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.

TRACY C. DAVIS is Associate Professor of Theatre, English, and Performance Studies at Northwestern University. She is the author of Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture (1991), George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre (1994), dozens of articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century performance and culture, and is presently writing a book for Cambridge University Press on the economics of nineteenth-century British theatre which investigates the theoretical and pragmatic intersections of capital and performance.

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NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITAIN

EDITED BY
TRACY C. DAVIS AND ELLEN DONKIN
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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3 Playbill from the Sans Pareil, under the management of Jane Scott, dated 24 February 1817. Reproduced by kind permission of the Theatre Museum, Victoria and Albert.

4 Madame Vestris as Don Giovanni. A toy theatre portrait published by J. Dyer. Reproduced by kind permission of the Governing Body, Christ Church, Oxford University.

5 Madame Céleste as the Wild Arab Boy. Lithograph by J. P. Hall, 1834. Reproduced by kind permission of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

6 Caricature of Mrs. Sarah Lane of the Britannia Theatre, subtitled “Rule, Britannia.” Source and date unknown. Reproduced by kind permission of the British Library.

7 Engraving of Harriot Murray (Siddons) c. 1800. Reproduced by kind permission of the Theatre Museum, Victoria and Albert.

8 A page from the Calcraft promptbook for *Constantine Paleologus* by Joanna Baillie. Reproduced with kind permission of Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

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When we undertook to edit this volume, we realized that to rethink how this period has been historicized we would need to deploy a new kind of process. We commissioned ten essays and set out a time-scale which allowed for collecting and distributing everyone’s work in preparation for a symposium held at Northwestern University. Substantive revisions came about as a result of our discussions. The editors thank the authors for taking the original leap of faith with us, commencing their research in *terra incognita*, and for their subsequent patience and persistence in thinking through each essay. The symposium was attended not only by the authors of this volume but also by invited scholars who came as respondents. So, in a very real sense, they are also contributors to this book and need to be acknowledged as such. Special thanks are due to Tom Crochunis, Amy Partridge, Esther Beth Sullivan, Judith Drummond, Catherine Burroughs, and Kerry Powell. We are also indebted to the people who joined this symposium on their own initiative and generously contributed their ideas: Richard Fotheringham, Angela Escott, Brian Artese, Maureen A. Dowd, Rachel LoCascio, Amy Kritzer, and Beverly Boyd. Special thanks also to David Downs, whose performances as John Phillip Kemble and Samuel Whitbread will never be forgotten by those privileged to be witnesses.

Earlier in 1997, a group of graduate students at Northwestern participated in what might have been the first class on the subject of nineteenth-century British women playwrights, and Tracy C. Davis acknowledges the lively and engaging afternoons spent discussing many of the texts treated in this book with Brian Artese, Jennifer Berzansky, Anthea Kraut, Julie Leavitt, Rachel LoCascio, John Martin, Amy Partridge, and Leslie Waddell-Harris. Anna Altman, a graduating senior, also braved the fray. This class was made possible through a generous grant from the Alumni Fund of Northwestern
University, which helped finance the acquisition of many important resources gathered from libraries and archives in Britain and America. In addition, the School of Speech, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Theatre, and Department of English contributed funds that ensured the symposium was hospitably catered and graciously housed.

The editors also thank Victoria Cooper of Cambridge University Press, whose savvy reading of the field is matched by perspicacity and boundless tact. The kind efforts of Hilary Hammond and Jayne Matthews are also acknowledged. Annette Fern shepherded many of the contributors through the labyrinths of riches of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

Both editors thank Max Shapey and Elly’s long-suffering family – Larry Winship, Molly Donkin Winship, and Grace Cobb Winship – and their respective (and sometimes overlapping) communities of great women friends.