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## **Women, Modernism, and Performance**

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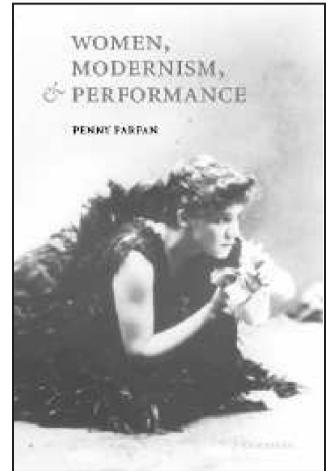
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# Books

***Women, Modernism, and Performance.*** By Penny Farfan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; 186 pp.; illustrations. \$80.00 cloth.

On the cover of Penny Farfan's *Women, Modernism, and Performance* is a photograph of the British actress Elisabeth Robins alone in front of a fireplace, clutching pages of text. In her opening chapter on Robins's critique of Ibsen, Farfan notes that in her portrayal of Hedda Gabler, Robins is "apparently destroying the manuscript" (30). But the image conveys much more than this. Covered in black feathers and crouching like a desperate animal, Robins's Hedda seems just as likely to consume the pages of text as to burn them. The image is emblematic not only of Farfan's immediate consideration of women's representation in the modernist theatre (i.e., Ibsen's tendency to animalize women), but also of a larger consideration of the role of the text—the material paper and printed words—in feminist performance. This image, one of several that Farfan uses to great effect, implies that the play text is something of a dangerous object for women, and Robins holds it with palpable ambivalence.



Although Farfan never says so directly, it is this ambivalence toward text in performance that underlies her study and points to the importance of her methodology. By gracefully positioning modernist texts—both literary and dramatic—as types of feminist performance, Farfan successfully combines both performance and literary analysis to articulate the dynamic role of women on modernist stages and, perhaps more significantly, in modern culture at large.

Moving gradually from feminist performance in the theatre to broader notions of cultural performance, Farfan contextualizes feminist-modernist performance primarily as a response to male modernist texts. For example, chapter 1 considers Robins's play *Votes for Women* (1907) as a critique of Ibsen, particularly the iconic figure of Hedda Gabler; chapter 2 argues that Ellen Terry's unpopular interpretation of Lady Macbeth challenges "contemporary gender ideology that made Ibsen's work so provocatively disturbing to 19-century audiences" (39). In chapter 3, Farfan conflates the textual and the performative in her reading of Virginia Woolf's response to Terry's acting within the "limitations of the existing dramatic canon" (63) as justification for Woolf's literary innovations. In a particularly cogent example of the intersection of feminism, text, and performance, Farfan refers to Djuna Barnes's article "How It Feels to Be Forcibly Fed" (1914), an article Barnes wrote after allowing herself to undergo forced feeding, a treatment suffered by imprisoned British suffragists. Farfan interprets Barnes's experience as "an extraordinary suffrage performance" (6), but one that appears to Barnes's "audience" only in newspaper text.

This discourse is not historically contained. Farfan reads the women of her study in dialogue not only with their contemporary (usually male) critics but also in light of recent criticism. For example, in her analysis of Ellen Terry's lecture on Shakespeare, Farfan considers Terry's text as a debate with Susan Carlson's 1991 book, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition*, on the connection between Shakespeare's comedies and his female characters. At the heart of her what she calls a "maximalist approach" (117), Farfan engages literary study and performance analysis to link her broad categories of "women," "modernism," and "performance" and to articulate the cultural resistance by what she calls

“feminist-modernist discourse.” This useful strategy enables Farfan to read intricate connections among the self-consciously feminist theatricality of actresses Robins and Terry, the public performance of lesbian Radclyff Hall at her obscenity trial, Virginia Woolf’s participation in the 1910 hoax of the Emperor of Absynnia, and the 1927 death of dancer Isadora Duncan within and among her analyses of individual plays. These connections—“a network” (5)—amplify her textual analyses by extending the notion of performance across the boundary of drama into the public lives of women modernists and their critical reception.

In her strongest example, chapter four’s “Staging the ob/scene,” Farfan uses Barnes’s play *The Dove* (1923) as the textual context for larger considerations of obscene performance and the role of the gaze, including both Edith Craig’s performance as the lesbian painter Rosa Bonheur in *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909) and Radclyff Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The scope of Farfan’s analysis in this chapter is far-reaching, and in it she successfully demonstrates that the “previously unscripted gender roles and sexualities in [modernist] theatre and drama” are essential to undermining the public, “hegemonical” gender roles outside the theatre.

Farfan continues this notion of resistance in her two final chapters—on Woolf’s novel *Between the Acts* (1941) and Duncan’s death—though somewhat less convincingly. Not surprisingly, it is the lack of a text (either performance or written) in her final chapter on Duncan that somewhat undermines Farfan’s analytical approach. In her final two chapters, Farfan attempts to inscribe the life of the woman artist as the twin acts of writing and performing by describing Woolf’s novel as “writing/performance” (89) and Isadora Duncan’s dancing as “writing through the medium of her body in motion” (113). But her analysis of Duncan’s “beautiful” death (as one male critic called it) is fundamentally the reception of Duncan’s death, not any of Duncan’s actual performances. Although Farfan ends with a call to “read Duncan’s life in terms of her accomplishments” (114), it is unclear how we are to reconcile this with the popular reception of Duncan’s death as an implied performance.

This interpretation of Duncan’s death as antifeminist performance is certainly an intriguing coda, but in the absence of sustained examination of Duncan’s own work, the emphasis on her death feels unbalanced.

In spite of this minor digression, Farfan’s study moves convincingly from the modernist stage as a limiting space for women to the liberating potential of feminist texts as performance. Astute and nuanced in the blurred boundaries between these domains, Farfan confronts the apparent dichotomies of text and performance from a perspective that is both fresh and exquisitely researched. Her integration of visual material and careful study of unpublished documents, letters, and notes are corollaries to her textual analyses. As such, this book will be essential to any serious inquiry into feminism and modernism. Most significantly, the book ultimately breaks through the boundary between text and performance by demonstrating that the act of writing—not only for authors like Woolf and Barnes, but also for performers like Robins, Terry, and even Duncan—could become its own kind of freeing performance.

—Sarah Bay-Cheng

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