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978-0-521-18865-4 - Gender, Theatre, and the Origins of Criticism: From Dryden to Manley

Marcie Frank

Excerpt

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*Gender, Theatre, and the Origins of Criticism from Dryden to Manley* provides a historical account of criticism's emergence between 1660 and 1714 by looking at the critical writings of John Dryden and those of the women of the following generation whose writings his example shaped. Aphra Behn, Catharine Trotter and Delarivier Manley are not the usual figures through whom the history of criticism has been charted; but Dryden himself, while often mentioned, is equally often relegated to the margins in those histories that have taken the periodical essays of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele as criticism's point of discursive origin.<sup>1</sup> The first part of this book examines the critical enterprise as Dryden undertakes it when he rewrites his Jacobean precursors, in order to argue that, in Dryden's hands, criticism is historical in orientation; this historicism serves in his production – itself an intensely theatrical affair – of a national literary tradition that is transmitted as a lineal inheritance in the vocabulary of poetic genealogy. The second part then looks at the writings of Behn, Trotter and Manley as they claim access through Dryden to this native literary tradition and to the critical discourse whose subsequent histories have written them out. I would thus reconfigure our sense of who contributes to the early development of criticism, and, by redefining the conditions of its emergence, make accessible to observation hitherto overlooked aspects of criticism's legacy.

I call this introduction “The critical stage” to signal the main arguments of this book: the historical sense of the term “stage” as “moment” or “age” indicates that this book delineates a crucial stage in the advent of criticism; the theatrical sense points to the constitutive importance that dramatic writing had for criticism. By elaborating the connections among three assumptions – that criticism arose in the period between 1660 and 1714, that it was historical in orientation from its inception, and that its production was conditioned by its proximity to the stage – *Gender, Theatre and the Origins of Criticism* makes the case that the modern

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enterprise of criticism is articulated in the writings of Dryden, Behn, Trotter and Manley, and that gender and sexuality are key terms in this articulation.

The theatre was the site of the critical discourse of the period between 1660 and 1714 in multiple senses: theatrical texts were frequently the subject of criticism, offering analytical pretexts in the form of prologues, epilogues, letters of dedication and prefatory essays. While the materials appended to seventeenth-century plays were most often directed at an audience of social superiors, at potential or actual patrons, criticism itself became a platform for public discourse, its very proximity to the stage marking the critic's social position between the court and the theatre, between an older model of literary production dominated by court-sponsorship and patronage and one increasingly oriented towards a consuming public. Because of the textual location of criticism and the social position of the critic, theatricality thoroughly infused Restoration and early eighteenth-century criticism. Such theatricality shaped the national vernacular canon that Dryden developed and his followers took up. By figuring its transmission as a patrimony, he drew the lines of access to a native literary tradition for subsequent writers and critics. As my readings of Dryden, Behn, Trotter and Manley demonstrate, by restoring the role of the theatre to the story of criticism's emergence, we can come to acknowledge the performativity of criticism, both in the sense of what it accomplishes – the establishment of a native tradition coded as filiation – and in the appreciation of the means by which it does so.

The perception that English criticism emerges in proximity to the stage is not new, even though recent histories of criticism have chosen to ignore what I call the critical stage. This book is not, however, a study of the theatre itself; rather, it is an analysis of the theatricality that shapes criticism. A glance at the rehearsal play, a popular type of drama in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gives in broad outline the trajectory of the arguments I make in this book. *The Rehearsal* (1671), by the Duke of Buckingham and others, stages a satire of a heroic play in rehearsal to an audience of two critics – Smith and Johnson, gentlemen from the country and the town, respectively – and Bayes, the playwright, a caricature of Dryden. Although there were only 10 recorded performances before 1700, the play was performed 273 times in London between 1700 and 1800.<sup>2</sup> Bayes's play begins with the usurpation of the brother Kings of Brentford by their attendants, the Gentleman Usher and the Physician, and this doubling of the monarch and his problems satirically acknowledges the foreseeable difficulties with James

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Stuart's status as the only legitimate heir to his brother, Charles II. The Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which James was deposed, remained of central interest to eighteenth-century audiences, and the doubled figure of the monarch is given a significant twist by Thomas Durfey in his 1721 rewriting of *The Rehearsal*. Durfey's *The Two Queens of Brentford: or Bayes no Poetaster*, subtitled "A Musical Farce, or Comical Opera. Being a Sequel of the Famous Rehearsal," as its title indicates, changes the gender of Buckingham's brother Kings. A 1753 rewriting of *The Rehearsal* by Catherine Clive, *The Rehearsal, or Bayes in Petticoats* (1753), picks up the change in gender to mount a satire on female authorship. These rehearsal plays draw insistent links between problematic monarchical succession as a theatrical subject, gender and criticism; in these plays, much of the dialogue is criticism directed towards the play being rehearsed. This persistent intersection, fueled, in part, by a general discussion of female readers and writers in the eighteenth century, evident in even so brief a survey, suggests that to properly situate criticism in relation to the theatre necessitates attention both to politics and to matters of gender, which I provide in my readings of Dryden and his female followers. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic, or A Tragedy Rehearsed* (1777), itself a late rewriting of *The Rehearsal*, marks, perhaps, a decisive point of divagation for critic and dramatist. The vitality of the theatre itself as a site of criticism diminishes as criticism comes to be more fully associated with the free-standing prose essay, but I propose ways to understand its influence in critical practice long after the novel and the periodicals pick up the momentum relinquished by the theatre as venues for literary innovation.

Criticism arises in response to the seventeenth-century series of crises in aristocratic culture, and its historical orientation marks its contributions to the modern separation of literature as autonomous from political, legal and historical discourses. However, this historicism, expressed in the vocabulary of poetic inheritance or genealogy, also establishes continuities with the aristocratic culture whose decline is a primary condition of its emergence. I argue that criticism is not predicated, at least not initially, on the separation of criticism from "literature" itself; together, both literary and critical discourses seek to distinguish themselves from the body of discourses that share a deep investment in the institution of genealogical inheritance as an authorizing and legitimating activity even as they also rely upon them. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century criticism is inseparable from the drama of the period, an understanding of which reshapes criticism's history and suggests some ways it informs

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the current stage of the critical enterprise. For example, literary criticism finds itself “in crisis” with a regularity that could almost be called soothing. I would suggest, however, that the rhetoric of crisis masks the fact that the question of legitimacy has haunted literary criticism from its late seventeenth-century beginnings. When criticism has not remained blind to its own history, its histories have situated its emergence out of crisis, but they have unselfconsciously recapitulated criticism’s theatrical origins in their attachment to the drama of crisis.<sup>3</sup>

By attending to the theatrical-historical nature of criticism from its beginnings and tracking this aspect of its history through Dryden, Behn, Trotter and Manley, this book highlights the strategies by which literary criticism was inaugurated, that both enabled the development of “polite” criticism and were submerged as literature came to be seen as autonomous. By treating Dryden, Behn, Trotter and Manley on a continuum, I redescribe the history of literary criticism as a history of the critical gestures – some of them scandalous – by which critics accrue cultural authority for their practices, which accounts of criticism segregated by gender cannot acknowledge. By reading later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century critical texts in their material and theatrical contexts, by reading criticism as a pre-eminently social discourse, and by integrating the critical writing by Dryden’s female followers into the history of criticism, I propose a framework for our current struggle to understand the place of literary criticism.

The texts that I analyze are primarily appended to rewritings of previous texts, and it is no accident, in my view, that rewriting provides the occasion for the development of criticism. Much of Restoration writing was rewriting, but my argument, that criticism is historical in its orientation from the beginning, has guided my selection of rewritings. I have chosen texts that display a sustained critical interest in the means by which the literature of the past can be transmitted into the present. Dryden rewrites a number of Shakespeare’s plays, including *The Tempest* (with Sir William Davenant), *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (with Nathaniel Lee), as well as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as the un-staged opera *The State of Innocence*; Catharine Trotter adapts Aphra Behn’s short novel, *Agnes de Castro*, for the stage; and Delarivier Manley rewrites Trotter’s romance, *Olinda’s Adventures*, in order to satirize its author in *The New Atalantis*, and retools the heroic play, a genre associated with Dryden, to provide a female hero in *The Royal Mischief*. On all of these occasions, rewriting necessitates critical attention to the texts under revision. This attention is historical in nature and it elicits the revisor’s comments. While

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rewriting is, perhaps, the Restoration practice that seems most archaic to us, I would argue such acts of revision continue to inform critical practice even after it sloughs off its dependence on the theatre. Even when criticism stops being found in dramatic form or in paratextual relation to drama, and criticism no longer comes “adapted for the stage,” its practice continues to be paraphrase. Moreover, criticism that rises above the level of plot-summary succeeds because it rewrites its textual objects in ways that enact those texts’ powers, dramatizing them, albeit most often in nondramatic prose, to make them amenable to critical description, appreciation and argument. By providing a new history of criticism as intertwined with the theatre, then, I want to highlight the persistent residues of its underacknowledged dramatic inception. By reading drama, prologues, epilogues, appended letters of dedication and defenses as the sites of critical practice, I capitalize on the ambiguous relations between texts written to be performed and texts written to be read in order both to bring out the historical distance between our critical assumption that texts are to be read and the vital theatrical culture out of which criticism emerges, and to illustrate the continuities that exist between historical and current critical practice. These have not been perceived, I suggest, because of the negative valences associated with theatricality.

Indeed, as Michael Fried, David Marshall and others have shown, theatricality was a central term of eighteenth-century philosophical, aesthetic and literary discourses.<sup>4</sup> However, theatricality is put under suspicion both in Fried’s privileging of “absorption” over “theatricality,” and in Marshall’s understanding that the “theatrical position” alternately posed “the threat of appearing as a spectacle before spectators,” or expressed “the dream of an act of sympathy” (2) that required the transcendence of theatrical distance. In contrast, Jean-Christophe Agnew’s brilliant treatment of the parallel and divergent histories of the theatre and the market, which allows them to come to appear worlds apart, makes it impossible to consider the one without the other.<sup>5</sup> Agnew’s work, moreover, provides a most productive framework in which to situate the emergence of criticism out of its dependence on the theatre into the new-found literary marketplace. This framework, which accommodates literary concerns in the very terms of its analysis, is thus hospitable to a social understanding of literary history; furthermore it offers a broader historical spectrum (in its focus on the years between 1550 and 1750), and a more flexible and nuanced vocabulary for describing what Jürgen Habermas calls the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere.

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Habermas sees the development of literary criticism in England at the end of the seventeenth century as a key symptom of and contribution to the “bourgeois public sphere.”<sup>6</sup> However, to situate the rise of critical discourse properly in its transitional context is to see that while criticism heralds some aspects of public sphere modes of representation, it contradicts others. Although recent accounts of the formation of the English canon use Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital to modify Habermas, and to describe the processes through which literature attains a status autonomous from religion and politics, they nevertheless retain a commitment to a cleaner break between court and public cultures than I would argue is warranted.<sup>7</sup> As a result, they give short shrift to the residual aspects of aristocratic ideology that continued to permeate the discourses of taste and connoisseurship in the eighteenth-century cultural marketplace and beyond. They also share the view that the canon formed in the later eighteenth century marks the autonomy of literary culture. Whereas they rightly emphasize the reorientation of critical discourse from providing models of how to write in a court-dominated rhetorical culture to describing how to read in a public-oriented consumer culture, in their focus on reading as *the* form of literary consumption, they ignore the theatre as a key venue for literary production and consumption, the site which, I argue, mediates criticism’s emergence.<sup>8</sup>

Douglas Lane Patey, Trevor Ross and Jonathan Brody Kramnick demonstrate that the canon is produced alongside new kinds of literary history, whose production in the service of forging and maintaining that canon comes to constitute the vocation of the literary critic.<sup>9</sup> A closer examination of Restoration critical practices, however, corrects the assumption that true literary history is produced only in the eighteenth century. When Kramnick asserts, for example, that John Dryden’s and Joseph Addison’s narratives of literary improvement show that “the pastness of the author, the text, or the period at large was an issue insofar as it had to be overcome” (1089), he ignores the fact that Dryden’s two court appointments, as poet laureate and royal historiographer, attested to the proximity of poetic and historiographic writing in the period. Indeed, rather than overcoming or negating the past, Dryden’s “improvements,” illustrated most fully in his rewriting of his Jacobean and other literary precursors, but also evident in his critical narratives, exhibit the historical awareness that comes to constitute the historicism of the later eighteenth-century criticism that Kramnick so eloquently analyzes.<sup>10</sup> Locating Dryden’s critical rewriting in the context of the crisis in the aristocratic authority of inheritance makes legible his sense of the differentiation of the past from the present. The critical practice of

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“improvement” becomes Dryden’s guarantee that a literary inheritance will be transmitted in a present otherwise cut off from the past; indeed, it mediates relations between the present and the past and testifies to the pastness of the past.

Samuel Johnson, who figures prominently in the narratives of the English canon, is perhaps the eighteenth-century figure most readily associated with the full-blown articulation of critical practice, yet he recognized Dryden as the “father” of criticism in English, using the terms of genealogy developed by Dryden to do so. Those terms still dominate our understanding of the literary tradition even as that most traditional of categories has been revised. Neither its renomination as “the canon,” however, nor its expansion to include other genealogies – of women writers, African-American writers, and others of “minority” status – have called into question what is preserved in the lineations, the familiarity, of genealogy. When Dryden proposes that the relations between current poets and their predecessors are lineal and familial, which he does at various points in his career, he retools and appropriates an aristocratic notion of inheritance for the dissemination of literary culture. Perhaps the most pressing question for Dryden is whether cultural continuity can be forged and sustained in an era remarkable for political upheaval. In response, he invests a national literary patrimony with a prestige designed to ensure that the present generation of writers will inherit greatness, despite the threat that their (literary and nonliterary) forefathers may have squandered the estate, even as he announces that the present writers can improve that estate. Criticism provides the means both to guarantee the transmission of a literary legacy and to augment that inheritance.

The imbrication of inheritance, transmission and improvement with criticism itself is most visible in Dryden’s epilogue to the *Conquest of Granada, Part II*, in which he criticizes his Jacobean forebears for failing to transmit “their fame” to their literary heirs. By pointing out that they have “kept [their fame] by being dead,” however, Dryden establishes critical discourse as the vehicle through which literary fame is transmitted. He goes on to explain his criticism of Shakespeare, Fletcher and Jonson:

Think not it envy, that these truths are told,  
Our poet’s not malicious, though he’s bold.  
’Tis not to brand ’em that their faults are shown,  
But, by their errors, to excuse his own.  
If Love and Honour now are higher rais’d,  
’Tis not the Poet but the Age is prais’d.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, for Dryden, criticism restores literary inheritance.

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Dryden's defense of this act of criticism in "Defense of the Epilogue" (1673) elaborates the concept of "the age." Explicitly a tool of periodization, and thus of literary historiography, this concept permits Dryden to explore the discontinuities between his contemporaries and the poets of a previous generation, all the while establishing the continuities between them. "The age" is thus a metonymy of criticism itself insofar as it is criticism that allows current poetic production to distinguish itself, even though it also might dim the appreciation that Dryden would seek for his singularity as a poet. The poetic genealogies that he articulates in subsequent writings carry forward a critical practice that is thus historical from its inception. While readers of Dryden have long recognized that his critical writing is historical, they have not agreed on how to characterize his views of history; moreover, they are so caught up in exploring the changing attitudes towards history he expressed at various points that they neglect to establish the significance of his thinking in terms other than those of his career.<sup>12</sup> I look at the epilogue and its defense in greater detail in the first chapter of this book, which provides an overview of Dryden's critical practice insofar as its historical orientation and theatrical articulation produce a vernacular literary tradition that is transmissible as an inheritance.

In some crucial ways, Johnson sets the tone in his treatment of Dryden for the latter's reception. Johnson's discomfort with the degree to which Dryden's criticism is socially embedded, and his horror at the venom and bitterness of seventeenth-century critical debate, support arguments for the development of the autonomy of literary culture; they measure the degree to which criticism had emerged, by the 1760s, as a "polite" discourse, as a paradigmatic instance of "reasoned debate" in a "public sphere" in which the merits of an argument count more than the status of the man. A brief look, however, at the terms in which Johnson assesses Dryden's vituperative battles with his contemporaries in the "Life of Dryden" suggests that Johnson's discomfort is telling in other ways as well, ways that complicate his narrative and invite a closer examination of the scene he repudiates.

For example, Johnson sees fit to indulge the curiosity he has provoked in his readers about Dryden's unseemly battles by providing them with large amounts of Dryden's *Remarks on [Elkanah Settle's] The Empress of Morocco* and Settle's reply. He justifies this reproduction with the claim that the pamphlets in question had not been widely circulated.<sup>13</sup> Summarizing their battle from a characteristically neutral-seeming moral vantage point, Johnson comments,



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Such was the criticism to which the genius of Dryden could be reduced, between rage and terrour; rage with little provocation and terrour with little danger. To see the highest minds thus levelled with the meanest may produce some solace to the consciousness of weakness, and some mortification to the pride of wisdom. But let it be remembered that minds are not levelled in their powers but when they are first levelled in their desires. Dryden and Settle had both placed their happiness in the claps of the multitudes. (346)

Johnson's sneer at the desires of the Restoration playwrights to please their audience attests to his understanding of the poetic vocation as removed from the social arena, which, significantly, he describes as a theatrical space in which success is measured by applause. He nevertheless cultivates a certain degree of popular accessibility himself by supplying his readers with unavailable texts. All the more curious, then, is his metaphorical use of "levelling," a term that evokes the threatening radicalism of the Civil War. For Johnson, "levelling" is the worst consequence of Dryden and Settle's battle, particularly disturbing because the abstract qualities of Dryden's mental powers are evidently so superior. In its figurative application to the battle between poets, Johnson uses the historically loaded vocabulary of the Civil War to assert the real discrepancy between Dryden's and Settle's literary talents, from which he draws the modern implication, which he applies to these poets of the past, that literary vocation should have permitted them to rise above social concerns. It is noteworthy that, despite his modern separation of the poet's concerns from those of the social and political world, Johnson nevertheless to a certain extent here recapitulates the association of Dryden's higher literary talent with his court-affiliated social status. It is ironic that the modern separation is marked by Johnson's historically inflected diction because that separation is inaugurated, as I argue in Chapter 2, by Dryden, in his rewriting of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as the opera, *The State of Innocence*. In the preface to that text, "The Author's Apology," Dryden reinforces this separation by introducing what I call critical identification to ground proper criticism. Dryden's critical identification, enabled by his dramatization of *Paradise Lost*, separates Milton's poetic achievement from his more problematic political or theological commitments. One might say that Johnson disavows Dryden's theatrical precedent and augments the separation he had initiated by dismissing the clapping multitudes. Dryden's separation can also be seen as contributing to the discourse of literary biography which Johnson's *Lives* so famously exemplify. Johnson's condescension towards the Restoration playwrights' desire to please their audience bespeaks the crucial difference between the reading

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public of his own day and the theatre-going public of theirs, a difference elided in the histories of criticism which ignore its theatrical nature.

Although accounts of the formation of the English canon have not fully acknowledged the role genealogy has played, this term has received attention from another direction – the psychoanalytically inspired literary history of Harold Bloom, whose understanding of the tropic elasticity of inheritance and the family romance is, at times, breathtaking. Bloom's account, however, detaches literary production from its historical contexts, insisting that it be understood instead as the expression of trans-historical psychic processes.<sup>14</sup> Bloom's telling omission of the Augustans in his accounts of English poetic production reveals the limits of his trans-historical method. Only by restoring Dryden and his contemporaries' preoccupation with inheritance in their descriptions of literary relations to its specific socio-historical context can we come to understand both the terms of Samuel Johnson's appreciation of Dryden as the "father of criticism in English," and the long-term function of inheritance and genealogy in criticism.<sup>15</sup> The genealogical vocabulary that describes and guarantees literary transmission may indeed betray anxieties, but I would understand these anxieties as more than psychological, as responses to both the long-term crisis in aristocratic notions of inheritance and the seventeenth-century upheavals in the domain of monarchical succession.

By the time Johnson applies the genealogical model of literary transmission to Dryden, that model had been well established by Addison and Pope, following Dryden's lead in classifying past literary production according to "poetic schools" or "ages."<sup>16</sup> Dryden's male heirs predictably abstract the transmission of a literary inheritance from a reproductive dynamic, charting clear lines of filiation from fathers to sons in a way that makes one wonder why Bloom ignored them. Interestingly enough, Dryden makes no such gendered distinction. In "To Congreve" he revises the process by which Congreve inherits Shakespeare's mantle by emphasizing his own intervention as critic, mediator and maternal figure. Such an expansion of genealogical models to include women clearly had its effect, for Dryden had a host of female followers, whose filiation cannot be described adequately by such feminist Bloomians as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, or Dale Spender, who seek to redress the lack of attention to female writers by proposing a counter-tradition of strictly female genealogy.<sup>17</sup>

Scant attention has been paid to female-authored criticism; the few essays analyzing women's critical writing have nonetheless retained