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Review of *Carrying All Before Her*, by Chelsea Phillips

Abstract

A review of Chelsea Phillips's *Carrying All Before Her: Celebrity Pregnancy and the London Stage, 1689-1800*, by Jennifer Buckley

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Chelsea Phillips. *Carrying All Before Her: Celebrity Pregnancy and the London Stage, 1689-1800*. University of Delaware Press, 2022. pp. xiv + 287 pp. ISBN: 9781644532485.

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From the eighteenth-century's best-loved actresses through to Beyoncé, celebrity labor carries with it the burden of public intimacy in which one's very being is subject to intense scrutiny. For Chelsea Phillips, "Stage celebrities, trading on the appearance of public intimacy, melded public with private, persona and person, and domestic and professional labor" (29). Such melding is most pronounced in relation to the gravid body, which exposes very personal, private acts to mass scrutiny and creates a false sense of public availability and closeness. In *Carrying All Before Her*, Phillips offers a significant contribution to histories of actresses, undertaking wide-ranging archival research that draws from a variety of sources, including correspondence, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies, financial records, parish records, journals, and visual satires, to reveal how being visibly pregnant impacted public perception of female celebrities in the eighteenth century.

It was par for the course for eighteenth-century audiences to see the working mother and pregnant body on stage and, using our own times when the reproducing body is the subject of intense political debate, Phillips' monograph uncovers how the eighteenth-century theatre industry was more likely to accommodate women than its twenty-first-century counterpart. Eighteenth-century theatres "did not start from the question of *if* they should accommodate working mothers (at all levels of employment), only *how* they would do so" (221). Phillips's case studies—Susanna Mountfort Verbruggen, Anne Oldfield, Susannah Cibber, George Anne Bellamy, Sarah Siddons, and Dorothy Jordan—move chronologically to span a period of 110 years and reveal how the theatre was a profession friendly to pregnancy, with actresses able to: negotiate contract start dates around lying in; delay or shorten their season; take varying amounts of time off to recover (as dictated by financial necessity); and change the roles they performed to continue working safely. While Phillips admits that these six actresses are a somewhat tendentious selection that excludes performers with careers outside the capital and those who did not have the benefit of celebrity status, celebrity provides the richest material for study. By taking a long history of pregnancy on the London stage, Phillips considers cultural shifts in domesticity to anchor our understanding of pregnancy on London's stage in these women's embodied experiences.

Going far beyond ideas of the virtuous wife or the “Madonna” versus “whore” binary (34), the book’s chapters carefully examine how these women managed a successful career alongside multiple pregnancies. Studies of Mountfort Verbruggen and Oldfield consider how pregnancy afforded opportunities for women to explore new avenues for their talents, rather than causing them to be sidelined; Cibber and Bellamy are framed in relation to tenebrism and how they controlled what the public saw of their private lives; Siddons is explored in relation to her ability to synthesize on- and off-stage performances of maternity; and Jordan embodies the full range of responses that the other women individually received. In each instance, Phillips focuses on the accommodations these women expected (and demanded) from their managers.

The first chapter, ‘Inheriting Greatness,’ highlights the book’s central intervention: pregnancy needs to be considered as part of a complete analysis of an actress’s repertoire and that understanding women’s careers outside of pregnancy gives a false sense of the priorities for authors, managers, and performers. This is an interesting chapter that explores the roles women chose (not) to play during pregnancy and lays the groundwork for the models of the ‘grotesque’ and ‘acceptable’ pregnant body to be explored in greater detail in later chapters. For Mountfort Verbruggen, pregnancy facilitated her movement into grotesque roles as she leveraged the comedic potential of her body to expand her repertoire and, for Oldfield, allowed her to move into tragedy. With women playing parts that drew attention to their changing bodies, pregnancy opened new professional doors and, in the case of Oldfield, lent validity to her out-of-marriage pregnancy, enabling her to counter attacks on her character outside the theatre with her performances inside it.

The chapter entitled ‘Pregnant Sensibilities,’ explores the question of female agency in choosing when to leave the stage and contextualizes the lives of Susannah Cibber and George Anne Bellamy in relation to accounts of their professional lives in memoirs, news reports, and crim. con. trials. The chapter focuses productively on the realities of the pregnant body and how these two performers alternately chose to conceal and reveal their gravid bodies to control public perception. Cibber did this by carefully curating her roles and taking a temporary retirement during her last pregnancy, while Bellamy took a more direct approach. Bellamy’s extensive memoirs reveal her life story on her terms, providing the context against which it is possible to read her career and pregnancies. Thus, Phillips highlights how certain stage roles take on new meaning when played during pregnancy, such as *Andromache* in *The Distrest Mother* (a role all the women in this study played while pregnant) and *Imoinda* in *Oroonoko*. While the tenebristic metaphor could have been pushed further, Phillips makes a convincing case for self-fashioning in which the celebrity actress

regains control over her depiction in the media by taking on roles that allows stage-personas to validate or counter perceptions of their private lives.

The richest discussion of the intersection of maternal and theatrical labor lies in the study of Sarah Siddons. This chapter takes a slightly different approach to its predecessors as Siddons was absent from the London stage for most of her successful pregnancies. It offers an extended reading of her performances of Lady Macbeth, considering how the part's depiction by a pregnant actress brings a new hopelessness that is added to the witches' prophecy that Macbeth will have no heirs. Extant account books see a welcome turn to a consideration of the financial impact of pregnancy and the correlation between financial health and perceptions of being good mother. The financial turn, combined with Phillips' persuasive close readings of Lady Macbeth's speeches see the union of Siddons's onstage and offstage characters as personal tragedies over childbirth intersect with her portrayal of maternal figures on stage.

Dorothy Jordan offers a natural end point for this study as, over the course of thirteen pregnancies, her experiences amalgamate of those of the other five women. While Jordan's out-of-marriage relationship with Richard Ford was accepted, her subsequent relations with the Duke of Clarence were initially received negatively and depicted in grotesque terms. The richer media landscape of the late eighteenth century allows for a strong case study as Phillips explores the visual satires that chart changing public perceptions of Jordan, her pregnancies, and her relationships. Over the course of ten successful pregnancies with Clarence, Phillips shows how changing depictions of Jordan's character shaped her repertoire – sometimes facilitating career opportunities for non-celebrity members of the troupe – and how her position as royal mistress was eventually validated by events in France, with opinion towards her softening in the wake of the execution of Louis XVI. Personal, professional, and national concerns, Phillips suggests, intertwine.

Carrying All Before Her puts actresses' own experiences center stage not just to reframe but to completely reorient the way we think about women's stage careers. However, as Phillips notes, there is a careful balance to be struck between breadth and depth in analyzing pregnancy and its influence on an actresses' repertoire (40) and their wider career trajectories – and this is a difficult line to walk when sketching out multiple careers over a large timespan. The richness of the chapters on Siddons and Jordan highlights the challenges of taking this line of approach for all but the most famous celebrities. With theatre records far more complete from the 1770s onwards, prior to the discussion of Siddons in Chapter 3 material from contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, account books, and artifacts of managerial practice is lacking, and Phillips offers conjectures as she seeks to find a new framework to compensate for this lack. This has two key effects: it relies more

extensively on personal accounts to document the women's own embodied experiences and opens the door for future work on non-celebrity women and those outside London's patent theaters who might help to supply that lack. The ephemeral nature of theatre means that its history is often fragmented, and archival gaps are numerous and often substantial. Phillips is aware of this difficulty with her source material, not least as the study of pregnancy is the study of periods in which actresses did *not* appear in many conventional sources; recovering the stories of pregnant women on stage is about "learning to 'listen to echoes'" (9) and interpreting omissions in extant records. One way in which some of these gaps could have been addressed and the argument strengthened, however, is through a discussion of medical literature; amid discussions of how medical advice to pregnant women changes over the century, including a few midwifery pamphlets would help add voices to the narrative where the archive is silent.

In sum, Phillips's book is pioneering in its approach to women's history. This work is important not just for those engaged in actress studies but for anyone setting out to explore the social and economic histories of cultural production and gender history. There is certainly more work to be done in this area, and Phillips has further vital contributions to make as her recent article in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* shows. This book offers a rich insight into ongoing debates about the place of motherhood in the economy and the world of work, drawing connections between the eighteenth century and modern times.