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Who was Sarah Bernhardt?
Negotiating Fact and Fiction

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Sarah Bernhardt is remembered differently by succeeding generations. Even during her own lifetime—she was born in 1844 and died in 1923—her fame was manifested and interpreted in very different ways. We have those first, fresh photographs of her taken by Félix Nadar around 1860. Here, she is an anonymous teenager who has not yet acquired theatrical renown; her bare shoulders, head of thick curly hair, and soft pensiveness contrast sharply with the jewelry, costume, and seductive staging which would characterize her portraits by the mid-1870s. Later, after the turn of the century, she was the *grand dame* of French theatre. At this point, she was carried majestically and very publicly in a litter chair she had specially built to accommodate the amputation of her right leg in 1915. Given the difficulty in associating Bernhardt with a singular iconic image (as, for example, Marilyn Monroe might be) or locating her within a specific historical moment or even century, Robert Gottlieb’s *Sarah: The Life of Sarah Bernhardt* had a particularly challenging task. It had to reintroduce readers to an actress whose life spanned two centuries, and who managed, remarkably, to stay in the public eye for over sixty years. The number of photographs, paintings and caricatures included in this biography certainly helps us to contextualize
the changing shape of Bernhardt’s fame. Where Gottlieb excels, however, is in his descriptive prose. Sarah is a legible, clear, and forthright account of a busy and peripatetic life. While none of the material included in the biography is new to researchers or scholars, the book is the first to introduce the complexity of Bernhardt’s life to a general readership.

The significance of this achievement cannot be overstated. At a point in which a growing number of exhibitions are dedicated to Bernhardt, or at least showcase her as a significant historical figure, there is a need to properly explain and contextualize her life. Indeed, in recent years, we have had many fascinating and engaging looks at the actress. There was the Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama exhibition held at the Jewish Museum in New York from December 2005 to April 2006, the Portrait(s) de Sarah Bernhardt exhibition organized by the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris in 2000-2001, as well as the Bernhardt film program offered at Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna 2006, and her portrait used to publicize the Legends exhibition held at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, in 2001. Gottlieb’s book serves as an important addition to this surge in interest in the actress. It reminds us of the simple but necessary fact that Bernhardt was not just a star of international renown who helped to inaugurate celebrityhood as it is understood today; as a child, and as a woman, she had to negotiate the difficulties that life brought her. This included having a mother who was a courtesan, and a father who was almost entirely absent from her life, and also the fact that, although she was baptized and converted to Catholicism in 1856, she nevertheless had to deal with the entrenched anti-Semitism of late-nineteenth-century France.

The opening chapters of the book are particularly strong. Here, Gottlieb conveys the difficulties Bernhardt endured as a child, and recounts the hardships she faced as a young actress, especially after the birth of her son Maurice out of wedlock in 1864. Rather than rely uncritically on anecdotes recounted in existing biographies (which include Bernhardt’s own Memoirs published in 1880), he deftly negotiates the slew of works we have available to us. As read-
ers, we are therefore engaged by the implausible historical “facts” Gottleib uneartths about Bernhardt. Against this backdrop of gossip and hearsay, we appreciate Gottleib’s more measured conclusions about what occurred during Bernhardt’s peripatetic life. What is interesting in this approach is the use that is made of Marie Colombier’s vitriolic roman à clef, *The Life and Memoirs of Sarah Barnum* (1884). Usually brought forth as an instance of the anti-Semitism rife in late-nineteenth-century France, it is also used by Gottlieb as an antidote to Bernhardt’s tendency to obfuscate or invent tales in her own *Memoirs*. Thérèse Berton, the wife of playwright Louis Vernueil, himself a Bernhardt biographer, also wrote a biography, *The Real Sarah Bernhardt: whom her audiences never knew, as told to her friend Mme. Pierre Berton* (1924), and Gottleib’s work draws upon this. Berton’s biography is correctly characterized by Gottlieb as “self-serving but sporadically convincing.”(6) He is thus able to use the works of writers such as Colombier and Berton in a serious and productive way.

In later sections of the book, Gottlieb discusses the decades of Bernhardt’s life that are most often canvassed by academics today (1870-1900), and he uses this abundant scholarship to create a sense of the sheer breadth of Bernhardt’s undertakings. We learn of her growing fame on the stage—her move from the Odéon Theatre back to the even more prestigious Comédie-Française, her successful marketing of herself as a popular star on the international stage after a falling out with the company during her tour to England in 1880—as well as of the many different ways that Bernhardt actively courted notoriety. Defiant of convention, Bernhardt “made fashion.”(82) She wore clothes that clung to her body and that twisted around her unusually thin frame; she used belts to accentuate her serpentine poses; and she was among the first to use (and commission) theatrical jewelry for off-stage use. She also famously slept in a coffin, was surrounded by exotic animals which she kept as pets, and took some of these with her on holiday to the fort she bought in 1894 in rugged Belle-Île, an island in Brittany. She also made a well-publicized ascent in a hot-air balloon during the Universal Exhibition of Paris in
1878, and was widely feted in a famous Sarah Bernhardt Day in Paris in 1896. Although she married a little-known Greek attaché in 1882—Aristides Damala, who joined her on the stage as Jacques Damala—Bernhardt had affairs with many of the leading theatrical men of mid- and late-nineteenth-century France. Victor Hugo, Paul Porel, Pierre Berton, Félix Duquesnel, Mounet-Sully, and Jean Richepin were among her lovers; she was also reputedly bisexual. Some of her exploits were also altruistic in nature. Most famously, she came to the rescue of French soldiers amid the 1871 siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, and was instrumental at this point in converting the Odéon Theatre into a temporary military hospital. She was also actively supportive of the Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus during the Dreyfus affair; Gottlieb tells us that “The event that shattered the unity of France… also shattered the family,” since Bernhardt’s son Maurice was among those who believed that Dreyfus was guilty of treason, and rejected the accusations leveled against the army of systemic anti-Semitism and a cover-up.(153) Finally, we know that in 1916 Bernhardt went to America in order to rally Americans to the Allied cause during the Great War.

While Gottlieb thus manages to survey many aspects of Bernhardt’s life within a narrative biography, the attention he pays to her engagement in the Dreyfus affair is of particular interest. Clearly, for a book written for a “Jewish Lives” series published by Yale University Press, Bernhardt’s support for Dreyfus is significant. For those of us who are familiar with the ways in which Bernhardt was vilified as Jew—and the book The Jew in the Text is a good source for this†—the information that Gottlieb details is important, since it also demonstrates Bernhardt’s willingness to identify as a Jew and to publicly attack cultural bigotry. Gottlieb asserts that Bernhardt’s “experience of her Jewish/Gentile identity oddly parallels that of Benjamin Disraeli, born forty years before her.”(154) While I would question the degree to which these two very different people can be easily compared, Gottlieb elaborates in a footnote that: “To both of them, Jewishness was a matter of race, not belief.”(154) In this context, we might return to many of the theatrical plays that Gottlieb earlier lists
as Bernhardt’s signature pieces in the late nineteenth century (such as *Le Passant*, *L’Étrangère*, *Fédora*, *La Tosca*, *Cléopâtre*, and *Gismonda*) and see in them a conscious choice on Bernhardt’s part to capitalize upon her own racial difference. The dynamic which Gottlieb describes within Bernhardt’s home—where Bernhardt was at once French and Catholic but also proudly Jewish—was played out in the roles she brought as a French actress performing “otherness” to audiences across the world.

Bernhardt was a clever businesswoman. She was not just the progenitor of the star system; she also knew how to develop her star status, cannily ensuring that she remained in the public eye until her death in 1923. While Gottlieb has done much to flesh out the early years of Bernhardt’s life by intelligently patching together information gleaned from an array of biographical sources, he is short on the last two decades of her life. We learn that she became “the first international film star” in 1912 with the successful release of *Queen Elizabeth* by Aldolph Zukor, that she had her leg amputated in 1915, and that, although she continued performing on the live stage, she was celebrated “less as an actress than as a worshipped relic of another era.”(202, 204) As Gottlieb explains, during the last months of her life, Bernhardt was involved in the filming of *La Voyante* (the scenes in which she appeared were shot within her home), but she died of uremia before the film’s completion. While Gottlieb therefore covers the key moments of Bernhardt’s final twenty years, there is no re-reading or re-interpretation of her life, as in his earlier chapters. Bernhardt remains a woman who, after the turn of the twentieth century, is steeped in the past and whose decadence becomes almost defiantly anachronistic.

I think there is still work to be done on this period of Bernhardt’s life. Much of the most interesting scholarly research on Bernhardt has turned not to the 1870s, 1880s, or 1890s, but to the opening decades of the twentieth century, and to the contribution that Bernhardt made to popular culture, the theatre, and feminism at this time. For example, theatre historians have usefully illustrated the ways in which Bernhardt adapted her performances to the popular Vaudeville
Dance historians have argued that, just as Bernhardt was influenced by the spiralling turns of the Japanese Kabuki actress Sada Yacco in Paris in 1900, so too was Sada Yacco instrumental in adapting Bernhardt’s repertoire to the Japanese stage. And in feminist (and Jewish) history Bernhardt has been cast as the lynchpin to the emergence of the “Modern Woman.” I would suggest that the very theatrical anachronism that Bernhardt came to represent on the stage was itself less about looking back to the nineteenth century than it was about fostering a proto-camp aesthetic at the dawn of the twentieth century. Those figures such as Oscar Wilde, Jean Cocteau, Pierre Loti, Robert de Montesquiou, Marcel Proust and Reynaldo Hahn, who, just after the turn of the century, so famously celebrated her as a monstre sacré, anticipated the very discourse that Susan Sontag would inaugurate in her 1964 “Notes on Camp,” where Bernhardt’s films were listed with “Tiffany lamps / Scopitone films / The Brown Derby restaurant on Sunset Boulevard in LA / The Enquirer, headlines and stories / [and] Aubrey Beardsley drawings…”.

It was not only Bernhardt’s quality of anachronism which ensured that she would remain legible (and thus relevant) to audiences in the twentieth century. As Sontag’s article implies, it was also her films. These were not just high class products destined for educated people. They were popular products which—at least in the case of Queen Elizabeth in America in 1912—broke all box office records. The significance of this is that Bernhardt effectively made herself available to an international audience just as her live voice was beginning to be described as broken, and at a point at which her physical mobility was limited. Rather than simply film herself on the stage, she cleverly adapted many roles which were associated with the operatic stage, such as La Tosca (André Calmettes, 1908), Camille (La Traviata) (André Calmettes and Henri Pouctal, 1911), Queen Elizabeth (Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1912), and Adrienne Lecouvreur (Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1913). In such roles, Bernhardt was able to reach both a middle class and popular audience; she was able to join together previously separate audiences around her films. Bernhardt’s was a strategic move,
unifying audiences traditionally used to the opera and versed in the hierarchy of the arts with a mass audience habituated to film. What I might call Bernhardt’s “operatic films” were also a clever response to the medium’s silence. It suggested to audiences across the globe that vocal absence did not indicate a linguistic or instrumental failure. Accompanied, as silent films always were, by live music, the strength of Bernhardt’s silent performance carried meaning. These films therefore became a new artistic hybrid that joined theatre and music to a new, mechanical art form.

Bernhardt made, among other works, the first celebrity home movie—*Sarah Bernhardt à Belle Isle* (*Sarah Bernhardt At Home*), Film d’Art, 1912—as well as a propaganda film promoting American intervention in the First World War (*Mothers of France*, Louis Mercanton, 1916). What this indicates is not just that Sontag’s characterization of Bernhardt’s films as camp is too narrow, but also that Gottlieb’s interpretation of Bernhardt as “over wrought and old-fashioned on the screen” is itself limited. I would instead suggest that Bernhardt significantly adapted her acting for film, making her gestures much faster and refraining from holding poses for a long time, as she commonly did on the live stage. Bernhardt also often structured scenes around famous paintings that were intelligible to audiences across the globe. The most obvious example of this is her final death scene in *Queen Elizabeth*, where she effectively stages, but then changes, the visual meaning of Paul Delaroche’s famous 1828 painting, *Death of Elizabeth I, Queen of England*. Clearly, film did not merely record an aged theatrical actress incapable of remaining abreast of technological and artistic change.

Gottlieb concludes his biography with an epilogue, which usefully lists some of the ways in which Bernhardt has been remembered and recalled over the course of the past century. We are told that she fronts a “Lucky Luke” graphic novel; she is cited, parodied or actually portrayed in a smattering of films (by Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*, Judy Garland in *Babes on Broadway*, as well as, more recently, by Nicole Kidman in *Moulin Rouge*), and her image is available on eBay through a range of materials, such as a memorial
plate, paper dolls, and Alphonse Mucha prints. Gottlieb’s epilogue concludes with a long citation from Proust’s *The Guermantes Way*, in which Marcel (Proust’s narrator) describes Bernhardt-as-Berma in one long engaging phrase. This turn to Proust, who was writing precisely when Bernhardt was in her old age, shows just how central this period of her life was to the subsequent development of art and literature in the twentieth century. Bernhardt, an actress of the nineteenth century, was brought forth to be enjoyed by a new generation. Proust’s proto-camp celebration of celebrityhood, artifice, and physical excess are still familiar to us today. Proust’s description of Berma, however, also indicates the difficulty that we will have (as English readers) in properly understanding the language of Proust and perhaps even of understanding Bernhardt herself. As Terence Kilmartin notes in relation to Scott Moncrieff (whose original 1925 translation of *The Guermantes Way* Gottlieb uses in this book): “A general criticism that might be leveled against Scott Moncrieff is that his prose tends to the purple and the precious—or that is how he interpreted the tone of the original: whereas the truth is that, complicated, dense, overloaded though it often is, Proust’s style is essentially natural and unaffected, quite free of preciosity, archaism or self-conscious elegance.” In other words, it is very hard to free ourselves from Moncrieff’s characterization of Bernhardt/Berma as a camp figure of excess. Even Gottlieb, who is so adept at understanding the nuance of a given text, here chose a translation which is more indicative Moncrieff’s interpretation of Proust rather than the language and style of Proust himself.

The “Note on Sources” which prefaces Gottlieb’s bibliography is good in that it is short, to the point, and generally helpful in evaluating the reliability of the Bernhardt sources that have been used. The Berton biography, which is frequently referred to in the opening section of the book, is included (without a title) in these notes, but does not appear in the bibliography. In the “Note on Sources,” we are also told that David Menefee’s *Sarah Bernhardt in the Theatre of Films and Sound Recordings* is “essential to tracking her career in these areas.”(222) However, Menefee’s book is cer-
tainly not a scholarly work, and it seems odd to imply it might be when such astute evaluation of written texts has otherwise been offered to readers.

The criticisms that I am making of Gottlieb’s biography come from my own work as a theatre and film historian; they are not meant in any way to undermine the engaging verve of his prose. Indeed, Gottlieb is a writer who makes a vast array of material accessible, intelligible, and interesting. While I have argued that the proto-camp appeal of Bernhardt’s theatricality might be seen in a more serious and scholarly manner, I also realize that it is Bernhardt’s eccentricity, outlandishness, and sheer audacity that draw audiences to her today. As Gottlieb correctly intuits, we need to be engaged by history. Unless or until we manage this, there can be no real debate over Bernhardt’s possible meaning.
Notes


