



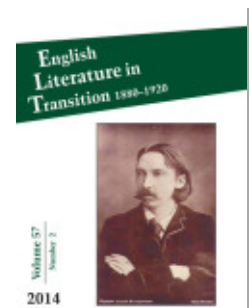
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The Theatrical Woolf

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The Theatrical Woolf

Steven D. Putzel. *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012. xxiv + 225 pp. \$70.00

IN A 1910 LETTER, Virginia Woolf complained that Bernard Shaw “kept us on the rack for 3 hours” with his new play *Misalliance*, attributing to the playwright “the mind of a disgustingly precocious child of 2—a sad and improper spectacle to my thinking.” Her prickly ambivalence towards GBS notwithstanding, the response might seem indicative of Woolf’s general view of the theater. The spectacles she witnessed on stage often disappointed her, paling in comparison to what she called “theatre of the brain.” Nonetheless, while she often avowed her preference for being an imaginative reader rather than a viewer, Woolf frequented theatrical and operatic performances. The drama held a mysterious lure for modernists proficient in other genres. While there are a handful of crossover successes, including William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot, many scriptural efforts remain eccentric curiosities scattered among prose masterpieces, as is the case with James Joyce, E. M. Forster, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. The conventional view is that Woolf belongs in the latter category with *Freshwater* treated as merely an extension of Bloomsbury role-playing and a tosh of inside jokes. Steven D. Putzel’s *Virginia Woolf and the Theater* assays to revise this view, claiming not that her play has been undervalued necessarily but that her relationship to the theater, both personally and professionally, is much more complex and far-reaching than biographers and scholars have estimated. In fact, his book’s unusual turn in its second half intimates that contemporary female playwrights as well as practitioners who seek to adapt Woolf’s prose for the stage help to restore a fuller sense of how she transfigured theatrical dynamics for the page.

Putzel’s introduction maps out a critical genealogy focused on Woolf’s relationship to the drama, beginning with the pioneering work of Jane Marcus and Louise DeSalvo and extending through recent studies by Penny Farfen and Georgia Johnston. Yet he maintains that an accrued silence persists in the scholarly conversation around Woolf’s theatrical influences that belies their crucial role in shaping her technique. As a remedy, the book seeks to recover a record, culled from a variety of sources, of Woolf’s theatergoing and practice. Its first half is composed of a loosely chronological gathering of extracts from juvenilia as well as notebooks, diary entries, essays, and letters interspersed with bits of

theater history and speculative reconstruction. Together they fill in a side of Woolf's life that Putzel maintains has been underemphasized by previous biographers including her responses to the productions she attended as a child. In the opening chapter, Putzel catalogs references to witnessed performances of plays, minstrels, operas, and pantos, identifying significant elements of production style that resonate in her novels. Framed by the narrative of her meta-theatrical relationship with Lytton Strachey, eloquent analysis in chapter two convincingly lays the groundwork for his argument about the influence of the Play-Reading Society and other private Bloomsbury performances on Woolf's later prose. The third chapter documents Woolf's connections with the Actresses' Franchise League and a handful of prominent actresses, but, as with the first two chapters, the commentary gingerly navigates around significant discrepancies such as, for example, Woolf's lack of interest in the surging work of female playwrights. What emerges from these chapters is a clear sense that she is engaged not with the material theater but with the concept and practice of theatricality itself. If theater is an imitation of an action, she found what happened between the acts more compelling. Frustrated by the overwrought, plot-driven theater of her time, she was intrigued by the art form's semantic gaps, semiotic multiplicity, and the circumscription of meaning by audiences and performers. Her interest in actresses, in the ways in which they suture what Woolf refers to as "the scattered sketches" that make up identity, demonstrates that theater for her models the performative conception of selfhood. As such, Putzel's first three chapters recover the early makings of a sensibility that will eventually synthesize dynamics of both seeing and practicing theater.

The material, especially Woolf's periodic diary experiments in crafting play ideas and stage dialogue, is undeniably fascinating though a bit overwhelming at times. Sketching the contours of Woolf's theatergoing and the shadowy beginnings of her narrative method gives to these opening chapters a structural flaccidity, a meandering shapelessness that can be wearying. Often ending abruptly, these chapters contain an impressive amassing of references, though the reader may find it hard at times to gain traction. Interpretive payoff arrives in a cogent and articulate fourth chapter in which Putzel approaches *The Years* and *Between the Acts* as examples of the "novel-as-play" and suggests that seeds sown by decades of theatergoing experience eventually blossom into a reliance in these novels on dialogue rather than narration. For Woolf, a play "demands coming to the surface," and the staged

word is a conduit between the imaginary world and the social real. Performance foregrounds the tension between language and thought, life and text, and turns upon a creative complicity between audience and performer, effecting what Woolf called “some sort of compromise ... between my reader’s version and the actor’s one.” For Putzel, the ways in which Woolf’s words play in these late works and their active collaboration with the audience to produce multiple meanings derive from theater, not drama. While always clear where his project fits within Woolf scholarship, he doesn’t address the ways in which his project speaks to current conversations about drama and late modernism. It is surprising, for instance, that he doesn’t refer to Jed Esty’s *A Shrink- ing Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (2004) which situates Woolf’s interest in drama alongside Eliot’s and Forster’s. Esty spends an entire chapter envisioning *Between the Acts*’s pageant play as a mode in which Woolf traced the movement from private epiphanies to the collective production of social meaning, particularly nationalist self-construction. Surely, Putzel’s important contributions on this topic demand a wider critical context in his study.

The engrossing final chapter pivots considerably towards an assessment of adaptations of Woolf’s works from the last thirty years or so, suggesting that postmodern theater styles and contemporary stage technologies enable more effective stagings of Woolf’s vision of interiority. Putzel surveys productions that achieve varying degrees of success, ranging from those that evoke Eugene O’Neill’s clunky *Strange Interlude* to more recent integrations of digital media and techniques of sound, movement, and design borrowed from performance art. The last quarter of the chapter analyzes stage representations of Woolf herself over the same period. In the acknowledgements, Putzel locates the origin of the project as his desire to study Woolf’s influence on contemporary female playwrights, and the book’s brisk conclusion reads as a précis for such a volume, the author tersely rattling off continuities of form and content between Woolf’s ideas and the work of two generations of British female playwrights, including Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, and Michelene Wandor. Charting the ways in which feminist theater practice since the 1970s speaks as and to Woolf’s legacy is indeed an appealing venture but one that both merits and mandates its own separate, full-length study. One startling omission is Sarah Kane whose celebrated plays primarily concern themselves with the relationship between body and word, subjectivity and culture, being and representing. Their fluidity of time, space, and form, particularly in her

late works *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis*, resonates in tandem with Woolf's interests and techniques. Similarly, Putzel includes two dialogue fragments taken from her diary that tantalizingly evoke the plays of Gertrude Stein, another female modernist interested in tracing subjectivity through the integration of prose and dramatic narrative. How Woolf's novels and the work of these playwrights complement and complicate one another should be more thoroughly realized in a study devoted solely to that topic.

Herein lies the Achilles' heel of Putzel's book. Despite the overarching unifying thread of Woolf's relationship to the theater, its contents seem disparate, reading at times more like an anthology than a monograph. The ambitious scope of *Virginia Woolf and the Theater* undercuts the depth of its divergent sections but not their persuasiveness. If the whole is less than the sum of its parts, there is nonetheless much to recommend. Besides considerable insight in every chapter, the book's critical methodology emulates Woolf's liberating, transsubstantial view of genre, productively integrating theater criticism and dramatic theory with their literary counterparts. One finishes the book fully assured of the abundant potential in examining Woolf's writing through the lens of drama *and* theater as well as the myriad fruitful directions such scholarship can take. Putzel begins with the valid assertion that no study on Woolf can be definitive, and the enormous value of his volume is in opening up rich, new critical terrain with the theatrical Woolf.

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