

BOOK REVIEWS

Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic. Edited by Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould. Lexington, KY: UP Kentucky, 2001. vi, 272 pages. \$34.95 US.

The title of this collection of essays comes from a revealing phrase in an eighteenth-century letter. In 1778, Ignatius Sancho, a former African slave living in London, wrote to a Philadelphia Quaker that Phyllis Wheatley, a poet of African descent living in Boston, was a "genius in bondage." In describing her as such, Sancho critically touched upon one of the contradictions in the Age of Enlightenment. The eighteenth century was also the era of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery that tried to transform the humanity of Africans into a commodity. In this edited volume, Vincent Carretta, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, and Philip Gould, an associate professor of English at Brown University, bring together discussions that interpret how Africans wrote about their responses and resistance to that transformation.

Divided into three parts, these thirteen essays of literary criticism are guided by an analytical perspective that is historical in nature. Part One is a discussion about the construction of race and gender in the Atlantic world. In Part Two, property rights and the ownership of identity are examined in the context of capitalism. For Part Three, the editors bring together essays that critique black literature as a complex language in an ideological encounter with the contradictions in the Atlantic world. Throughout the book, the writings of Ignatius Sancho, Phyllis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoana, Britton Hammon, John Marrant, Mary Prince, Jupiter Hammon, Benjamin Banneker, and Nathaniel Paul are parsed to show how they reflect early black sentiments about the slave trade, slavery, religion, race, freedom, justice, and equality.

Early black literature emanated from the shadow and substance of the Atlantic world. Socially, blacks were on the margins of eighteenth-century English-speaking society; but, economically, they were a major source of that society's wealth, power, and prestige. What black people remembered of their experiences is crucial to understanding what they chose to make known to the reading public. They recalled how the slave trade and slavery degraded them. They wrote about their spiritual liberation through Christianity. They expressed their hopes for racial equality in a common humanity.

For example, one essay critiques Mary Prince, an escaped West Indian slave. She collaborated with an amanuensis, an unmarried English woman, to authenticate to English society how slavery was wretched and sexually abu-

sive. Another essay examines the experiences of Olaudah Equiano, a black abolitionist in England. He maintained control over the marketing of his narrative not only through subscription but also through a clever advertising strategy that subtly emphasized his triumphal survival of the horrors of the slave trade. And a third essay renews interest in Benjamin Banneker's intellectually stimulating 1791 letter to Thomas Jefferson. The freeborn son of a former African slave, Banneker tried to engage Jefferson as one farmer and scientist to another in a futile effort to gain the American politician's opposition to slavery.

Genius in Bondage is an important contribution to the dialogue between history and literature. The contributors demonstrate the potency of memory in the black imagination. They enhance the literary discussion about the meaning of social change and political consciousness among peoples of African descent in the Atlantic world. The scholarship is informed and insightful although the general reader will probably find it at times dense. Most importantly, this book is a reminder that literature is a complex language because, regardless of condition, circumstance, class, or colour, people are endowed with the genuine feelings and complicated thoughts that make up the human experience.

Lester P. Lee, Jr.

Northeastern University

Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights. General Editor, Derek Hughes. 6 volumes. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001. liv, 234; xliv, 308; xxx, 266; xxviii, 288; xxxii, 300; xlv, 336. \$795 US.

The most extensive revision of our literary canon in the past generation has been the inclusion of large numbers of women writers; many of these writers had once been canonical, many others have become canonical for the first time. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women playwrights have not been the first or primary focus of these revisions to the canon, but they, too, have gradually begun to receive the attention that has so long been denied them. The delay has been in part because of the general lack of interest in the drama of the period, and in part because plays by women in the eighteenth century tend to provide at best minimal support for late twentieth-century feminism. Recognition came first to those women playwrights most easily seen as proto-feminists. Aphra Behn was the first woman playwright of the Restoration and eighteenth century to receive serious attention in the twentieth century. She was soon joined by Mary Pix, Delarivier Manley, and Catharine Trotter. More grudging was the recognition of Susanna Centlivre, despite the long run of the popularity of her plays on the stage. Later playwrights have only begun to appear in anthologies: Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald, and, for the first time, Frances Burney (whose plays had hitherto not been

printed). One of the most promising developments in the new millennium is the willingness to revisit plays by women who promote a society in which women accept roles that are not acceptable today. The collection under review marks this important transition.

There have been a few classroom anthologies of plays by women of the period, but nothing extensive enough to serve as the necessary first attempt at establishing a canon for women playwrights of the Restoration and eighteenth centuries, that is, an anthology that could do for women playwrights what Roger Lonsdale's *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford UP, 1990) did for women poets. Enter *Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights*, the six-volume collection here under review. Derek Hughes and his volume editors have now filled that void with the handsome volumes and readable texts we have come to expect from Pickering & Chatto. They have anointed eight playwrights: Manley, Eliza Haywood, Pix, Trotter, Centlivre, Elizabeth Griffith, Cowley, and Inchbald. And they have chosen from each two to five plays, claiming for their choices plays that are presented as representative of what each playwright did best.

The selection of both playwrights and plays deserves discussion. It is a good and reasonable selection, but one that will inevitably provoke quarrels. Hughes begins his anthology in 1695, excluding Aphra Behn as "pre-history in this tale." Given her influence on the theatre of the eighteenth-century and especially on women writing for that theatre, this is a position difficult to justify. The fact that Pickering & Chatto has recently published Janet Todd's now-standard edition of Behn offers a more pragmatic explanation. Behn's plays are easy to find, thanks to Todd and to a number of paperback volumes currently available. It made good sense to exclude them from this anthology, but not because they are pre-history to this theatre. Similarly, Pickering & Chatto published Peter Sabor's important edition of Burney's plays. I assume that that is why she is not in this anthology. No alternative explanation is offered. (With these earlier Pickering volumes, the Hughes anthology offers a very strong selection indeed.)

Still, there are missing playwrights. Nearly a hundred women are known to have written plays in England during this period. For me, the most obvious omissions are Frances Brooke, Charlotte Charke, Susanna Cibber, Catherine Clive, Harriet Lee, Sophia Lee, Hannah More, and Frances Sheridan. This is not to say that I would prefer these playwrights to the ones chosen for this anthology, but I would have liked to see an explanation for the choices made. Similarly, the choice of plays by the selected playwrights wants explanation (among the excluded plays are Pix's *The Spanish Wives*, Haywood's *The Opera of Operas*, and Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*). This is a formative moment for the emerging canon of plays by eighteenth-century women; in my view, the moment requires serious argument about editorial choices.

The plays themselves are presented in reader-friendly texts. Copy-texts are usually indicated by facsimile title pages; there is no textual appara-

tus. In some cases, variants are noted, but no attempt has been made to providing a scholarly edition. Explanatory notes are provided that should be more than adequate for the general readers these volumes intend to serve, as well as students and scholars looking for reliable reading editions from their libraries (the cost will, alas, prevent most individuals from having their own copies). Each volume contains a good introduction that captures current thinking about the playwright in question. The best of these introductions (Anne Kelley on Pix and Trotter and Angela Smallwood on Inchbald) convey a sense of the theatrical contexts for the plays as well as the biographical and critical contexts found in all the introductions. Hughes's unsigned general introduction provides a fine overview of the period for readers unfamiliar with the period. And each volume provides one-paragraph biographies of the players who acted in the plays in that volume. (Three of the volumes acknowledge the source for these biographies, the fine Highfill/Burnim/Langhans *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians ... in London, 1660-1800*. I assume this was the standard reference for the project.) It is helpful to the reader to have the relevant personnel included in each, self-sufficient volume. It is also interesting to compare descriptions of the same theatre personnel from volume to volume.

The importance of these volumes is in making a significant number of texts by women playwrights available in many libraries. Like most good anthologies in new or recently rediscovered areas, they serve as a de facto canon, encouraging others to explore and challenge their choices. Few of these plays have received stage productions in recent years. This anthology will prove still more successful if it provokes serious new productions. Those productions in turn, especially when successful, will figure in the ongoing re-evaluation of these plays. Eighteenth-century women playwrights will have arrived in the theatrical canon if the next major anthology of plays is informed by a significant new stage history. For now, we should be grateful to have this one.

Brian Corman

University of Toronto