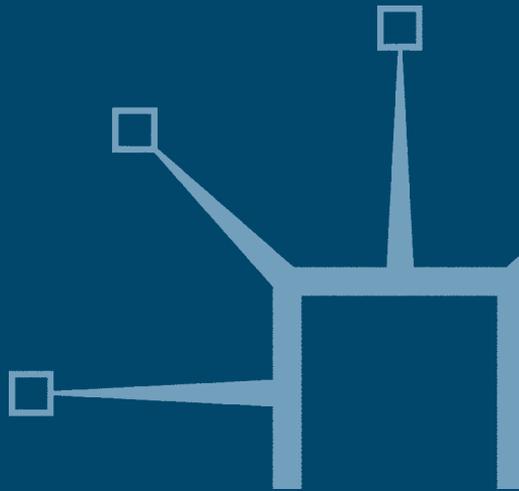


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Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain

Katherine Newey



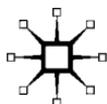
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*To my teachers and colleagues, Penny Gay, Margaret Harris,
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Introduction: Framing the Victorian Woman Playwright

This book is about the appearances, disappearances, and reappearances of women's words in the British theatre from the late Romantic period to the beginning of the twentieth century. My principal focus is playwriting for the commercial London theatre, although I also consider the substantial work of women for amateur and home theatricals, women's work in translating and adapting for the stage, the agitprop theatre of the suffragette movement, and the para-theatrical writing – not quite closet drama, not quite stage success – which characterized dramatic writing by women in the mid- and late-Victorian periods. My aim is to make visible those previously invisible women writers, whose work has been shrouded by a combination of factors: the material practices of the London theatre industry which presented a misogynist obstacle course, Victorian gender ideology which theorized the public nature of the playwright's task to be unfeminine, a practice of theatre historiography which has consistently converted partisan aesthetic judgements into universal statements of fact, and the scholarly discipline of Victorian Studies which has consistently ignored the theatre as a significant element of nineteenth-century culture.

The woman playwright

At first sight, my task might seem straightforward: to chart the work of hundreds of women playwrights who between them produced over one thousand titles between 1800 and 1900. Yet recent critical and historical theory has questioned both parts of that description. Feminist theory has questioned the notion of such a unitary category as 'woman',¹ and post-structural theory has turned its attention to questions of authorship as the central focus of writing history. The moves from 'woman' to

'gender,'² and from 'writer' to 'author-function'³ have been both instructive and liberatory for feminist literary history, and might at first, make this book seem naïve or essentializing. But as feminist theorist Agnes Heller wrote about women writers and the death of the subject: 'Before someone is buried, they need first to be identified,'⁴ and in this book I am committed to naming previously invisible women – identifying who actually wrote what and how. Recent scholars of eighteenth century and Romantic women's playwriting have argued part of my case for me. In response to concerns about segregating women writers from the 'mainstream' of theatre history, Catherine Burroughs argues for patience with what she calls 'an archaeological study focused primarily on bringing to light undiscovered or long-forgotten texts of women writers,' categorizing such work as 'first-phase scholarship.'⁵ And following Burroughs, Misty Anderson defends apparently 'old fashioned' studies of women writers as still necessary while scholars still 'look only to the usual canonical suspects.'⁶

I am not, however, advocating a separation of women playwrights into an oppositional or marginalized grouping; as Tracy Davis has argued, nineteenth-century women playwrights were 'not a counterpublic but rather part of the public sphere struggling with the structures and settings of sociability leading to representation.'⁷ I take my cue from Victorian women playwrights themselves who persistently resisted quarantine, although they were just as persistently forced into it. Cicely Hamilton was reported to have responded with characteristic forthrightness from the woman's point of view to the toast to 'British Dramatists' at a celebratory dinner held by the O. P. Club in 1914:

She did not think that there was a woman's point of view in the theatre. Her point of view was the same as a man's, only man refused to recognize that it was the same.⁸

Hamilton's claim to equality, and her exasperation at male insistence on imposing difference, is representative of many women writers' thinking about the theatre as a scene of writing and professional endeavour in the nineteenth century. Augusta Webster explained this in her typically humorous (but serious) manner to Edmund Gosse:

I don't dispute that a man's work and a woman's on the same theme differ where the theme is one they naturally approach from different points. [...] But I feel that (though an inquiry into the distinctive differences of men's and women's work would be a legitimate subject

for a critic), when the critic simply professes to be reviewing such and such a product, book or picture or sonata, what he has undertaken is to tell the public and the author about the *result* before him, and that it is not more reasonable in doing so to introduce a classification of authors by sex than ones by rank or bodily health or income or any other of the important material differences which, influencing personality, influence persons in all they do of every kind.⁹

And earlier in the century, in a period of acute gender panic over 'lady' playwrights, Emma Robinson wrote to James Robinson Planché regarding the banning of her play, *Richelieu in Love* in 1844, complaining, 'I am far more afraid of having too hot a champion than of wanting one.'¹⁰

All in all, I want to resist speaking definitively of a distinct school of women's dramatic writing in the nineteenth century or reading women's playwriting as *necessarily* different in form or content from men's play writing. Women's output was too various, and responsive to local conditions. Yet, indisputably, women's plays *were* viewed and read differently by their contemporaries, and women faced gender-specific obstacles in the achievement of professional status as playwrights. On these grounds, I am interested in what connects women's playwriting across the century and identifying the common themes and concerns which emerge from this large body of women's writing, however individually each writer deals with them. Much of the argument of this book is dedicated to examining the interplay between the gendered differences in production and reception of women's play writing, and the themes, materials, and genres of women's writing for performance. What impact did women's gender difficulties have on the content and form of their plays? And how did the theme, content, genre chosen by a woman playwright affect her reception? Approached in this way, an acknowledgement of the variety of women's writing across the nineteenth century does not preclude an awareness of a female writing tradition or traditions. And looking across the work and working conditions of a number of women playwrights, it is also possible to place issues of gender alongside those of class, to offer a corrective to the sometimes oppressive category of 'lady playwright.' What emerges when looked at in this way is a body of work which demonstrates women playwrights' abilities to exploit the very conditions which seem to restrain them, and to work from within the conventions of their profession to produce works which can be read by the twenty-first-century feminist historian against the grain of Victorian ideologies of class, race, and gender.

In examining what women wrote about and how they expressed themselves when they were given the opportunity to take to the stage with their words, I have become fascinated by what drew women to the theatre, despite the substantial obstacles in their way. In looking at this work, I find answers which are obvious perhaps, but nonetheless bear repeating. Writing for public performance gave women a powerful voice with immediate impact, and a woman playwright could deliberately organize bodies and events on the fictional stage in ways that she was not always able to in the world off-stage. As a playwright, a woman had a possibility of agency. And her voice could be a playful one, could be multiply deployed, and sceptical and subversive, while maintaining the outward decorum of generic expectations.

Nineteenth-century theatre history: Keeping on forgetting

This book will not chart the movement from dark pre-feminist days of the popular theatre in the 1820s and 1830s, to a liberated theatre of the modern woman by the end of the First World War, although this is my chronological sweep. The history of women's work as professional playwrights is not one of a smooth and triumphant progress from oppression and silence to freedom and voice, although in Chapter 3 I do argue for progress towards a grudging acceptance of some aspects of women's playwriting by the turn of the twentieth century. However, this marginal acceptance was undercut by a counterdiscourse which was critical of the so-called feminization of English culture at the *fin de siècle* and the related Modernist project which created an artificial divide between the Victorian and the modern. So 'acceptance' is a contingent term, and this instance of popular women's playwriting – stranded between the modernist avant-garde and the literary drama – is a typical example of the dialectical relationship between women's playwriting and the rest of the theatrical establishment throughout the nineteenth century.

My study starts in contemplation of an earlier rift between 'notions of female authorship [...], and play writing [...]' which Ellen Donkin identifies at the conclusion of her study of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women playwrights.¹¹ Donkin ponders, but does not explain, the reversal in women's positions as theatre professionals from much performed authors at the end of the eighteenth century to oddities and extras in the 1820s. The 1820s, it seems, was the critical period of counter-revolution for women's writing for performance. Not coincidentally, this was a period of some turbulence and change for the London theatre industry as a whole, and in my first and second chapters,

I explore the ways in which this instability caught ambitious women playwrights (or would-be playwrights) in its changes. While conditions in the theatre tightened for all playwrights in the 1820s, women were doubly affected, as increasing restrictions on feminine behaviour that we have since labelled 'Victorian' hampered their participation as fully professional writers, and disabled women writers in ways which were quite different from their fellow male playwrights. Through the study of a series of 'exceptional' women playwrights, I look at women's interventions into the apparently masculine realms of the legitimate theatre, high comedy, and historical verse tragedy, balancing the success of such raids into masculine territory against the personal professional difficulties experienced by these playwrights.

Although I have chosen not to include a study of Joanna Baillie in this book (of all nineteenth-century women playwrights her work has been the most thoroughly discussed in recent revisionist scholarship) aspects of her work and working life offer an important paradigm for my discussion of women playwrights in the 1820s. Recent reassessments of Baillie's dramatic authorship have been fundamental to the revision of theoretical and historiographical assumptions which had hitherto kept Romantic theatre at the outer edges of relevance for Romantic literary studies generally.¹² Key features of her work which are of relevance for discussing an emergent tradition of women's playwriting are the consideration of the cultural work of the closet drama, and a broadened understanding of the possible relationships between the Romantic theatre and national politics. After Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Baillie has always been the most consistently visible woman playwright of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, to state this is not to say much. Despite public recognition of her work, and its usually respectful critical reception, Baillie's career contained significant contradictions and difficulties, which came to be symbolic for women playwrights following her.¹³ Baillie's recognition was won in spite of considerable difficulties, both personal and public, and her career often teetered between unarguable success and an abiding sense of personal and aesthetic failure. It is this sense of failure, rather than recognition of their successes, which has marked the history of women's playwriting to this day. Part of the task of my second chapter is to rebalance this critical history, and to move carefully between women playwrights' own senses of the shapes and outcomes of their careers, and a more independent assessment of their achievements.

Countering the problematic status of the exceptional woman, and the woman playwright in the legitimate theatre, in Chapter 3 I consider

women who wrote plays as part of the family theatre business. They were actresses, managers, choreographers and teachers, mothers, daughters, and wives, as well as playwrights. They wrote for the 'illegitimate' theatres and saloons of the East End and the South Bank, and the West End matinées and fashionable theatres at the end of the century, and the early film industry. In this way, I argue, they made a defining contribution to what Peter Bailey calls 'popular modernism.'¹⁴ Unlike the uncomfortable spotlight on Hemans or Mitford, these women's work has been actively forgotten, covered over by the processes of Victorian gender ideology then, which sought to identify women by their domestic relationships, and the teleology of theatre history now, which has, until recently, valued only playwriting which contributed to the establishment of British realism and a literary drama. But it is a tenet of feminist historiography that, as Helen Day argues, 'women's theatre history [...] is inclusive rather than exclusive and without imposed hierarchies. The high and the popular co-exist and have equal status,'¹⁵ and in Chapter 3 I am interested in the ways that women's theatre writing moved between the categories of 'high' and 'low' (or, more comfortably, 'popular') culture in what Jane Moody has called a revolution in London theatre in the nineteenth century, when illegitimate culture supplanted the legitimate and regulated theatre of the Patent houses.¹⁶

However, the pressures on women writers to conform to a 'high art' model of literary production can be seen in the contrasting careers of George Eliot and Augusta Webster, whose verse dramas I discuss in Chapter 4. This chapter, together with Chapter 2, looks at a range of engagements by women playwrights with the cultural capital implicit in the literary drama across the Victorian period. I trace the dialectical dance of involvement with and retreat from the Victorian stage; in the cases of Mitford and Hemans, this occurred within each career, while Eliot and Webster were much more guarded about their ambitions for the theatre (as opposed to the drama). I am interested in Eliot and Webster's turn to drama, and the conflicting pulls between public performance and private contemplation which it represented – in very different ways – for each writer. Their plays were not written primarily for performance but took up the dramatic and the theatrical in ways which solidify the tradition of dramatic verse for women playwrights. In this, I argue that they are representative writers, rather than individual geniuses, because, although I focus on Eliot and Webster, there are others who are candidates for similar examination, such as 'Michael Field' (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Katharine Hinkson

Tynan, Emily Pfeiffer, and Harriet Childe-Pemberton. Again, issues of choice and focus in scholarship are relevant here – although there has been a resurgence of interest in the work of ‘Michael Field,’ little work has been done on their dramatic writing, which was not inconsiderable. They had one play, *A Question of Memory*, performed by the non-commercial, avant-garde Independent Theatre Society at the Opera Comique in 1893, and ‘their insistence on publishing largely unperformable verse tragedies’ (as Angela Leighton puts it)¹⁷ persisted throughout their joint writing career. E. Warwick Slinn offers a suggestive way into further theoretical work on verse drama by bringing together the aesthetic and the political through his analysis of the performativity of the dramatic monologue as the ‘discursive means by which normative structures and personal subjectivities are shown to invade and constitute each other through acts of speaking,’ arguing that it is the ‘excesses’ of poetic form which draw attention to contemporary issues, as much as such poems’ ‘thematic allusiveness.’¹⁸ The attraction of the theatre as a vehicle for political work when income was not at stake is the focus of the second half of my discussion of women’s theatre writing and ‘art,’ as I look at the investment a series of women writers made in translations of Henrik Ibsen in the late nineteenth century. With Eleanor Marx, pre-eminently, I find a new confidence in a theatre which could not only serve progressive aesthetic and intellectual ambitions, but also offer compelling public entertainment (if not commercial success) – even Clement Scott, a socially conservative anti-Ibsenite through and through, conceded that the attention of the audience was wholly gripped by Achurch’s *Doll’s House*.¹⁹ I am not suggesting, however, that these three exemplars make a neat pattern of the progress of women’s playwriting across the Victorian period; rather, I offer these women as examples of negotiation with the high stakes of ‘art.’ Even if economic capital was not at stake, the investment in cultural capital was substantial.

Women’s theatre writing was not always staged in theatre buildings – a truism now after a century of avant-garde performance and particularly women’s theatre fuelled by feminist experimentation – but in Chapter 5 I suggest ways in which women’s writing in the Victorian period offers models for the oppositional critique of later twentieth century political theatre. The apparently conservative content of plays written for performance in the home, in schools, and by children masks the way in which the activity of theatre within the home challenged the boundaries of the public and private spheres so powerful in constraining the activities of women in the theatre industry. Writing

for this niche market, as several women playwrights specialized in doing, and performing in amateur and home performance as it became increasingly fashionable, not only suggests the permeability of these gendered boundaries, but offers a corrective to the historiographical assumption that the Victorian middle-class were largely ignorant of the popular theatre of their day, and fundamentally anti-theatrical. Furthermore, a study of theatre in the home allows us to see the ways in which Victorian domestic ideology could be subverted from within: as Barbara Caine and Anne Mellor find in their separate studies of women's role in the public sphere in the nineteenth century. Hilary Fraser and Judith Johnston neatly sum up this double movement in their study of the Victorian periodical, a medium closely paralleling the theatre in this period, with their observation that '[T]he "Politics of Home" addresses both the political public domain of national government and the political private domain of domestic government.'²⁰ The links between the government of the home and the government of the nation are to be found in the apparently frivolous social comedies and 'silver fork' novels of Catherine Gore as well as the agitprop theatre of the suffragettes, and the patriotic melodramas of Mrs Kimberley during the First World War.

My conclusion returns to the popular theatre of the *fin de siècle* to look at another set of representative women writers who included the theatre in their professional writing careers. Again, my point is to examine the work of these women, and also to reflect on how that examination might change our assumptions about the theatre of the late Victorian period. To borrow a metaphor from the country where I started this research, I am proposing the theatre, and its dramatic writing, as the 'Antipodes' of Victorian literature, and the work of women playwrights as pioneers of that territory who can tell us much about its hinterlands. In making sense of the work of some many Victorian women playwrights, I have been involved in the work of discovery of this land of hitherto 'invisible' women, who, like the Antipodes, were actually always already there. But like the geographical Antipodes of the popular imagination, the Victorian theatre is for many scholars a far away place, full of odd things, where perhaps the natives walk on their heads? But what happens when we make that long journey to the Victorian theatre and discover that actually it is not isolated, upside down, or back to front, but really quite like the world we are used to, but with differences enough to give some fresh views of our familiar environment? Through women's theatre writing, I trace the continuing popularity of female-centred, and female-authored popular drama on the stage to the end of the nineteenth

century, an understanding of which has the potential to disrupt the historiographical model of a smooth evolutionary development towards psychological realism and representational naturalism at the end of the nineteenth century – that male-centred account of the British theatre.