Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990–2000. By Elaine Aston. Cambridge Studies in Modern Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; pp. x + 238. $65.00 cloth.

Elaine Aston’s latest book demonstrates yet again her ability to capture multiple perspectives on contemporary women’s theatre work. This useful and articulate text focuses on women playwrights, the English theatre, and the last decade of the twentieth century. The nine chapters chart an impressively wide range of work while simultaneously providing context and literary and dramatic analysis.

The introductory chapter, entitled “A feminist view on the 1990s,” serves a double purpose. First citing various cultural critics (such as Susan Faludi), Aston provides a clear and succinct reading of the decade, one that is both specific and personal. From feminist backlash, to the crisis of masculinity, to the girl power of the Spice Girls, she catches the social and cultural pulse of this heady decade. Secondly, Aston presents a brief theatrical context infused with references to key feminist scholarship. And she points out her own limitations: the necessity of being selective instead of all inclusive; her focus on England and not Britain; and her attention to venues and companies dedicated to new writing.

The second chapter highlights the plays of Caryl Churchill, the writer in Aston’s volume with the longest career. Churchill’s prolific work spans the seventies through the present day and, unlike other writers in the book, “Churchill is someone whose playwriting career and political outlook have consciously been shaped by a continuing commitment to feminism” (18). Aston begins with a reading of the 1991 revival of Top Girls, first produced in 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre. This play, so enormously influential to theatre artists of the 1980s, serves as a touchstone for understanding and coming to terms with the wanton destructiveness of the Thatcher era. As playwright Mark Ravenhill states, “Nobody else got it quite so right, that epic struggle between two different value systems” (23). Aston continues with examinations of The Skriker (1994), Blue Heart (1997), and a brief look at Churchill’s first play of this century, Far Away.

“Saying no to Daddy: child sexual abuse, the ‘big hysteria’,” the third chapter, continues the serious reflection on the betrayal of children that is also central to much of Churchill’s work. Here the plays of Sarah Daniels from the early 1990s, such as Beside Herself (1990), with its split subject—the adult Evelyn and her abused childhood self, Eve—are examined. The play stages our culture’s unwillingness to believe the victim. Other works considered here are Anna Furse’s Augustine (Big Hysteria) (1991), Claire Dowie’s Easy Access (for the Boys) (1998); and Byrony Lavery’s Frozen (1998). The chapter ends with the 1999 London production of Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues, a piece which Aston recognizes for its high-profile politics and popularity among women, but warns that it “risks an essentialist reduction of women to Woman/vagina” (57).

The fourth chapter, “Girl power, the new feminism?,” features the work of two playwrights little known outside of the United Kingdom: Rebecca Prichard and Judy Upton, whose respective plays Yard Gal (1998) and Ashes and Sands (1994) explore girl-gang violence and the troubling, yet empowering way it gives agency to young women. The violence and anger that are central to these works surface with a vengeance in the plays of Sarah Kane, the writer examined in the fifth chapter. Kane, known by the British press as “the bad girl of our stage,” is Aston’s most controversial subject, and Kane’s plays are a challenging and difficult topic to tackle. To do so, Aston cannot merely consider the plays in isolation; the sensationalist news coverage that accompanied their productions is crucial to her reading of Kane. Aston treats three of Kane’s plays—Blasted (1995), Cleansed (1998), and Crave (1998)—as a cycle of interconnected work that “variously treats and critiques the damaging and brutalising force of the masculine . . .” (97). Aston’s detailed, in-depth consideration of these maddening and often inpenetrable texts makes chilling sense in the wake of Kane’s early suicidal death in 1999 and her cult following.

Views on identity, specifically among lesbians and gays, is the locus of the sixth chapter. Through the works of Bryony Lavery and Phyllis Nagy, Aston teases out notions of queer politics, the shifting border crossing subject positions. Chapter seven gives a much-needed examination of black and Asian writers whose work both critiques the limits of second wave feminism and looks beyond the fragmentation of identity politics in order to understand the “black British experience that operates diasporically within and across cultures and geographies” (127). A central concern here is the impressive and engaging work of Winsome Pinnock, whose plays Talking in Tongues (1991) and Mules (1996) are read by Aston as contributing to an “evolving transnational feminism” (128). Aston points out how Pinnock’s texts tackle both separatist politics and global capitalism while giving voice and agency to women of color. The chapter also looks at company and solo performance work.
productions from Tamasha, a British Asian company, whose name is Hindi for “commotion” (137), are analyzed along with SuAndi’s solo autobiographical performance piece, _The Story of M_ (1994), a work that considers growing up in a multiracial family.

In Aston’s penultimate chapter she returns to two key issues that have underscored much of her book’s concerns: “the relevance of feminism to women’s lives at the close of the twentieth century and the ‘crisis in masculinity’” (149). Here, as with her analysis of Churchill, she draws on an established, high-profile writer: Timberlake Wertenbaker. The decade of the 1990s was a difficult time for Wertenbaker; not only did she feel “homeless” because of her break with the Royal Court Theatre, her new work of this period, especially _The Break of Day_ (1995), received harsh negative press. Aston offers a convincing argument to reconsider this work for its “cross-border feminism” (156). Aston’s tantalizingly brief conclusion looks at new work on the horizon of this century, from Scottish writer Rona Munro to Tanika Gupta’s Asian family dramas, while at the same time providing a useful summative account of her book’s visionary view.

LESLEY FERRIS  
_The Ohio State University_

PERFORMING MENKEN: ADAH ISAACS MENKEN AND THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN CELEBRITY. By Renée M. Sentilles. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003; pp. xi + 313. $45.00 cloth.

In this fresh approach to the career of mid-nineteenth-century performer Adah Isaacs Menken, Renée M. Sentilles breaks the conventional chronological narrative of biography and tackles a variety of topics instead, layering the contexts of culture, gender, theatre, media, and war into her discussion. She offers a thorough overview of what was documented about and by Menken and examines the speculation that has been accepted as fact. The various performances of Menken, from the Jewish Deborah, to the pugilist’s wife, genteel poetess, the notorious Mazeppas, and simply “the Menken,” frame the study, as Sentilles regards Menken “as a deliberate performance, a self-created celebrity who shaped her image to suit the times” (3).

The performer’s fuzzy claims about her background included fathers with a variety of last names, multiple places of birth, and a range of possible ethnic origins: African, Creole, Jewish, Irish, Spanish, French, Portuguese, or a combination thereof. Menken also bestowed heroic qualities upon herself, as an exotic adventuress in Mexico, Cuba, and Texas, and she added the requisite Indian captivity narrative. In distinguishing between the well-documented public career of Menken and her intentionally obscured personal life and background, Sentilles calls Menken “an invented character” about whom the verb “perform” is critical, as she performed, both on- and offstage, “a Menken identity that was all about constant change” (4). The author weighs Menken’s calculated ambiguity against the scraps of evidence that exist—often contrary to Menken’s own assertions—and contends that since it was during the Civil War that the “cult of celebrity” emerged, Menken’s own “celebrity exposes the roots of that cultural phenomenon” (3).

What distinguishes Sentilles’s approach to Menken is that the author takes the time to explore the ramifications of Menken’s actions and the significance of her position in a number of areas, mapping out her appearances in various parts of the tumultuous culture of the Civil War era. For example, in taking on her private performance as Alexander Isaac Menken’s wife in Cincinnati’s Reformed Jewish community, Menken was simultaneously developing her comic and cross-dressed roles on the stage. Sentilles looks at the relationship of Jewish and Christian cultures in mid-nineteenth-century America, particularly in terms of women’s positions in those communities. She follows the scandal of Menken’s purportedly polygamous marriage to champion boxer John Heenan (while supposedly still married to Alexander Menken), and how the story played out in the print media. Menken even briefly changed her name when Heenan was vying for the world title in England, and she certainly profited from the association, whether the marriage was legal or not (although the divorce trial did damage her reputation for a short time). Sentilles also considers the ways in which contemporary black and lesbian communities regard Menken as an icon of their representation as well, particularly as a poet. And when discussing Menken as a writer, Sentilles examines nineteenth-century poetry, places Menken in the tradition of its sentimental school, and analyzes her printed verse as a critical part of her public performance.

Certainly the epitome of shameless self-promotion, Menken learned how to gain access to newspapers, get her letters and poems in print, and to carefully craft her image. “As long as Menken appeared sincere and pathetic in print, she could push the parameters of respectability on stage.”