WOMEN AND PLAYWRITING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Why does historical memory exclude nineteenth-century women playwrights when hundreds worked prolifically across the spectrum of professional theatre, amateur theatricals, and publishing? What might it mean to adjust the collective focus of cultural historians and literary critics so that these women can come into view? This collection of essays, written by a team of leading scholars in the field, undertakes not simply to recover the names and careers of women playwrights but to call into question the whole idea of what a playwright is, and what she does, and why it matters. Gender inquiry is the start: destabilizing the category of playwrights loosens the borders of theatre history, making it possible to reconceptualize theatre and drama not as a product of culture but as social processes dynamically interacting with culture.

The book examines the work of some well-known figures in the theatre of the time as well as a lesser-known but influential group of managers, actresses, and writers, including Jane Scott, Joanna Baillie, and Sarah Lane, proving that women contributed to a lively and active theatrical profession between the eras of Aphra Behn and Caryl Churchill, which only now is coming to light.

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TRACY C. DAVIS AND ELLEN DONKIN
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Of Genius wild & savage Nature spring
The Drama rose, when that & mind were young.
Rose, such as now, o'ercanopied by trees
And lighted by the Sun, the Indian sees:
An uncouth Pantomime of mingling foes,
Ear-piercing war-cries, long-resounding blows,
Mimicry that abjures the aid of speech,
And brainless jest which thought disdains to reach.
Such was the Drama when its course began;
So impotent! so rude! ± for such was Man.
...
Secure that here all flames you may defy,
Except th' unburning flames of Woman's eye.

(Mary Russell Mitford, ms poem entered for the 1812 Drury Lane opening address)
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11 Sappho listens to her companions singing a hymn to Aurora. Illustrated in the Poetical Works of the Late Catherine Grace Godwin (London: Chapman and Hall, 1854). Reproduced with kind permission of Vassar College Libraries.
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