Scholarly Reading Notes · EN

Frances Brooke, the Playwright as Critic

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In chapter two of Getting into the Act, Ellen Donkin begins with a familiar event in a playwright's life. A theatre manager turns down a manuscript. What makes Frances Brooke's experience worth examining is what happened to other treatments of the same story. David Garrick rejected Brooke's Virginia. Samuel Crisp's Virginia and John Moncrieff's Appius subsequently reached the London stage. Brooke believed that Garrick had refused her play without reading it. Why did her manuscript receive so little consideration or encouragement?

Donkin draws on correspondence addressed to Garrick. She takes care over what the surviving evidence can establish. It cannot tell us that Garrick rejected this particular play because a woman wrote it. It does, however, raise a question about access. Brooke seems to have lacked the network of references and introductions on which a hearing might depend. In this sense, a decision whose immediate motive is uncertain can still pose a feminist question (p. 32).

After the rejection, Brooke published thirty-seven issues of The Old Maid. In one, she considered Nahum Tate's version of King Lear, the appeal of Spranger Barry's performance and Garrick's interpretation of Lear. Donkin finds the comparison fair (p. 34). This distinction matters. The disagreement with Garrick belongs to the history of their relationship, but it cannot on its own account for Brooke's judgement as a theatre critic.

The next connection concerns Madame Riccoboni. Brooke had translated a work by Riccoboni, who also had professional ties to Garrick. Donkin reads Riccoboni's declaration of loyalty to him alongside the loss of her collaboration with Brooke. A relationship that might have benefited both women artistically and financially became difficult to sustain. A manager's influence could extend well beyond the manuscript on his desk (pp. 37–38).

The difficulties Brooke encountered with her short opera Rosina bring Samuel Foote and George Colman into the discussion. In a letter, Brooke wonders whether Colman might prove to be another Garrick. Donkin hears in that remark a recognition of a wider obstacle. The patent system concentrated theatrical authority in a small number of interlocking managerial domains. Turning to another manager offered little assurance of a different hearing (p. 39).

Brooke did see Rosina and Marian performed at Covent Garden, and her novel The Excursion appeared in print. Those achievements sit alongside a system that remained remarkably durable. Read together, Brooke's letters, criticism and professional relationships make visible the pressures under which a woman could write for the London stage. They also let us hear Brooke judging the theatrical culture that presumed to judge her.

Source · Ellen Donkin, "Frances Brooke: The Female Playwright as Critic", in Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776–1829 (Routledge, 1995), chapter 2.