In the 1780s and 1790s theatre critics described the stage as a state in political tumult, while politicians invoked theatre as a model for politics both good and bad. In this study, Betsy Bolton examines the ways Romantic women performers and playwrights used theatrical conventions to intervene in politics. Reading the public performances of Emma Hamilton and Mary Robinson through the conventions of dramatic romance, Bolton suggests that the romance of national identity developed by writers such as Southey and Wordsworth took shape in complex opposition to these unruly women. Setting the conventions of farce against those of sentiment, playwrights such as Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald questioned imperial relations while criticizing contemporary gender relations. This well-illustrated study draws on canonical poetry and personal memoirs, popular drama and parliamentary debates, political caricatures and theatrical reviews to extend current understandings of Romantic theatre, the public sphere, and Romantic gender relations.

This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad, and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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WOMEN, NATIONALISM, AND THE ROMANTIC STAGE
WOMEN, NATIONALISM,
AND THE ROMANTIC
STAGE

Theatre and Politics in Britain, 1780–1800

BETSY BOLTON
For Nancy Calhoun,
Kristin Bolton
and
Zoe Clare Peyton Jones

three generations of women
who in very different ways
accompanied me
through the writing of this book.
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