Introduction: uncloseting women in British Romantic Theatre

Catherine B. Burroughs

This collection features the contributions to theatre and drama of female playwrights, actors, translators, critics, theorists, and managers who worked during the period traditionally called the "British Romantic era." By circling obsessively about some of the more prominent artists in an age of prominent theatrical women – Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Baillie, Sarah Siddons – this volume draws attention to a variety of other figures who participated significantly in the mainstream theatres of Great Britain.[1] Several essays focus on theatre artists who have received relatively little attention – such as Ann Yearsley, Hannah More, Mariana Starke, Anna Larpent, and Mary Russell Mitford – and some essays explore playwrights who have been more commonly associated with non-dramatic genres, such as Frances Burney and Anne Plumptre, or who were affiliated, as Jane Scott was,[2] with playhouses other than the "major" theatres of Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

By providing readers with information about women who worked in theatre during the critical transitional years between the neoclassical and Victorian eras, the essays collected here contribute to the process of revising narratives of theatre history and reinforce the idea that the dating of a theatrical period depends upon whose perspective is privileged. While this study focuses on the fifty years between 1790 and 1840, it could be said to begin with the successes of several women writers in different genres – Hannah Cowley's comedy *The Runaway* at Drury Lane in 1776, Hannah More's tragedy *Percy* at Covent Garden in 1777, and Sophia Lee's comedy at the Haymarket in 1780, *The Chapter of Accidents*, which was performed yearly until 1824.[3] And its endpoint targets the seven-year stretch that saw the publication of Joanna Baillie's last collection of plays in 1836 and the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843. The French Revolution marks a convenient starting-place for British Romantic studies,

but it is not as crucial for gaining a more precise view of the situation facing late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century female theatre artists as is – for example – the Stage Licensing Act of 1737,[4] or the changes in theatre administrations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,[5] or the rise of female-controlled theatre spaces in the first four decades after 1800.[6] Certainly the 1770s – though not featured in this collection – are important for having spawned a generation of female playwrights (Hannah More, Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Griffith, and Frances Brooke) whose achievements partially account for an unprecedented proliferation of dramatic writing by women between 1788 and 1800.[7] Indeed, the 1770s are particularly significant because Sarah Siddons made her second London debut in 1782, a wildly successful event that took place six years after David Garrick's retirement in 1776 and which represented not only a change in acting styles but also a shift in perceptions of female actors as less "sexually suspect."[8] That there are a number of ways to conceptualize the beginning and concluding dates of this volume requires that we rethink how periodization has sometimes worked to impede the recovery of women in British Romantic theatre.[9]

Additionally, this collection reinforces current attempts by scholars to reexamine definitions of performance, text, and theatre by balancing theatrical with literary perspectives. But it does so not to argue for infusing a largely literary tradition of scholarship with methods and approaches that attend more to performance and theatricality, though this would not be an undesirable development.[10] Rather, read collectively, the essays in this volume suggest that the Romantic period is crucial for understanding the historical roots of contemporary discussions about how reading and performing playscripts become (differently) inflected. Indeed, this collection follows the lead of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British theatre theorists – many of them female – who were presciently interested in negotiating the closet/theatre division that has so problematically characterized discussions of Romantic theatre and drama in our own era and which has caused "Romantic theatricality"[11] to be misrepresented as antitheatricalism throughout the twentieth century. That is, each essay either explicitly or implicitly foregrounds the page/stage opposition to suggest how it has hindered our recovery of women in British Romantic theatre and how an investigation of this opposition can help historicize the

knotty relationship between "text" and "performance," even as we theorize the relationship anew.[12]

Since the 1970s and the revival of interest in Romantic theatre and drama,[13] much of the scholarship has been produced by literary critics narrowly focused on the plays of the canonical male Romantic poets. Yet it is precisely this focus that has resulted in a relatively small but important body of critical literature[14] that seeks to explain how the genre of closet drama figures "the disjunction between text and performance,"[15] emerges as "a forerunner of the gay closet,"[16] and contributes to the growing interest in revising the concept of "public" and "private" spheres so as not to distort the ways in which late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women actually lived their lives.[17]

To encourage these developments, part I of this volume explores some of the specific features confronting female theatre artists around 1800. In their analysis of the degree to which women in Romantic theatre exercised cultural influence, Jeffrey Cox and Greg Kucich argue for the necessity of reevaluating traditional critical narratives that present nineteenth-century women theatre artists as either marginalized *or* self-empowering. Their examination of a variety of archival materials reveals how difficult and misleading it is to attach labels to the cultural performances of women who dominated their specific theatrical arena, such as Joanna Baillie in playwriting, Sarah Siddons in tragic acting, and Anna Larpent in the licensing of plays. Complicating recent claims that these women's art was politically subversive,[18] Cox observes that the dramaturgy and staging of Baillie's most pointedly Scottish play, *The Family Legend* (1810), reinforced anti-populist views.[19] Likewise, Siddons's portrayals of queens and other aristocrats as passive, sexually attractive, yet also sexually restrained paralleled Edmund Burke's anti-Jacobin representation of Marie Antoinette as a heroine in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Anna Margaretta Larpent's diaries indicate how she exerted influence on Romantic theatre through her husband – the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays – in order to prevent the staging of dramas that featured the spectacle of the French Revolution.

Cox's argument that power in Romantic theatre was constituted variously by aesthetic, textual, social, and institutional performances sets the stage for Greg Kucich's analysis of a subject that has received little attention – the reviewing by male critics of female playwrights

and actors.[20] Starting with Hannah More's *Percy* (1777) and moving forward to Harriet Lee's *The Three Strangers* (1826), Kucich traces the contradictory responses of male critics[21] to plays and stage performances by women in order to examine the cultural significance of the opposition of closet and stage between 1790 and 1840. Because the rhetoric of male reviewers often figured the female-authored text as an embodiment of the playwright's gendered position, expressing a keen desire to see her play in performance, reviews of the period underscore the intense cultural need to fetishize the female body and prescribe proper performances of feminine identity as a strategy to preclude female power. Thus, interest in (the performance of) female playscripts became a way not so much to encourage the proliferation of women writers as to submit them to yet another cultural test of whether they – as writing women – could conform to gender expectations while inhabiting a harshly scrutinizing arena.

One of the reasons that female dramaturgy from the period alternately reinforced and discouraged revolutionary tendencies is that it often identified with the politics of those in power while trying to promote the rights of the disenfranchised. Part II of this collection – "Nations, Households, Dramaturgy" – offers examples of this ideological ambivalence. Those women writers whose work was most popular in late eighteenth-century British and American repertoires – Susannah Centlivre, Hannah Parkhouse Cowley, and Elizabeth Inchbald[22] – wrote mostly variations of social comedy, which seems to have allowed female authors to participate in topical debates without alienating those audiences who would be resistant to the idea of an "unfeminine" – that is, politically serious – woman writer. Yet, as Katherine Newey describes, several British women playwrights who published between 1770 and 1830 helped to establish another pattern – one associated primarily with male Romantic poets – of writing historical tragedies[23] set in distant time periods and exotic places as a means of engaging with topical issues while still eluding the corrosive effects of the censorship institutionalized by the Licensing Act of 1737. According to Newey, playwrights like Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, Frances Burney, and Mary Russell Mitford registered their interest in the social impact of the American and French revolutions by exploring some of the ways in which women have historically challenged domestic tyranny.

Newey's essay suggests how other dramatic genres of the period managed to make political statements and still obtain licenses for

performance. Certainly, the strategy of displacing controversial material to foreign locales and distant time periods appeared even in a form we might describe today as "early musical comedy." During the 1790s in America, for instance, British-born Susanna Rowson managed to intensify the pro-abolitionist and pro-feminist views of her play, *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), by setting the piece in Africa, and, simultaneously, to diffuse hostility to her work by introducing songs at potentially serious moments.[24] Indeed, a number of women playwrights – including Joanna Baillie, Hannah Cowley, Maria Edgeworth, and Elizabeth Inchbald – participated in the late eighteenth-century debates about slavery by creating plays that represented a "strange mix . . . of anti-slavery sentiments and racist attitudes."[25]

Like Cox and Kucich's essays, Jeanne Moskal's analysis of Mariana Starke's abolitionist comedy, *The Sword of Peace* (1788), manages to avoid the assumption that enlightened or progressive attitudes were (consistently) articulated by women in Romantic theatre. As Moskal explains, Starke engaged briefly but intensely with the London theatre scene in order to explore the complicated relationship between merchant imperialism, feminism, and the slave trade. Challenging cultural and legal restrictions on women's political engagement, Starke's dramaturgy shifts between conservative and liberal positions, alternately aligning her with Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft. The topical context for this shift is the 1788 impeachment trial of Warren Hastings – the former Governor-General of Bengal – and Moskal comments on some of the ways in which Starke's dramatic response to this trial drew upon theatrical convention.[26] Certainly in comparison to other genres for which Starke would become better known (such as travel writing), drama allowed this temporary playwright to explore her vision of a desirable nationalist identity as one that middle- to upper-class women could promote through their marriage choices, even though any agency they might enjoy during courtship would most likely recede after the wedding. For this reason, Starke's dramaturgy provides an opportunity to study the ideological complexities that can emerge from texts of the period, many of which aimed both to amuse their audiences and to confront controversial issues.

This double impulse structures Joanna Baillie's first comedy, *The Tryal* (1798), which also drew upon the public fascination with legal

trials and contributed to the intensifying debates about women's social position during the last decade of the eighteenth century. Along with Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald – whose playwriting careers, for the most part, ended in the 1790s – Baillie's dramatic and critical output distinguishes her as one of the more important theatre artists between 1780 and 1810. While she lacked Inchbald's experience with commercial theatre, Baillie compensated by becoming one of the era's premier theorists of theatre, attaching prefaces to her published plays that are historically significant for confronting some of the differences between reading and seeing plays (especially as these differences drastically affect reception). Furthermore, Baillie's prefaces suggest that exciting drama can be located in "closet stages" outside the bounds of "legitimate" and commercially viable playhouses.

That these plays of the small and private space could teach audiences what Baillie described as "sympathetic curiosity"[27] is the focus of Marjean D. Purinton's analysis of *The Tryal*. By examining Baillie's dramatization of two female characters' conscious attempts to stage their resistance to marrying for money alone, Purinton underscores the degree to which the political features of marriage have historically, in courtship, been reinforced by theatrical rituals. She also highlights the potential for theatre to provide some women with strategies for exerting control over their Romantic lives, exploring how cousins Mariane and Agnes draw on their knowledge of playwriting, directing, and stage performance to create a series of "trials," or "little dramas," that flummox their male suitors. Baillie's dramaturgy permits her both to emphasize the performative aspects of women's (and men's) gendered position and to suggest that private stages are especially conducive to teaching audiences how to develop a political consciousness. For this reason, Baillie may be viewed as continuing a trend established by pre-Revolutionary women writers during the Age of Sensibility to combine sentimental comedy and the values of the Sunday School Movement with Madame de Genlis's "theatre of education."[28] But Baillie does so in order to create a new comedic form for the new century – what she calls "Characteristic Comedy" in her famous "Introductory Discourse" (1798) – a mode that "represents to us this motley world of men and women in which we live, under those circumstances of ordinary and familiar life most favourable to the discovery of the human heart . . ."[29]

Because in her day Baillie was so well received, so prolific, and so relatively unperformed (in spite of her ambition to see her plays staged), she is central to current attempts to confront the extent to which the category of "closet play" has created misperceptions about Baillie's investment in public staging and negatively affected the critical reception of her plays since the 1830s. In the book's third section – "Performance and Closet Drama" – the essays by Susan Bennett and Jacky Bratton address the way in which generic categories affect the historical evaluation of playscripts and the construction of critical narratives about theatre. As Bennett demonstrates, both Baillie's prefaces and dramaturgy convey her practical interest in, and knowledge of, early nineteenth-century London theatre, as well as her sensitivity to performance questions triggered by scenes that make use of actual closet space. Identifying Baillie as an important early advocate of "alternative theatre," Bennett looks closely at Baillie's tragedy, *Constantine Paleologus* (1804),[30] and at some of the ways that Baillie used her preface writing to intervene in the critical reception of her own work.[31] Bennett performs this analysis in order to argue that Baillie must be released from the closet of genre, periodization, and discipline so that the divide between literary critics of Romanticism and theatre historians – about which Jane Moody and Thomas Crochunis have recently written[32] – can be eroded and the historical significance of Baillie's work more widely appreciated.[33]

Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this book's aim to undermine page/stage oppositions, even as it explores their functioning, occurs in the essay on Jane Scott, the most prolific female British playwright between 1806 and 1819 (she created approximately fifty playscripts, ranging from pantomime to burletta to comic opera).[34] As Jacky Bratton tells us, the essay in this collection grew out of her desire to understand some of the ways in which gender affects the dynamics and tone of the melodramatic form produced during the period *after* the explosion of Gothic plays in the 1790s[35] and *before* the proliferation of melodrama during the Victorian period. Bratton began to explore this issue by transcribing the licenser's copy of Scott's five-act drama, *Camilla the Amazon* (1817), which was performed in Scott's own "illegitimate" playhouse, the Sans Pareil; and Bratton's search extended to the classroom where she enlisted the talents of script reader Gilli Bush-Bailey and students in the honors degree program in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Media

Arts at the University of London to perform the transcribed text. But performance was not the culmination of the course's investigation; participants were also encouraged to write about their experiences of workshopping the play. Modelling "heteroglossic critical writing," sections of the essay are interlarded with students' words about their rehearsal and performance process, the research of the tutors, quotations from *Camilla the Amazon*, reviews from Romantic periodicals, and commentary from late twentieth-century critics about Gothic melodrama. Thus, in both its origins and execution, the essay demonstrates how questions debated in scholarly research about British Romantic drama and theatre find different formulations and responses when (women's) playscripts are recovered and performed, and it argues that generalizations about genre often become productively confounded by modes of theatre research that happily insist upon placing tone, audience reception, and acting methods center-stage with the reading experience.

The extent to which studying pre-twentieth-century female dramaturgy offers new perspectives on theatre criticism and theory is central to the fourth section of this collection.[36] As Marvin Carlson notes in his essay on the critical prefaces that Elizabeth Inchbald composed for Longman's 25-volume series, *The British Theatre* (1805–08), Inchbald's distinction as one of a fairly small group of British women who wrote theatre theory becomes more impressive when one realizes that she was the first British critic of either sex to undertake a project of such prominence and scope: chosen by the series' publisher to record her critical views of 125 plays current in the early nineteenth-century British repertory, Inchbald produced a monumental record of the "legitimate" drama, those plays that had found a foothold in "major" British playhouses. Certainly Inchbald's selection as the preface-writer for Longman's series more than legitimized her as a critic; it ensured that she would be heralded in subsequent ages as a major shaper of critical taste. Yet Inchbald has not been canonized in discussions of landmark theatre theorists who wrote before Modernism, even though she was apparently, as Carlson notes, the first British critic to draw upon personal knowledge to discuss plays as both read and performed experiences. The general failure of post-Romantic scholars to appreciate that the better-known "closet critics" – like Lamb and Byron – were not so much against performance as intrigued by theatrical possibilities unavailable on commercial stages[37] has ensured that women writers

from the period, even preeminent writers like Inchbald, would be disregarded.

But Inchbald deserves our attention for her remarkable achievements: one of these, as Carlson demonstrates, was the construction of a voice that would not offend readers unaccustomed to viewing a woman in the position of theatrical critic or theorist. And her published writing reveals that she could shift deftly into a more complicated voice when necessary, as when she wittingly and witheringly responds to the published complaints of playwright George Colman.[38] Additionally, Inchbald brings her performance experience to bear on the critical enterprise in ways that convey her belief in the importance of consciously addressing how different critical perspectives – whether theatrical or literary – will affect one's assessment of a dramatic work.

Because Inchbald was such a powerhouse of varied theatrical talent – creating more than 20 plays and 125 critical prefaces, and performing, less notably, as an actress – she demands more critical scrutiny than she has previously received.[39] Thomas Crochunis is interested in some of the ways that Inchbald's published work reflects a self-consciousness about "authorial performance." Thus, he compares Inchbald's critical prefaces with the prefatory writing Baillie produced in her three-volume series, *Plays on the Passions* (1798, 1802, 1812), to argue that certain female playwrights during the Romantic period often staged authorship as a complex cultural process: by publishing their plays, Baillie and Inchbald targeted their work for closet readers, even as they expressed their aim to have them performed before live audiences rather than only read. Yet, because they attached critical commentary to their work designed to shape readers' responses to (female) authorship, both Baillie and Inchbald created performances surrounding their playscripts that alternately complemented, reinforced, and competed with their dramaturgical performances. A study of the differences between these various discursive stages can cause us, Crochunis argues, to pay more attention to the ways in which the "cultural *mise en scène*" affected – and affects – any reading of a playscript or theatrical document. For if we are to receive a more culturally specific picture of a playwright's work, then we must, as Sue-Ellen Case has argued, attend to the variety of scripts contained within a dramatic text and resituate that text by exploring the many "performances" embedded in it.[40]

Among these neglected performances from the Romantic period are translations and adaptations of French and German playscripts crafted by writers such as Elizabeth Craven, Maria Geisweiler, Anne Gittins Francis, Elizabeth Gunning, Hannah Brand, Marie Thérèse DeCamp Kemble, and Mariana Starke.[41] In the volume's fifth section, Jane Moody examines the controversy surrounding Inchbald's translation of a Kotzebue play, *The Wise Man of the East* (1799) – a comedy in which a female character commits suicide. Moody suggests that the act of translation allowed women like Inchbald to transform "foreign plays" from "subversive" documents into texts that confirmed particular aspects of hegemonic ideology. And yet this conservative impulse should not overshadow what Moody characterizes as the liberatory potential of the translating and adaptive mode. Particularly for Inchbald (and for Anne Plumptre with whom Moody compares her), translation became an oblique means of raising important political questions about the construction of feminine identity. For just as suicide draws attention to the issue of agency and its restrictions, so translation enabled Inchbald to rehearse a set of potential "selves" (for herself and her characters) that freed a writing persona, even as it also closeted away the idea of one, identifiable writer to whom readers and audiences could assign responsibility and praise.

Julie Carlson, whose essay concludes this collection, has also written about adaptation in terms relevant to the topic of revision, which is the larger focus of her essay here: "[p]erformance meets sociality at adaptation, a space-time in which moving speeches can remake social relations . . ."[42] As the starting-point for Carlson's analysis of two plays on the subject of remorse – Baillie's tragedy, *Henriquez* (1836), and Inchbald's comedy, *A Case of Conscience* (1833) – Carlson revisits her earlier assertions in one of the most important books about Romantic theatre to emerge in the 1990s, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (1994). She shares her reflections on that book's arguments in order to highlight her own "remorse" at having engaged exclusively with male writers and (in her assessment) for suggesting that women writers did not undergo psychological journeys comparable to the male playwrights she features in her study. Such undefensiveness about one's own work can remind us that it is vital to encourage scholarship on women in Romantic theatre that embraces a range of practitioners and perspectives. This surprising critical strategy also allows Carlson to