

1-1-2010

Review of *Gothic Plays and American Society, 1794-1830*, by M. Susan Anthony

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

the actress, who abandoned formal education as a teenager, equipped to become a respected author—a tribute to her tenacity, and apparently to her self-study. The idea of actress-as-writer could certainly prompt another study of Morris and others.

Grossman's detailed descriptions coupled with her use of primary documents makes tangible the most ephemeral aspect of theatre history: performance. General American theatre history texts resort to categorizing, swarming with names and labels but little notion of how acting style might have manifested onstage. This study of Clara Morris makes sense of the "Emotional School," explaining and comparing Morris's style with those of others, illustrated by specific examples from performance texts. *A Spectacle of Suffering* is a welcome addition to reading for graduate seminars in American theatre history.

While it has illustrations and extensive notes for each chapter, *A Spectacle of Suffering: Clara Morris on the American Stage* does not include a bibliography. This omission may be owing to the press and not the author, but as a reader attempting to locate Morris's works and specific reviews, and as an avid browser of bibliographies, I found using notes alone frustrating and time-consuming. I was disappointed about this single aspect of the book, especially as I plan to use it as an example for graduate students.

—ANNE FLETCHER

Southern Illinois University Carbondale



Gothic Plays and American Society, 1794–1830. By M. Susan Anthony. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007. 195 pp. 7 appendices. \$39.95 paperback.

Gothic Plays and American Society is the first full-length study of gothic dramas in early America. Although Susan Anthony uses her study to suggest ways that American playwrights and actors attempted to appropriate and thereby nationalize the genre, the implication that gothic drama was in any meaningful way "American" is itself more than a bit suspect. As her own research proves, there were only seven American playwrights producing gothic dramas during this period, and of those seven, only one or possibly two could be seen as writing new or original works. The other five were clearly recycling standard British gothic fare, such as William Dunlap's *Bluebeard* (1801) or J. D. Turnbull's *The Wood Daemon* (1808). Nevertheless, this is an interesting study that opens up a curiously neglected area of theatrical history in this country. For instance,

when Edgar Allan Poe published his only drama, *Politian* (1835), he could assume that his fellow citizens would have recognized it as a hybridized mix of the gothic, the melodramatic, and the sentimental. The discussions of gothic dramas in this book effectively explain the derivative and anxious theatrical climate of the early American republic.

Written in a lively and jargon-free voice, Anthony's study has both strengths and weaknesses, and I will address the former first. Using theatrical memoirs published in contemporary periodicals, and playbills and engravings housed in the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Historical Society, Anthony has assembled a good deal of original research on the four major theatrical centers of early American society: Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Boston. Her eleven chapters (six of which have been published in other venues) examine such topics as the construction of maleness and femaleness in the gothic, the evolution of the female "star" in gothic dramas, the use of stage spectacle, the adaptation of British plays for the American stage, and the largely negative critical reception of gothic dramas. Her seven appendices are useful, particularly the one that lists the gothic dramas as they were first performed in the United States (159). This appendix makes it clear that only seven American playwrights were producing gothic dramas in America at this time and that the majority of their works were clearly adaptations of British gothic fare (for example, British dramatist Miles Andrews's *Mysteries of the Castle* was adapted by American dramatist John Blake White).

Anthony's thesis, as she delineates in her preface, is that "Gothic plays reflected the ambivalence of Americans. On the one hand, Gothic plays featured a villain who freely transgressed legal and moral boundaries, and yet, as a form of melodrama, these same plays ensured the triumph of virtue, reinstating social order and conventional behavior" (2). This is not exactly a new insight, nor are its political, social, and cultural implications drawn out, and I am afraid that there are not many original, theoretical, or sophisticated analyses in this study. But what the book does offer, as I have suggested, is a fair amount of useful archival research that paves the way for gothic theorists to examine these long-neglected dramas.

If originality of thought is not strongly evident here, neither is dogged research in the secondary scholarship on the gothic. My own book and articles on the subject are represented by a citation of a Web site that I didn't even know existed: www.virginia.edu. In place of reading published books and articles, the author appears to have taken the easy way out on a number of occasions by consulting dumbed-down Web sites. The other topic that is noticeably absent is

any awareness that issues of religion, secularization, and modernization are currently at the forefront of gothic scholarship. For instance, in discussing the phenomenon of the ghost on the gothic stage, there is no analysis of how conflicted the audience would have been about this avatar of Catholicism, medievalism, and animism in their midst. While the book focuses on gender construction, a fairly overworked emphasis in gothic scholarship over a decade ago, it does not examine the more crucial issue that is currently being examined in gothic studies: Why were these works so popular, and what sort of cultural work was being performed for their audience members? If Americans attended the theatre, were they motivated by a need to find a substitutive religious ritual, or did the plays enact the struggle that was currently being waged between the forces of rationalism, science, and materialism and the opposing forces of supernaturalism, “superstition,” and a resurgence of the transcendent?

All of this is to say that Anthony has provided us with a real service by excavating the raw materials we need to locate and study these long-lost “American” gothic dramas. They need, however, to be placed in a more nuanced, scholarly, and interpretive framework that will allow us to understand exactly why they spoke to their early American audiences so powerfully.

—DIANE LONG HOVELER

Marquette University



Dramaturgy and Performance. By Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. xi + 229 pp. \$26.95 paper.

When discussing approaches to dramaturgical analysis in *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, both professional dramaturges and lecturers at the University of Winchester, encourage openness and inclusivity. Building on numerous personal interviews with leading dramaturges in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe, as well as archival research, the authors present an understanding of dramaturgy and dramaturgical analysis that is expansive rather than reductive, suggesting numerous possibilities and applications.

As part of the Palgrave series Theatre and Performance Practices, Turner and Behrndt’s book is intended as an introductory text that offers a brief and accessible analysis of the historical developments and contemporary practices of dramaturgy. Although the authors sometimes discuss dramaturgy in Eu-