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Q&A with Felicity Nussbaum

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1fr1f799>

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Publication Date

2007-10-01

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BY CANDACE MOORE AND VIVIAN DAVIS

Q&A Felicity Nussbaum

HER UPCOMING CSW SENIOR FACULTY SEMINAR WILL CONSIDER “ACTRESSES AS RIVAL QUEENS”



CURRENTLY WORKING ON *Exceptional Virtue: Actresses and Performance in the British Theatre, 1700–1780*, and editing (with Professor Saree Makdisi, Department of English)

a volume that will provide historical context for *The Arabian Nights*, Professor Felicity A. Nussbaum, Department of English, will share new work on the subjectivities of Restoration-era female actresses as part of the CSW



“The Rival Queens of Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres, at a Gymnastic Rehearsal.”

Senior Faculty Feminist Seminar Series. The essay she will present, “Real, Beautiful Women’: Actresses as Rival Queens,” isn’t just about staged performance, it’s about bloodshed too. As Nussbaum puts it, the piece explores “theatrical rivalries in which female characters engaged in mortal combat and even shed real blood to keep heroic tragedies such as Nathaniel Lee’s *The Rival Queens*, and other plays resembling it, viable.” One of the exciting features of this seminar series is that top faculty doing work on gender and sexuality are matched with respondents from among their peer group. Professor Sue-Ellen Case, Chair of Critical Studies in the Department of Theater, and Professor Anne K. Mellor, Department of English, will join Nussbaum to engage with her work and open up a dialog with the audience. Professor Nussbaum recently shared these remarks about her work and the upcoming seminar.

Your career illustrates a long-term commitment to research in gender. How did that come about?

My grandmother was a suffragette, and my mother often spoke to me about women’s rights as she struggled with the conflicting

messages given to women in the 1950s. As an undergraduate I had only one women professor, a crotchety Shakespeare specialist who nearly turned me away from studying English literature because of her lack of pleasure in reading the plays. Not a single one of my professors in graduate school was a woman, and I recall having to persuade the well-known scholar who taught “History of Literary Studies” that Elizabeth Elstob, an eighteenth-century antiquarian, deserved study. The anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements were yoked with the women’s movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. I took my inspiration for thinking about women’s literary history from fellow grad students and dedicated young professors at my first job who were beginning to think that gender was a discipline-changing category of analysis, and with whom I developed an interdisciplinary women’s studies course.

You recently published an article in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* entitled “Risky Business: Feminism Now and Then.” Are feminist critical frameworks just as risky in the twenty-first century as they were in the eighteenth?

Feminist critical frameworks were only beginning to be developed in the eighteenth century, and Mary Astell, Eliza Haywood, the Bluestockings, and Mary Wollstonecraft

were courageous thinkers in a way I strive to emulate. It’s still a risky business, but I think our foremothers found it more difficult than we do, partly because so many of them developed their ideas in relative isolation and without the women’s movement.

In your upcoming talk, you’ll be discussing the relationships and rivalries between prominent early English actresses. What first prompted you to investigate actresses in Restoration and eighteenth-century England? Why is the figure of the actress so important for studies in eighteenth-century culture?

*It is a curious fact, a fact I take to be more than coincidence, that the first woman on the legitimate British stage (most probably Margaret Hughes) after the theatres reopened almost certainly acted as Desdemona in *The Moor of Venice* in 1660, a role which would have emphasized the difference between the tragic heroine’s white skin and the painted blackface of Othello. Masking or veiling of any sort for women, including blacking up, was often taken to be the sign of the whore. The early actresses, who first came to the stage after the all-male Renaissance theatres, are often regarded as prostitutes because they earned an independent income and freely inhabited the public domain. I thought there had to be more to the story. In fact, their sexual behavior varied from the freest to the*


most chaste. Examining the economics of the theatre reveals that the most talented actresses made substantial sums of money and possessed real cultural authority. And the theatrical extended far beyond the stage. Most women in the eighteenth century, whether professional actresses or not, had to learn to be actresses in order to successfully perform the prescribed roles for “woman,” and they posed a challenge to the so-called proper lady.

As a Professor of English at UCLA, you live and work in the heart of the entertainment industry. Do you see any special connections between contemporary American celebrity culture and the Restoration actresses you investigate?

Obviously the pursuit of celebrity pervades world culture, and Stella Tillyard has claimed that eighteenth-century London theatre was “the crucible of celebrity.” Early actresses were among the first celebrities who cultivated “public intimacy” to enthrall audiences of men and women. But cultivating celebrity is also about making money for the industry, then and now, and the way that actresses and their bodies became sites of cultural struggle regarding virtue, conditions of employment, social class, and the nation are the issues that interest me in both periods.

Your talk on October 31 will feature Professors Sue-Ellen Case and Anne Mellor as respondents. How has the experience of working in a community of feminist scholars affected your own work?

I can't imagine pursuing my work without the inspiration and friendship of these two women, as well as the CSW community of feminist scholars and graduate students, and the larger national and international communities. Feminism has now expanded enough to encompass various conflicts and controversies, but we still share many common as-yet-unrealized goals.

 **Candace Moore** is a doctoral student in Critical Studies in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media. **Vivian Davis** is a doctoral student in the Department of English.

UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN

presents

“Real, Beautiful Women” Actresses as Rival Queens

Felicity A. Nussbaum

Professor in the Department of English

RESPONDENTS:

Sue-Ellen Case

Professor and Chair of Critical Studies,
Department of Theater

Anne K. Mellor

Professor, Department of English

Wednesday

October 31

4 pm

314 Royce

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