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978-0-521-57413-6 - Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-century Britain

Edited by Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin

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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.

ELLEN DONKIN is Professor of Theatre at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. She publishes on feminist directing and feminist theatre history. Her work includes essays on Sarah Siddons, Eleonora Duse, Gertrude Stein, and Sarah Bernhardt. She is coeditor of *Upstaging Big Daddy* with Susan Clement (1993), and author of *Getting Into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776–1829* (1995).

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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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