Introduction

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> To understand the workings of the social memory it may be worth investigating the social organization of forgetting, the rules of exclusion, suppression or repression, and the question of who wants whom to forget what, and why. In a phrase, social amnesia. Amnesia is related to "amnesty," to what used to be called "acts of oblivion," the official erasure of memories of conflict in the interests of social cohesion.
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> (Burke 1997: 56–57)

Nineteenth-century British women playwrights stubbornly refuse to comply with any of the tropes of feminist historiography that Margaret Ezell identifies as the historical constructions of second-wave feminist scholarship (Ezell 1993). We do not see, in their work or their lives, growing rebellion (either individual or collective) leading to a feminist consciousness. We do not see an evolution from Aphra Behn, Delarivière Manley, and Mary Pix in the 1690s to the next century's flowering of Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Hannah More paving the way for legions (or even a trickle) of more confident and assured nineteenth-century women taking up the drama as if it belonged more comfortably in their hands. And we do not see simple models of women playwrights as outcasts, for many were heralded with welcome praise even though they often found long-term success less easy to come by. Nor do we see them shut out of writing altogether by the vicissitudes of a theatre and culture where masculine prerogative stacked the deck against them, for many persisted in writing for theatre or forging careers that involved writing in various genres and forms. What we do see, however, is that the vast range of activity which women undertook in writing plays has disappeared from the historical consciousness of theatre historians, literary critics, and feminist scholars of all kinds, despite their very solid presence in the annals, calendars, bibliographies,

and handbooks of the stage (Mann and Mann 1996; Davis and Joyce 1992; Mullin 1987; Ellis 1985; Wearing 1976; Nicoll 1952, 1955 and 1959). Kerry Powell capitalizes on some of this research to detail the prohibitions on dramatic theory which mask gender prejudice, and the deeply buried subversive subtexts in some late-Victorian drama by women (1997). But by and large, scholarship has corrected some of the record though not yet its historicization.

As the epigraph from Peter Burke suggests, it is as if there is organized forgetting, patterns of exclusion, suppression, or repression, and a widespread social and scholarly amnesia about them. It is not only intuitively true but also factually true that women – who were so prominent amongst the ranks of novelists, poets, and essayists – also wrote plays, and not only for the mass medium of professional theatres but also for the growing market in amateur theatres (home, school, and community groups) and for a reading public. So far, the scholarship has concentrated on women playwrights in relation to Romanticism (Burroughs 1997; Cox 1992; Purinton 1992), and especially on Joanna Baillie, "the Shakespeare of her Age," complemented by John Franceschina's anthology of Gothic melodramas, including plays by Miss Burke, Harriet Lee, Jane Scott, Margaret Harvey, Elizabeth Polack, and Catherine Gore (1997). Adrienne Scullion's anthology broadens the scope by providing a more temporally diverse group of writers, including Teresa de Camp, Fanny Kemble, Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins, and Pearl Craigie (1996). But readily available research resources provide a goldmine of additional texts by hundreds more women. The Readex series English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century (on microcard and microfiche) aspires to include every known play in every known version, the Frank Pettingell Collection of East End plays (on microfilm) includes many promptbooks and play manuscripts, the English Verse Drama Database created at the University of Michigan so far includes plays by Joanna Baillie, Felicia Hemans, Mary Russell Mitford, Frances Kemble, Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, Pearl Craigie, and Michael Field (http://www.hti. umich.edu/english/evd), and in time the website British Women Playwrights Around 1800 will include more and more dramatic texts (http://www-sul.stanford.edu/mirrors/romnet/wp1800), opening up this field to the vast research possibilities that exist simply amongst textual resources. What have been "acts of oblivion" in terms of the scholarly memory of these women need not be perpetuated a moment longer.

What this book aims to do, in part, is to explore a number of reasons why there has been such widespread amnesia about women's playwriting activity, and the ways that this amnesia touches other types of women's theatrical work, writing work, and official participation in nineteenth-century culture. Their oblivion has been orchestrated, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in ways unique to their sex. Historians and critics have consistently leapt over the nineteenth century (and sometimes the entire eighteenth too), forgetting all the generations between Aphra Behn and Caryl Churchill, with a nod to Edwardian suffragists (Fitzsimmons and Gardner 1991; Spender and Hayman 1985). This amounts to acceptance of, and complicity with, the ideological forces that preferred to keep women in the background, that rightly or wrongly perpetuated the antitheatrical prejudice, and that undervalued the drama (and its slightly less prestigious cousins, the mere "play-scripts") as a writing pursuit secondary to novels, poetry, expository prose, and even translation.

Instead, when we reopen the inquiry, we discover that writing plays (whether they are intended for page or stage, closet or theatre) is inherently a kind of "free space" for invention. The persistent anxiety over rejuvenating the National Drama – an indigenously written and theorized product that could be proudly hailed – offered in principle a field open to all comers who might somehow make this mass medium as praiseworthy at the height of the British Empire's world dominion as it was in the era of its formation, when Shakespeare (or so Britons recalled) came to the fore. The accomplishments of the culture were manifestly out of balance with the accomplishments of the nation, and a flowering of Genius was sought with desperate longing (Gamer 1997). What the heralds of culture got instead was a patch of tangled weeds.

But could Genius be a woman? Despite the rhetoric of scrupulous fairness and evenhandedness from the managers, it seemed that nothing from a woman's hand could, on a stage deemed worthy of legitimate drama, satisfy the critics. Ultimately, no men were fully satisfactory either, but women's trials were complicated by more factors, including the abiding belief that respectability, dramatic genius, and playwriting skill were uneasily if not impossibly reconciled in a woman. The stage was rough enough for gentlemen – Byron, Coleridge, and Tennyson all fare badly in theatrical posterity – but quite impossible for ladies.

As long as the criterion for success is synonymous with the legitimate theatres, the scope of the question is unnaturally narrow. For until the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843, the denominator of legitimate theatres limits the field in London to two patent houses (Covent Garden and Drury Lane) and the Haymarket, plus a handful of theatres royal scattered through the major English provincial, Scottish, and Irish cities. Everything else was "minor" or "illegitimate," constrained by the licensing laws from producing the valued genres of tragedy and comedy. After 1843, the situation officially loosened, but the hierarchy was retained through the artistic hegemony of London's West End and the second-class (or worse) status of any theatre beyond that boundary. Also devalued were dramatic endeavors directed at private theatricals, however genteel, as a matter of disdain for the champions of the National Drama and the still-dominant evolutionary bias in theatre and dramatic history that relentlessly seeks the English lineage leading from the sparkling by-play of Sheridan's dialogue to the comedies of Shaw and Wilde, ignoring the century in between. What if, for example, instead of identifying Tom Robertson as the most important stepping-stone between Richard Brinsley Sheridan and George Bernard Shaw we substituted Mary Russell Mitford as the link? Is there any obvious rationale for why the house dramatist at the fashionable Prince of Wales Theatre takes precedence over the highly acclaimed author of *Julian*, *Foscari*, and *Rienzi* as the standard-bearer between Sheridan and Shaw? Or is there any sound principle excluding a host of other women writing for the most popular of stages – Jane Scott, Catherine Gore, Sarah Lane, and Melinda Young – if Robertson takes such a rightful place? Can we tinker with the periodization of theatre history by focusing also on the work of women, or must we throw out the paradigms entirely?

Although Genius was the abiding criterion in the nineteenth century, it is patently misleading to hold to it now. The first order of questions, in a newly conceived nineteenth-century theatre history, might more productively focus not on Genius but on survival. Not on legitimacy but on activity. Far too much cultural weight has been given to far too few of the actants, and far too little of their endeavor. The new information that emerges simply by adjusting the lens to a different focal length suggests whole new patterns in the historiography. By selecting particular heroes, we achieved a particular version of the past in which art struggled to survive within the

exigencies of business, and a succession of pretty good playwrights attracted crowds when produced by very good actor-managers who accurately judged and provided for the taste of the town. What we still find, when including women, is that playwrights are predominantly middle-class, and that particular kinds of learning and certain levels of prosperity are especially conducive to enabling (or motivating) the writing in the first place. We find that women worked almost everywhere men worked (in the East End, in the West End, in the provinces) and that they struggled with everything men encountered (genre prescriptions, staging conventions, indifferent audiences, and inept producers). But we also find some differences, which we offer with caution and anxiety, conscious that women authors experienced the world with the privileges and prescriptions of a different gender.

It is precisely these differences which have informed the shaping of this book. Difference is not only a fact of gender in the broadest sense, but equally an issue for the researcher and critic who would seek to understand how difference informs the process by which they work. This book is organized as a series of questions which intentionally undermine assumptions about where to look for evidence, what authorship means, why locale matters, and how genre functions. And yet in this collection, the first of its kind on this subject, there are also differences of interpretation. Most notably on the comedic competition of 1844 (won by Catherine Gore), the authorial ascription of a Britannia Theatre playwright (Sarah Lane), and the approaches toward the most canonized of nineteenth-century women dramatists (Joanna Baillie), we offer different interpretations. The idea is not to counter one monolithic narrative of the nineteenth century with another, but to make a case for the multivocality of history and the importance of staging emergent debates. But the first order of business is adjusting the lens so that theatrical activity by women snaps into focus.

The first part of the book, "In judgment," suggests that we look at how these women have been judged, not only by their own contemporaries, but also by historians. In the first chapter, Tracy C. Davis proposes "sociability" as a theoretical concept which makes a crucial lens adjustment possible. It is a shock to realize how the dichotomy between the so-called "public" and the so-called "private" has worked its way into the fabric of historical inquiry,

with the result that women in the nineteenth century disappear behind its cloth. It is particularly egregious for feminist historians working in theatre, who by looking only at "public women" (published, produced) have inadvertently overlooked a huge and instructive groundswell of theatrical activity by women. Activity is the key word, whether in and for the closet or the public stage. Focusing on the realms of sociability requires that we detach ourselves from the convenient binary of public/private, and look instead at theatrical activity in its myriad of public and private forms – closet drama, salon readings, home theatricals, school plays, political pageants – in an effort to understand it as a form of cultural participation. In this new scenario, it does not matter any longer whether or not a woman was published, reviewed or produced. It matters that something theatrical was in circulation, that it shaped opinion, a sense of the self, or a sense of community. Theatrical activity framed in these terms reveals not only the fluidity of these imaginary borders between public and private, but also the women themselves, who now appear before us in legions, from all classes and all geographical corners. Their connecting thread is theatre, not necessarily as a profession or even as a primary source of identification, but as an activity. As Davis puts it, "Shall we let women succeed on their own terms?"

Being inside the profession, however, usually meant that a woman playwright was not allowed to succeed on her own terms. The terms were always controlled by other people. Gay Gibson Cima's chapter makes it clear that one of the hazards of the profession for women was journalistic notice. Reviews, Cima reports, were almost never written by women. They carried the double authority of being in print and being written by an (alleged) eyewitness. But whose eyes were watching these productions? Cima reveals many of them to be men who were themselves playwrights, subsidizing a precarious career in theatre by working as journalists. Their anonymous columns provided an unfiltered conduit for judgments not only of the woman's work, but of her social presence as playwright. Cima's chapter warns us as historians to consider the source before we cite the review. Ellen Donkin's chapter on Catherine Gore documents the devastating impact of those reviews, not only on a woman's professional momentum, but also on the way she is subsequently judged by historians who do not trouble to balance the evidence of the reviews against the length of the run. It is abundantly clear, at

the close of this section, that professional theatre, situated in the respectable West End and bolstered by the historic legitimacy conferred by monopoly, was a toxic environment for women.

The second part of this book, "Wrighting the play," asks two important questions: do female-authored plays constitute the limits of female authorship?; and can playwrights "make" plays without necessarily "writing" them? Jacky Bratton coins the term "intertheatricality," a concept which intentionally expands and enlarges our notions of authorship. The specific case in point is Jane Scott, manager, playwright and performer. If we look at one of Scott's evenings as a totality, that is, not just at Scott's plays but also the sequence of songs she chose, and the juxtaposition of the animal acts with the dancing girls, important layers of cultural meaning emerge, ones that Scott seems to have engineered. Jane Moody takes this expanded notion of authorship and goes a step further by claiming that women who managed and performed could "author" a play by proxy. Moody looks at Vestris and Céleste as women who, by virtue of their highly distinctive performing styles, shaped their texts by a kind of ventriloquism. In other words, playwriting need not necessitate writing at all, but instead can be conceived as *wrighting* in the sense of shaping or fashioning. Jim Davis's chapter on Sarah Lane focuses on translation and adaptation, and while raising questions about Mrs. Lane's authorship of several plays ascribed to her, he demonstrates how her combined skills as manager and dramaturg require that here, too, we must rethink how the term *playwrighting* not only enlarges our notions of *playwriting*, but also more accurately accounts for the activities of women. Together, Bratton, Moody, and Davis complicate the idea of self-conscious authorship, authorial naming, networks of production, and serial collaboration to reevaluate what writing (or *wrighting*) entails (see also Bristol 1996: 38–43). Authorship, they argue, is not so much an ideological fiction as a matter of historical indeterminacy (Davis), multiplicity (Bratton), or collectivity (Moody).

Part III, "Geographies of production," considers how the legitimacy and acceptability of women playwrights and their work was contingent upon where (and if) that work was produced. Even if we were to momentarily revert back to the luxurious traditional notion of singular authorship, the idea of the author proves unstable in actual production. The important issue for women playwrights, as Beth Friedman-Romell points out in her chapter on Joanna Baillie's

Constantine Paleologus, is that a woman's play in production in the nineteenth century moved through a machine which was almost wholly male-controlled, and that these men, particularly the provincial managers, had license to make substantial interventions to that script, either in the service of local politics, practical considerations of personnel and resources, or by way of satisfying gender expectations. Heidi Holder's chapter moves out of the provincial theatres and into London's East End, drawing our attention to how the plays of Melinda Young and Sarah Lane created roles for women that featured extraordinarily robust and assertive female characters. Far from functioning as a kind of escapism, as historians have claimed, these melodramas may have modeled agency for the women in their audiences in a way to which nothing in the West End could lay claim. Katherine Newey's chapter takes us to the West End, and reflects soberly on what it cost a woman to scale the fortress of legitimate theatre on its own terms. She formulates the idea of the "lady" playwright, and how that uneasy compromise between privacy and professionalism had the effect of a double-edged sword, by permitting a woman and her work to be conflated and judged on the basis of socially "appropriate" behavior (which manifestly did not include playwriting to begin with).

The final part of the book, "Genre trouble," asks this question: Why is it that when women's work exceeds the informal boundaries of dramatic genre, it is condemned as inept, rather than praised as innovative? Susan Bennett's chapter looks at two tragedies by Baillie and two melodramas by the lesser-known playwright Elizabeth Polack, and considers how these scripts "pollute" received categories of genre by repeatedly moving away from the universal and in the direction of particularity and difference with respect to gender and ethnicity.

Denise A. Walen's chapter considers another locus of tragedy, that of closet drama, which in the context of "sociability" takes its place firmly among the varieties of theatrical activity. Walen reappropriates this kind of theatre, not as a category of deficiency but as a map of something suppressed – in this case, lesbianism – in culture. She argues that if the historian conceives of closet drama as a locus for radical imaginary enactment, then the women who wrote these plays emerge very differently, not as "lady" playwrights who shrank from the test of production, but as deliberate experimentalists working with inflammatory materials. The ascription "closet drama" has

been used to name certain kinds of plays as also-rans: somehow deficient in the kind of practical theatre experience necessary for success on the professional stage. But Walen instead tries to determine what kinds of complex and various activities the term *closet* might be closeting. If we think of the women writing Sappho plays, and of the women reading them, as participating in the sociable act of making culture, then it matters as much that these verse dramas *were* "closeted" as it would if they were not. It is not necessarily a judgment by posterity, but instead can be an aesthetic option in its own time. After all, Mann and Mann (1996: 412–17) found virtually as many women's plays of 1800–42 to be unacted, closet dramas, or privately produced (46.4%) as were professionally produced (47.8%), out of a sample of 201 texts.

The final chapter of this book, which also brings us to the close of the nineteenth century, is Susan Carlson's. Where Powell focused on serious drama (1997: 122–45), Carlson focuses on comedy, a genre which she warns us is renowned for its reconfirmation of the status quo. Nonetheless, women playwrights at the close of the century found ways to deploy comedy both as a means of validating and of challenging their culture. In so doing, they repeatedly fell foul of the rules of genre, usually with devastating critical results. But Carlson also cautions us about something that is resonant for the volume as a whole: we cannot give in to understandable impulses to superimpose our own needs for valor and vision after the fact.

Mary Russell Mitford provides a powerful case in point. In 1812, while gaining fame as a poet but not yet embarked as a playwright, she offered an address to be read at the opening performance of the new Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Along with dozens of other writers, she entered her poem into a contest, and lost to Lord Byron. The poet laureate, like most of the other entrants, eulogized the old Drury, narrated the fire, pumped up nationalist fervor, and lauded the noble – and entirely masculine – tradition of the British stage.

> Dear are the days which made our annals bright,
> Ere GARRICK fled, or BRINSLEY ceas'd to write;
> Heirs to their labours, like all high-born heirs,
> Vain of *our* ancestry, as they of theirs.
> While thus Remembrance borrows Banquo's glass,
> To claim the scepter'd Shadows as they pass,
> And we the mirror hold, where imag'd shine
> Immortal names, emblazon'd on our line:

> Pause – ere their feebler offspring you condemn;
> Reflect how hard the task to rival them. (*Genuine Rejected* 1812: 2)

Mitford's defiance of this view is palpable. Her entry, reproduced as the epigraph to this book, virtually cringes at the "brainless jest" and dumb show of British drama which Byron praised, for she is mindful that it is watched over by the colonized peoples of the empire. The theatres may burn, she intimates, and their fare may perish, but not without her piercing judgment going down into eternity:

> Secure that here all flames you may defy,
> Except th' unburning flames of Woman's eye. (Mitford 1812)

Two serious volumes of these rejected addresses were collected and published.[1] None of their selections overlap. Neither includes Mitford. Instead, a verse by "Laura Matilda," a composite of Hannah Cowley and Perdita Robinson – both dead – was included as a parody of their poetic school, the Della Cruscans (Boyle 1929: 152). It concludes:

> Blood in every vein is gushing
> Vixen vengeance lulls my heart;
> See, the Gorgon gang is rushing!
> Never, never let us part! (Boyle 1929: 69)

As with this poetic analogy, so with the plays. Absence from the record does not mean abjuration of writing. And likewise, inclusion in the record may be compromised by the taint of literary prejudice, or worse. In either case – the women who wrote and the men who wrote about (or on behalf of) them – there is a point of view. What is at stake here is not Mitford, or anyone else, necessarily becoming part of the chronicle of famous men, but that Mitford, like so many women, had – and asserted – her point of view. Perhaps we agree with her view, or perhaps not, but there it is ready to be found and accounted for.

If we are going to adjust the lens through which we look at these women, we must have the courage to see what is actually there. The temptation is to create a triumphant countercanon of women's playwriting within a narrative of evolving mastery, but it is a temptation that should be resisted at all costs. Remembering women's outlets for sociability makes it possible for us to see more clearly the complexity, richness, and diversity of what was there, though it may not satisfy a certain persistent longing for greatness. It is our hope that this book be understood not as a compendium of