Women in British Romantic Theatre and Drama: An Overview.

Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act. Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829*. Routledge: London, 1995, pp. 240 ISBN 0-4150-82501 £16.99.

Barbary Darby, *Frances Burney Dramatist. Gender, Performance, and the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1997, pp. 248 ISBN 0-8131-2022-5, US$39.95.

Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 295, ISBN 0-521-65982-5 £13.95 (US$21.95), ISBN 0 521 57413 7 £37.50 (US$59.95)

Women in British Romantic Theatre. Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840, Catherine Borroughs ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 344, ISBN 0-521-66224-9 £37.50 (US$59.95)

> 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.

The quotation from Peter Burke's *Varieties of Cultural History* (1997) chosen by the editors of *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (hereafter *WP*) as the apt opening of their fascinating volume might be also used as a suitable introduction to the series of investigations into the presence of female writers and performers (or rather, the apparent lack of them) in the late Eighteenth Century and the Romantic period which have been recently carried out by a number of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. Far from being the latest fashion in either cultural or historiographic studies, the abundance and scholarly accomplishments of the present research testify to new and challenging readings of Britain's social history as well as to the on-going reshaping of the literary canon. In point of fact, whereas this revisionary process has already helped to dismantle long-time literary bulwarks in the field of the novel and (more recently) in the history of poetry, the area of drama and performance studies is still affected by the contrived enforcement of a critical hierarchy separating high from low forms of entertainment as well as by the well-established tropes of the Shakespearean tradition and the generic normativity associated with it. "Why," runs the argument of the editors of *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, "is it that

when women's work exceeds the informal boundaries of dramatic genre, it is condemned as inept, rather than praised as innovative?"(8).

The latest Anglo-american dramatic scholarship has proved that —despite their erasure from the official records of mainstream literary history— the period spanning between the retirement of David Garrick from manager and leading actor of the Drury Lane Theatre (1776) and the establishment of the Dramatic Authors' Society in 1833 could be rightfully considered one of the most influential in women's dramatic history. Extensive archival research amongst unpublished diaries, promptbooks, playbills, theatre ledgers and other kinds of theatrical documents has shown that, making due allowance for the limited number of new plays staged each season by the managers of the three Theatres Royal (Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and Haymarket), there were more than one hundred women writing drama at the time. However it is equally true that the reassessment of the real place covered by female dramatists in the age of Coleridge, Shelley and Byron (not a casual cadre of great names, since all of these poets tried their hands at drama, at least once and with varying success) is still far from being completed. While it might be expected to find opposing views between some feminist historiographers on the one hand and a number of otherwise very reliable scholars on the other —who appear delighted to accuse some of the latest gender-ground reconstructions of critical bias and historical inaccuracy (see Jeffrey Cox's redressing of Donkin's 1995 critical narrative, in *Women in British Romantic Theatre*, hereafter quoted as *BRT*)— in the same way we might anticipate a high degree of critical sensitivity in those scholars who openly embrace a woman-friendly approach. Unfortunately this is not always the case.

For instance as recently as 1999, two contributors to the *Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (the latest and most updated reference book for those interested in women's studies, with a truly impressive coverage of female writers and their works) have rather unfavourably recorded the life and works of Elizabeth Inchbald and Joanna Baillie, maybe the major female dramatists in the Romantic theatrical arena, and the two authors who today elicit the greatest critical attention. Besides being the author of some twenty plays (including wildly successful main- and after-pieces), and as well as constituting maybe the first instance of 'dramatist in residence' (i.e. a dramatist officially subsidied by both the Haymarket and the Covent Garden managers for her playwriting), Inchbald's influence as drama critic and anthologist cannot be overstated. Around 1805 the publisher Longman commissioned her the composition of the critical prefaces to 125 currently acting plays (*The British Theatre; or a Collection of Plays*, in 25 vols, 1805-8), a daunting critical feat previoulsy attempted only by Samuel Johnson, whose illustrious example Inchbald respectfully acknowledges, and yet takes issue with in several occasions. However Inchbald's pioneering role as critical commentator upon the works of other living dramatists (primarily men) is thus disappointingly reported in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, "She also edited three collections of plays including *The Modern Theatre* (1806-9)."

A similar critical abridgement awaits Joanna Baillie, whose *Plays on the Passions* were welcomed by such broadly reiterated consensus that she was placed on an equal footing with Shakespeare and hailed even by the certainly not tender Byron as the renewer of British national literature. Influential critics such as Catherine Borroughs have demonstrated that Baillie's prefaces to her *Plays* offer some of the most interesting insights into the Romantic theatre business and Jeffrey Cox has pointed out that "'[h]er Introductory Discourse' to the first volume of the *Plays on the Passions* [1798] has often been compared to Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (*BRT*, 27). Despite a persistent generic framing as anti-theatrical 'closet dramatist', Baillie's awareness of and confrontation with casting procedures, variations in acting styles, the aural/oral requirements of performance (with its reliance on lighting effects, music and blocking), in short her preoccupation with the theatrical viability of her works seem to teasingly contradict any easy critical simplifying. Moreover her historic verse tragedies appear to have challenged standardized tragic female roles and to have called into question the traditionally masculine realm of national politics by refocusing the sphere of public action, thus complicating and often subverting Romantic theories of gender and genre. Such consequential contribution to Romantic drama is however almost dismissed in the *Cambridge* coincise entry on Baillie, which completely overlooks the theoretical relevance of her criticism, and yet finds space to mention that, "Sir Walter Scott was at first suspected of being the author [of her early tragedies] and the two writers became life-long friends." Even such an interesting biographical detail is taken up no further by the contributor, who neglects to bring into fuller view how such literary mis-attribution connects with the troubled negotiations entertained by Baillie (and by her fellow women authors) with the stage, her literary patrons and warrants, the social and cultural institutions surrounding theatre during the age and, finally, with her position on contemporary politics and the current construction of British national history, an issue suggested here by Scott's well-known allignement with the Tory party.

The above examples could actually function as a reply to Catherine Borrough's question of whether there is still necessity of "uncloseting" the presence of women in British Romantic theatre and drama. At the same time, the disappearence from the cultural record of Inchbald and Baillie (two of the most glaring names amidst a much larger cluster of less famous theatre artists gone a-missing) also refers us back to the history of the British stage, and the succeeding generations of Romantic, Victorian and Modernist critics and reviewers who have constructed its canon. If women playwrights had become indeed a well-established presence on the Garrick stage (and in this respect Donkin's evidence in *Getting into the Act* must be considered definitive), why have the varying achievements of their Romantic and early-Victorian successors been dismissed in most anthologies and even in such influential theatre histories as Michael Booth's and Allardyce Nicoll's at best with curt, edged praise and at worst as the ludicrous attempts of an inferior, often misguided female pen? The studies written and edited by Ellen Donkin, Tracy Davis, Barbara Darby and Catherine Borroughs

offer thought-provoking, scholarly accomplished and sometimes downright brilliant new perspectives on a critical conundrum which has gained more and more attention in the course of the last decade.

An array of scholarly editions and facsimile reprints of the complete plays of such diverse authors as Eliza Haywood, Frances Burney, Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald and Joanna Baillie (all come out between 1979 and 1997) and the recent research possibilities opened up by such excellent websites as British Women Playwrights Around 1800, *Romanticism on the Net* (both at http:/www-sul.stanford.edu/mirrors/romnet/wp1800) and the University of Alberta-run Orlando Project for the History of Women Writing have helped to make sure that no unjustified acts of cultural oblivion are perpetrated any longer. A summary scan of the extensive bibliography closing *Women in British Romantic Theatre* is enough to realise the scholarly effort recently put into the dramatic investigation of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth British dramatic history: of the over three hundred items listed in the volume edited by Borroughs (2000), only around thirty had been previously referred to by Donkin in *Getting into the Act* (1995).

Ellen Donkin's provocative observation that the percentage of plays by women in actual production has remained surprisingly low and their presence disappointingly fragmentary over the last two centuries (see the season figures of production for 1778 and 1989 quoted in the "Afterpiece" of *Getting into the Act*) also suggests that when discussing female playwriting at large we had better consider the social conditions that regulate (and often regiment) the female artists' lives, the authorising fatherly and avuncular presences that lurk behind their works —no matter how successfull they prove to be— and finally the social prohibitions that inhibit such collaborative, 'writerly' art forms as theatre practice and production —activities which necessitate long and difficult negotiations with the discursive force of the separate spheres and, accordingly, with constructions of femininity and codes of conduct that are regulated by the patriarchal discretionary power. Donkin discusses in great detail the protection and obedience 'racket' enforced by the Drury Lane and Covent Garden managers David Garrick, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Thomas Harris, whose roles of literary mentors legitimized the access of a large number of women to playwriting and controlled both their influx and output, through the reliance on a system that reproduced *on stage* the cultural formations and familial hierarchy popularized *off stage* by the educational and conduct literature of the time.

With the passage from the late Eighteenth to the early Nineteenth Century, the presence and power of the manager-as-mentor figures who had regulated women's access to the profession, safeguarded their respectability and reputation, and, more to the point, operated their material and ideological containement, gave way to new forms of social and cultural restraint. In two very interesting studies of the critical framing of Nineteenth-century female playwrights, Gay Gibson Cima (*WP*) and Greg Kucich (*BRT*) look at the pragmatics of the theatrical relationship and in particular at role the male critics and reviewers of the

mainstream press had in the shaping of the sphere of women's sociability. Whilst Kucich "examine[s] the cultural significance of the opposition closet and stage between 1790 and 1840" (4), Cima points out that Romantic female critics were few and far between and even the best known amongst them (for instance Mary Hays, Anna Barbauld and Anna Jameson) would produce literary and art criticism rather than journalistic theatrical reviews.

The breathtaking mysoginy openly professed even by the most celebrated dramatic critics of the age would not certainly help a female budding talent, as shown in *Lectures on the English Poets* by William Hazlitt (maybe the best known name of the male critical clique), who notoriously dismissed Hannah More's otherwise truly respectable literary output as "a great deal" from the pen of a lady he believed "still living", and "which I have never read". Cima also reminds us that the critics —who very often remained on the staff of the same newspapers and magazines for years— were protected by anonymity since reviews carried no by-line until well into the Nineteenth Century. The judgemental work of the journalistic critic was carried out mostly at night and it brought him (or, more rarely, her) into contact with the mixed audiences and highly-gendered spaces of the playhouse. In short, the limitations and implications of reviewing and its very nature prevented any '(dramatically-bent) proper lady' from audaciously taking the task up. (This situation changed only in the aftermath of the end-of-the-century suffragist revolutions, which prompted the rise of the women-friendly New Journalism of the 1880s).

In fascinating dialogue with Cima, Kucich analyzes the divided responses of the Romantic male critics to the playtexts and cultural performances made by women. He underlines how in the contemporary discourse, female literary professionalism and growing presence in the early-century popular venues, both on stage and off, and the concurrent display of the actresses' beauty were seen as facets of a dangerous feminization of the theatre. The tendency to consider plays by women as embodiments of the gendered identity of the playwrights lead the majority of male critics to consider the playhouse as a space "for affirming established codes of gender appearance and behaviour, while simultaneously controlling strenuous, potentially uncontainable threats to those very models of gender propriety." (Greg Kucich, *BRT*, 56). Thus the disciplining of women's presence on stage became another means of enforcing yet again the discursive bar.

As far as performance theory and the history of the theatre are concerned, the volume *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* offers some refreshing and long-awaited insights into nineteenth-century women's theatrical practice, both at level of playscript and production. Romantic and early Victorian female playwrights emerge as self-promoting entrepreneurs, surprisingly able to address the actual requirements of the expanding audiences of the nineteenth-century theatres. In particular, Jacky Bratton's chapter on the actress-playwright-manager Jane Margaret Scott of the Sans Pareil (later Adelphi) Theatre is a fascinating introduction to the craft of the woman artists's *playwrighting*, that is to say to the creative activity and labour —the actual 'wrighting'— of a performance artist

who refuses the primate and authority (as well as the dichotomy) of writing and stage. (The idea of*playwrighting* is further expanded by Jane Moody in *WP*.) Bratton develops the implications of the concept of "intertheatricality", a term which collectively associates the woman's writing practice to her performance and managerial activities. In this respect Scott's case history is exemplary of how re-admission into the theatrical record is dependant on the peeling off of several layers of historiographic downplaying. Documentary evidence shows that Jane Scott's popular performances perfectly answered the different tastes of her mixed audience and the requirements of mass entertainement. Archival playbills of her productions show that the Sans Pareil Theatre staged performance nights complete with dancers and singers, in a completely audience-oriented, artful mixture of melodrama, farce and ballet. Thus in Bratton's view, "intertheatricality" signifies the integration and coherence of such multiple theatrical experiences, whose subcultural (nondominant) state —for years erased from the record by the standard hierarchies of the traditional dramatic canon— powerfully testifies to the presence of an anti-establishment, thriving female tradition.

Bratton's companion discussion of Scott's Gothic melodrama *Camilla the Amazon* (1817) (*BRT*) explains how workshopping the play with a class of Honours students proved invaluable in bringing out the heteroglossic texture of the playscript, experienced as a series of cooperating texts which retrive the visual, musical and gestural resources typical of the Romantic popular performance and highlight the creative role of actors and audience. At the same time Bratton's chapter links up with several other studies in both *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* and *Women in British Romantic Theatre* which are careful to recover the fruitful relationship between women and illegitimate forms of cultural performance. In point of fact, the concept of Romantic anti-theatricality has been recently questioned and challenged by several scholars (amongst many, by Catherine Borroughs and Tom Crochunis), who have discussed and reevaluated the role of the closet for women's drama and theatre. Far from representing a case of dramatic failure or a further instance of that 'short, sad history' of the Romantic poet and the stage (to paraphrase the title of Timothy Webb's well-known article), the extraordinary nineteenth-century range of performances by women lying outside the bounds (and binds) of public, normative theatre (for example, such performative events as musical comedies, equestrian shows, amateur theatricals and other forms of no-profit acts) point to the numerous theatrical possibilities available to female theatre artists outwith the commercial stage. At the same time, such types of mixed performance texts appear particularly suitable to the narrative of emotional and personal states —even suppressed homoerotic desire— which could hardly find expression on the public stage. (In this latter meaning, 'closet' stands for something private and intimate and it is accompanied by its subtext of homosexual coming out, as discussed in Denise Walen's chapter *Sappho in the Closet* in *WP*).

In similar dialectic tension between text and script, Barbary Darby's original approach to Frances Burney's newly-edited plays (1995) has the merit of balancing theatrical with

literary perspectives. Darby analyzes Burney's retrived playtexts through the lens of feminist studies and performance theory; accordingly she discusses them as blueprints for performance and potential scripts. Although her work was actually staged only in one occasion (and even then with disastrous results), Burney comes across as rather skilled in the practical craft of the theatre, and she is perceived as an author who successfully (although silently) drafted her way past the porous generic boundaries separating novel and drama in eighteenth-century Britain. Darby's work is particularly convincing in her call for a reading of Burney's complete *ouevre* in order to assess the writer's range of social commentary. Only the collation of Burney's narrative and dramatic works can help us grasp the author's real position in relation to the role of women in society and their gender-specific experience of social institutions (family, courtship, marriage) and historical events. The semiotic approach favoured by the critic thus tends to concentrate on the use of stage space and the physical body (movement, gesture, entrances and exits) as replica of the "proxemics of social order" (9) and the embodiment of the manipulations undergone by the female figure (and in particular by her body). Despite her focus on a single author, Darby's study invites us to reevaluate the role of production in the current reassessments of all long-forgotten female artists, and to realise that —although these practitioners were never or hardly ever performed they considered drama as central to their achievement, and everything but a sideline to their other better known, public, and often sterilized modes of address.

In conclusion we might say that the merits of this exciting recent scholarship in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's drama and theatre are manyfold. Through foregrounding the page/stage opposition, it describes how the recovery of women playwrights has been hindered and "how an investigation of this opposition can help historicize the knotty relationship between 'text' and 'performance', even as we theorize the relationship anew" (Borroughs, *BRT*, 2-3). Women's regulated sociability meant "reduced chances of selecting repertoire, affecting taste, challenging public opinion, and putting forward their own vision" (Davis, *WP*, 16). The control and censorship exercised by managers and lessees was thus an index of "the potentially hegemonic power theatrical performance wields over audiences" (Friedman-Romell, *WP*, 153) and as such a reflection of theatre as a powerful cultural institution. Female playwriting undermined gender discrimination, it stood in opposition to established generic constructions and to both doing and keeping silent, it gave women the chance of making political statements and influencing the public arena, whilst their controversial role as manly critics implied the possibility of publicly judging others (male) authors. The flaunting of the actress's body became a central metaphor for the indecency of the female text and therefore the containement and reviewing of the female display implied the more far-reaching regulation of women's social and literary presence.

The reconceptualized history of the stage offered by these critics release us from "the closet of genre, periodization and discipline" (Borroughs, *BRT*, 7) and it teaches us that Britain's dramatic history offers more than a disheartening dramatic void spanning between

the Restoration blockbusters and the appearance of Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In this way we realise that the recovery of women in British eighteenth-century and Romantic theatre brings to the surface a range of widespread social, literary and gender constructions that fatefully invest the practice of the forbidden theatrical "house" with the rules (and roles) of the prohibiting familial "home".

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