

Acting Like a Lady: British Women Novelists and the Eighteenth-Century Theater

By Nora Nachumi.
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17 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$94.50.

Reviewed by Peter Sabor.

Nora Nachumi has a good subject for her first book: the various ways in which the theater and theatricality influenced eighteenth-century women novelists in their representations of femininity. Two general chapters, “The Theatrical Woman and the Feminine Ideal” and “The Lady and the Novelist: Paragon and Performer,” are followed by studies of three major authors: Elizabeth Inchbald, Frances Burney and Jane Austen. Nachumi has especially rich material to work with in the case of Inchbald, an actress and a prolific playwright as well as a novelist. Burney too was the author of seven completed plays—four comedies and three tragedies—but only one of these, her tragedy *Edwy and Elgiva*, was ever performed in her lifetime, and only on a single occasion before being withdrawn from the stage.

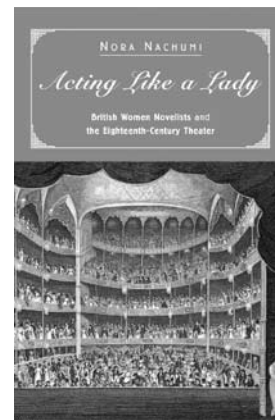
Nachumi’s twenty-five page concluding chapter is entitled “Seeing Double: Jane Austen and the Perception of Performance.” As she acknowledges, “a great deal of work that explores the relationship between Austen’s novels and her knowledge about performers and plays has already been done” (147): in particular the two fine books of 2002 by Paula Byrne and Penny Gay, both entitled *Jane Austen and the Theatre*. Nachumi’s primary concern is with the famous rehearsals of *Lovers’ Vows* in *Mansfield Park*, but she begins by discussing the Austen family’s own theatricals. Her account, however, is neither

original nor reliable. Misreading Byrne, she refers to “William Bigg’s recollection of a twelfth-day party in 1808, during which Austen read the role of Mrs. Candour in *The School for Scandal* ‘with great spirit,’” and suggests that “Austen, at age twenty-three, enjoyed performing in front of her friends” (153-54). But the performance of Sheridan’s comedy probably took place in January 1808, shortly after Austen’s twenty-second birthday, and the informant was not “William Bigg” but William Heathcote, the son of Austen’s friend Elizabeth Heathcote (née Bigg). Nachumi’s account of Austen’s putative acting at the Abbey House School, Reading, which she and Cassandra attended together as boarders in 1785-86, is equally flawed. She asserts that “although there is no evidence that Austen participated in dramatic productions during her tenure, it seems likely” (154). The headmistress, Sarah Hackitt (not “Hackett” as Nachumi has it), was a theater enthusiast, but there is no hard evidence that any productions were mounted at her school. She did have “Scenes for Theatrical Exhibition” on the premises (a point that Nachumi fails to mention), but these might have been for the girls to look at, rather than for use as props.

In a discussion of the comic playlet *Sir Charles Grandison*, Nachumi, following Brian Southam, attributes the piece to Austen herself, rather than to her niece Anna or to the two in collaboration. Regrettably, she could not draw on the recent reassessment of the evidence for authorship in the *Later Manuscripts* volume of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen* (2008), edited by Janet Todd and Linda Bree, who believe that Anna was probably the author, with Austen acting as her amanuensis, “so aiding a niece, and perhaps a group of children, who wished to write and act a little play” (cxvii). Nachumi’s brief remarks on the play’s precursor, Samuel Richardson’s massive seven-volume novel, are distinctly odd. She refers to Richardson’s “very thin plot” (159), although few novels could have more

convoluted plots than *Sir Charles Grandison*, and she believes that Austen did not admire Richardson’s style, although all of Austen’s remarks on and allusions to the novel suggest the contrary. Nachumi is on surer ground when she turns to Austen’s use of *Lovers’ Vows* in *Mansfield Park*, but the topic has been exhaustively discussed by previous critics and the analysis here adds little to the debate. The single illustration provided for the chapter, the engraving of Austen made in 1869 from a reworking of Cassandra’s sketch by James Andrews, is likewise ineffective; reproductions of playbills for some of the performances seen by the Austens would have been far more informative.

The most useful part of *Acting Like a Lady* is its 110-page appendix, “British Women Novelists and the Theater, 1660–1818.” Here Nachumi lists 382 women novelists from the period, indicating which ones were also playwrights and providing information on both their novels and plays, as well as any other involvement with the theater, including acting, managing, translating, etc. Austen thus figures as the author of, in addition to her published novels and other fiction, three miniature juvenile comedies—“The First Act of a Comedy,” “The Mystery,” and “The Visit”—and “Sir Charles Grandison,” as well as a participant in private theatricals. Eighty-two of the novelists on Nachumi’s list were also dramatists, and over a third of them were associated with the stage in some way. These figures justify her claim that the stage offered women novelists a source of female agency worthy of further exploration, but the Austen chapter in *Acting Like a Lady* delivers less than it promises.



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