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Renata Kobetts Miller. *The Victorian Actress in the Novel and on the Stage*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018. 250 pp.

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<1>The Victorian actress has long been a subject of fascination for humanities scholars. Various celebrated and condemned for her public life, her craft, and her character by period critics and social commentators, the Victorian actress now “performs” in the contemporary discourse as a figure of profound historic and symbolic import, one whose labors (both onstage and off) helped document the changing sociopolitical landscape for white British women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Renata Kobetts Miller’s *The Victorian Actress in the Novel and on the Stage* joins a rich, interdisciplinary catalogue of scholarship on the Victorian actress written by theatre, gender, and cultural historians, literary scholars, and Victorianists. The book traces the ways in which representations of the actress in novels and plays evolved from the 1850s to the early 1900s. As Miller asserts, the actress’s shifting depictions coincided with—and potentially influenced—developments in genre (melodrama, realism, naturalism), in theatrical production, and acting methods; the tastes of reading and theatregoing publics; and women’s societal roles. Miller also attends to the ebbs and flows of antitheatrical sentiment within the Victorian literary community; indeed, when antitheatrical biases intersected with misogyny, the Victorian actress became a target of derision and doubt.

<2>Miller’s Introduction summarizes *The Victorian Actress*’s aims and methods, as well as delineates the scholarly lacuna it addresses. “Redressing theatre’s neglect in literary study,” Miller notes, “this book treats the theatre not only as a figure in the Victorian imagination, but also as an active participant in the literary culture of its time” (2). Central to Miller’s project are investigations of the vacillating relationship of the Victorian actress to her reading and theatregoing audiences and of the novel and the theatre’s related developments. Miller presents her first case studies as ‘prologue’ to the forthcoming chapters—William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847-8) and *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50)—that together engage in depictions of theatrical women, including the “social performer” Becky Sharp (24).

<3>The book’s first three chapters consider the authenticity, respectability, and exceptionality of the actress as conveyed by perceptions of her emotions, her domestic life, and her relationship to her audiences. In Chapter One, “An Actress’s Tears: Authenticity and the Reassertion of Social Class,” Miller employs works by Edward Lancaster, Dion Boucicault, Charles Reade, Tom Taylor, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon to consider how an actress’s visible displays of emotions (tears, blushing, etc.) became complicated indices that signaled either genuine feeling or calculated dissembling, depending on the perceivers’ leanings. The chapter also details theories of acting circulating in the Victorian period, citing the influential writings of Denis Diderot, George Henry Lewes, William Archer, and Henry Irving. Had Miller also incorporated the

performance-oriented essays, letters, and memoirs of Victorian actresses like Marie Bancroft, Ellen Terry, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell it would have been an even more useful overview.

<4>Chapter Two takes as its focus novels and plays, including Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862-3) and T.W. Robertson's *Caste* (1867), in which actresses labored to navigate their public and private lives, some successfully and some less so. "Using domesticity and family to ground the actress in the real," posits Miller, "[these authors] also assert her respectability and, by extension, make claims for the respectability of the theatre, even as they use the actress as a figure for the disruption of social class hierarchies" (72). In Chapter Three, Miller considers the ways in which the Victorian actress depends upon and are defined by their audiences. For this, she examines the "exceptional" performing women in works by George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, including the eponymous heroine of Eliot's poetic drama *Armstrong* (1871), whose opera career is cut short after losing her voice. In *Armstrong*, Miller argues, Eliot advances a "notion of the female artist's greatness—her exceptionalness—[that is] inseparable from her interaction with audiences" (108).

<5>Antitheatrical bias and the emergence of literary and dramatic naturalism take center stage in Chapter Four, as Miller investigates the censorial, satirical writings of novelist and essayist George Moore. In his naturalistic novel *A Mummer's Wife* (1885), offers Miller, "Moore used an actress's deadly neglect of her child to challenge the theatre's realism, respectability and encroachment on the domestic sphere while asserting the superior naturalism of his own novel" (146). Chapter Five is both a continuation of and a departure from the previous four chapters. Rather than focus on fictional actresses, Miller explores the suffrage activism of performers in the early twentieth century. Through the Actresses' Franchise League, whose members demonstrated for voting rights alongside other prominent suffrage organizations, and through the development of suffrage plays, actresses and female playwrights became influential political activists onstage and off. "The suffragettes, and actress-suffragettes more particularly," Miller argues, "employed theatre and theatricality strategically and symbolically in order to engage with...the cause of women's political rights" (193). Using 1911's Coronation Procession and Elizabeth Robins' 1907 suffrage play *Votes for Women*, Miller considers the political spectacles enacted by suffragettes in order to "convert" skeptical or resistant audiences (208).

<6>*The Victorian Actress* is well organized and cogently argued. Miller moves with efficiency and care between her analyses of literary and dramatic works, subtly underscoring that (with the exception of closet dramas) play texts were written to be performed. Each chapter is more compelling than the last, with the penultimate and final chapters delivering especially satisfying studies with animated prose. However, I longed for *The Victorian Actress* to engage more directly and deeply with the world in which the actress existed: the theatre. Miller is a knowledgeable guide to the Victorian stage, but the book's bibliography boasts very few nineteenth-century theatre historians (Tracy C. Davis, Jim Davis, and Victor Emeljanow are the notable exceptions). To be sure, scholars of English literature have produced authoritative volumes on the Victorian theatre, and Miller wisely avails herself of many of them, including those by Nina Auerbach, Gail Marshall, Kerry Powell, and John Stokes. Nevertheless, it is curious that the book's notions of how the Victorian theatre operated largely lack the support of career historians of theatre and performance. The effects of this are small but perceptible. Chapter Two's analysis of T. W. Robertson's 1867 play *Caste*, for example, is absent of the term

“cup-and-saucer drama,” a mid-century style of domestic realism credited to Robertson and actor-managers Marie and Squire Bancroft, who collaborated together at the Prince of Wales’s Theatre. Later, a brief discussion of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen’s influence on the development of British theatrical realism and naturalism missed a key aspect of its history: Ibsen’s plays polarized British critics and the theatregoing public when they first premiered, prompting a heated debate in the popular press between rapturous Ibsenites and outraged detractors. The book’s use of period theatre reviews is minimal, with the result that only one or two reviews become representative of a particular play’s critical reception. Still, in offering these minor critiques, I acknowledge that Miller’s primary project was the actress in *text*, and not the actress in *performance*. *The Victorian Actress in the Novel and on the Stage* combines clear prose, an innovative organization, and effective close readings, and would be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of Victorian literature scholars.