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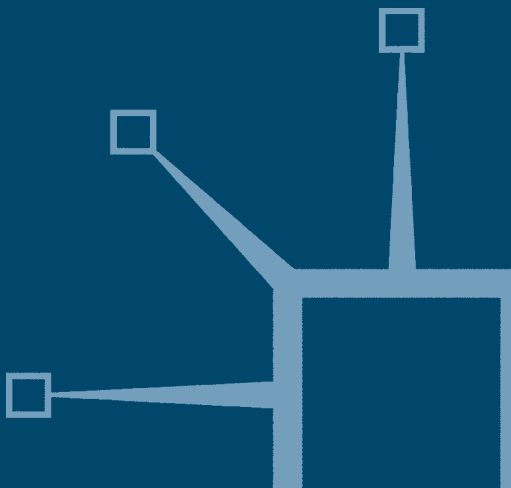
Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain

Katherine Newey



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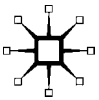

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To my teachers and colleagues, Penny Gay, Margaret Harris, and Elizabeth Webby

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Contents

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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.

1
Rescuing the Stage

In a puff for Frances Burney's historical tragedy *Hubert de Vere*, the *Oracle* announced that 'Miss Burney's pen will retrieve the Stage, degraded beyond bearing by the tricking trash which our Harlequin Writers have forced upon the Public.'[1] In the latter part of her life, Hannah More justified her earlier work as a playwright by the desire to convert 'the Stage [. . .] into a school of virtue.'[2] In 1826, the *Theatrical Examiner* wrote of Mary Russell Mitford 'that this lady has in some measure rescued the stage from these moving nuisances, those puning [*sic*] pirates who infest the purlieus of the theatres, under the assumed name of authors.'[3] And about Mitford's later play, *Rienzi* (1828), the ubiquitous D.——G. wrote, 'The reception of this tragedy is a proof that, though the public have been wont to feed on garbage, they have no disinclination to wholesome food.'[4]

These comments represent one face of the critical reception of women playwrights on the London stage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their positive and welcoming tenor marks a period of relative visibility for women playwrights who in this period according to Ellen Donkin achieved 'a modest momentum.'[5] Yet, this momentum could be attributed to the positioning of women writers and femininity as the guardian and guarantor of stage morality during a period of discursive and industrial crisis over the state of the theatre to 1843. This was a role as easily transgressed as fulfilled, and had problematic consequences for the status and reception of women's playwriting. In the discursive construction of the woman playwright in this period, always to be the 'rescuer' suggests a kind of alien status, implying women playwrights were not part of the profession which needed rescuing, but outsiders who could occasionally perform heroic gestures as a sort of moral housekeeping. And there were conditions

attached. The welcome by largely male critics and theatre managers was conditional on women playwrights' maintenance of a feminine demeanour, policed through the discourse of respectability. Women's participation as playwrights was tolerated, and at times even welcomed, if they wrote as 'proper ladies' in Mary Poovey's terms[6] and acted as moral gatekeepers or apologists for the theatre. As a consequence, the late Romantic period saw women playwrights increasingly labouring under the necessity of participating in a set of highly gendered conventions of playwriting in content and style, and circumscribed possibilities in the development of artistic and professional *personae*. Greg Kucich comments that the reviewing of women playwrights in the Romantic period reveals the theatre as 'one of Romanticism's more charged cultural sites of gender contention marked by conflicting postures of welcome, containment, and threatened resistance.'[7] Needless to say, such moral and professional demands were never made of male playwrights, and indeed, restrictions on their freedom were regarded as inimical to their artistry, as the move to de-regulate the London stage in 1843 suggests.

So, women playwrights' 'rescue' of the stage in the first three decades of the nineteenth century was less the long-overdue public recognition of women's undisputed talents than the positioning of a minority of women playwrights as 'exceptional.' While the recognition of these women is important, their identification as exceptional is a double-edged sword for the history of women's playwriting. Every time a woman writer was spotlit in this way, the acceptance of women playwrights as normal, diverse and numerous in their presence in the theatrical profession became more tenuous. The recognition of the few exceptional women playwrights seems to have occurred alongside the general perception that there existed no other type of woman playwright. The discourse of exceptionality is part of the gendered process of uncoupling the identity of 'woman' from that of 'playwright,'[8] a process reiterated throughout the nineteenth century and accepted into the twentieth century as a given of British theatre history. In an attempt to break this vicious circle, I will be arguing for the normative identity of women playwrights in the nineteenth century. If we acquiesce in the view of women playwrights as *exceptions* to the category of playwright in the nineteenth century, then we must run the risk of wilfully persisting in a damagingly incomplete version of the past.

However, in this chapter and the next I want to pursue the consequences of exceptionality for a handful of women playwrights, who, in their various ways, set out to reform or rescue the British theatre by

working within its most authoritative institution, the legitimate drama played at the Theatres Royal. In looking at these exceptions, it is possible to identify those attributes of the female pen which were thought could ease the problems of the nineteenth-century stage, but that also needed to be contained within the boundaries of exceptionality and respectability. Except for Fanny Kemble, my subjects in these chapters are women for whom playwriting was part of a wider writing career, but who did not come from theatrical families. Other characteristics of women theatre workers' exceptionality which I explore include the woman's identification (both by herself and by others) as middle-class, or respectable, or as a gentlewoman in a period of class instability; her need to survive independently because the conventional expectations of a male relative or husband as provider were not met; and the pursuit of her ambition and talent in spite of powerful social proscriptions against such desires. The saving graces of femininity which were on occasion welcomed into the theatre were necessarily underpinned by women's work – intellectual, emotional, and physical – and in the theatre, this work was often too visible. Given the hegemonic power of ideologies of respectable femininity which stressed female subservience, lack of agency, and a refusal to engage directly with material concerns of income and profession, the conditions of exceptionality – of ladies' work made visible – inevitably caused conflict. In this chapter, I look at the consequences of those conflicts for particular women writers and theatre workers – Isabel Hill and Fanny Kemble, and the winners of playwriting competitions held across the nineteenth century – arguing that this model of exceptionality has structured our histories and historiographies of British theatre and women's writing ever since.

Saving the National Drama

In 1829, Isabel Hill attempted to save the English National Drama. In August, the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden faced another of its financial crises, and was likely to be closed down, with the properties, scenery, and costumes sold to pay creditors and share-holders. Writers and actors were exhorted to give their services free to save this 'temple of the National Drama.'[9] Isabel Hill responded with her comedy, *The First of May; or, A Royal Love-Match*, which opened on 10 October 1829. On 5 October, opening this rescue season, Fanny Kemble, daughter of Charles Kemble the indebted manager of Covent Garden, and third generation of one of England's foremost theatrical families, made her public stage debut as Juliet in a season of *Romeo and Juliet*. Although

Fanny Kemble did not perform in *The First of May* – and indeed much to Benson Hill's *chagrin* Isabel's play seemed to be deliberately slighted by its selection 'for the nights that Miss Fanny Kemble did *not* appear'[10] – Kemble's and Hill's simultaneous involvement in a season expressly designed to rescue the fortunes of the proprietors of Covent Garden serves to illustrate some of the central themes of this book. More particularly, the contrasts between Hill's and Kemble's contributions to Covent Garden's 1829 autumn season open up some of the paradoxes enacted by middle-class women working in the theatre that are my concern.

What was the woman's play offered to Covent Garden at this time of crisis? Surprisingly, *The First of May* is very unlike Hill's earlier, unperformed play, *The Poet's Child* (1820), or her later unperformed verse drama *Brian the Probationer; or, The Red Hand* (1842), or descriptions of the unnamed script she produced for actor James Warde, praised by Kemble and Macready, and was also never performed.[11] It is not in the mould of the formal five-act verse tragedy generally considered the pattern of legitimate drama of this period, and which might have been thought particularly suitable for a season devoted to restoring the fortunes of a Patent theatre. Instead, it is a knowing and ephemeral piece, sub-titled 'A Petite Comedy in Two Acts,'[12] close to farce in its plot of potential sexual transgression, and designed to show off the dancers and singers of Charles Kemble's company, as well as his theatrical property in costumes. It is written in colloquial prose, and opens and closes with song and dance numbers involving a sizeable chorus and ballet company, with the playbill for its first performance listing these featured *divertissements*. *The First of May* headed the bill for Saturday, 10 October 1829, five days after the new season opened, and starred Charles Kemble as Edward IV, and Ellen Tree (who had made her Covent Garden debut four nights earlier as Lady Townly in *The Provok'd Wife*) as Lady Elizabeth Gray. The play recounts Edward IV's wooing and marriage of Elizabeth Gray (*nee* Woodville), turning an episode of English dynastic history during the Wars of the Roses into a series of comic situations where the ignoble reputations of some of the noble characters are central to the plot. Edward IV is represented quite openly as a libertine by himself and other characters – indeed, it is his reputation as a lover of beautiful young girls which is crucial to the plot, when he sets out to test the trust of his wife-to-be. Three marriage plots intertwine – Edward's wooing of the Widow Elizabeth; the attempts of Katherine, ward of city merchant Oldgrave, to marry her lover Henry Woodville (Elizabeth's brother) rather than be forced into a marriage with her elderly guardian; and the eventual marriage of her guardian

to the Widow Jolly, sister of Katherine's dead mother. The play ends in the standard comic resolution of marriage, but along the way, various permutations of cross-gendered disguise, sexual impropriety, and cross-generational couplings run very close to the line of immodesty on the censored public stage at the time.

To a modern reader, the play is both perplexing and exhilarating. Exhilarating in that it is written with great verve and gusto, but perplexing in the way it seems neither to carry the weight of its occasion – the support of a National Theatre in crisis – nor to reflect Hill's more earnest aspirations as poet and woman of letters. For a woman who had written at least two poetic dramas, this looks like a missed opportunity. Yet the play is exhilarating precisely because it confounds such expectations. *The First of May* is a commercial play, an occasional piece, written with an eye to its immediate market. It shows off all the riches of the Covent Garden company to their best effect by exploiting both the physical property and abundant talent of a major theatre company in a Patent Theatre, with dancers, singers, and lavish costumes (the *Athenæum* comments that 'The dresses helped the piece considerably').[13] Indeed, the play could be read as expressly designed to exhibit all the trappings of cultural status and accumulated wealth which supporters of the theatre monopoly maintained were impossible at the minor theatres.

It is also a play which dwells on the libertine character of Edward IV, and constructs a plot around the sexual knowingness of its characters. There is an ironic fitness in the Theatre Royal staging a play about the dissipations of a monarch at a time when memories of George IV's Regency were still fresh, and Britain was in the middle of social and political reorganization reform. But most importantly, for a young woman to enter so wholeheartedly into representing the sexual foibles of a past monarch suggests an answer to one of the questions we might ask of women playwrights: why were they drawn to the theatre, despite the very real hazards participation had for them? The playfulness of the piece, its ludic possibilities, offer a powerful answer here. The character of the libertine King gives Hill an opportunity to play with the representation of male sexuality, a topic usually proscribed for respectable women. A frank acknowledgement of Edwards's licentiousness, sanctioned by historic 'fact,' sets the tone for her representations of other characters' innuendo and frank admissions of desire, including those of the juvenile heroine, Katherine, and, more predictably, the comic Widow Jolly. The reading of this dramaturgy as subversive is reinforced by Misty Anderson's concluding comments on women's comedy, as she remarks that 'women [. . .] have used humor as a way to speak the

unspeakable. Taboo material can explode into public discourse through jokes and wordplay, bribing the hearers to assent to its wicked logic when direct speech would be ineffective or impossible.'[14]

The play of desire starts in the first scene where a conventional scenario of youthful rebellion is consistently pinned down by overt references to sexual misbehaviour and innuendo. Katherine rebels against her guardian Oldgrave's plan to marry her himself, claiming that she 'will never be sacrificed to an old trader, while I have my youth, my eyes, and a soul that makes me worthy to mix with Lords and Ladies' (f. 233). Oldgrave snaps back 'But what manner of Ladies will they be Kate? The Lady Lucy – or mistress Shore?' (f. 233) placing Katherine in the company of the King's mistresses. There is little preaching to counter the King's desire, and certainly no punishment of him for his 'sins.' On the contrary, in answer to a friend's remonstrances, the King explains his behaviour in terms of his royal position:

> I only wish that thou wert forced for one day to feel the galling weight of a crown [. . .] and then see how thou wouldst support such life without the aid of some kind half dozen women. (f. 237)

So Hill converts libertinism into solace and support for a lonely king, using the possibilities of comedy to reverse – if only for a moment – the moral assumptions of her audience to offer them a more pragmatic view of kingship and masculinity.

Contemporary critics were lukewarm about the quality of the play, the *Examiner* typical in calling it 'slight in every respect.'[15] Of course, after the sensation of Fanny Kemble's stage debut, the debut of an obscure 'lady' playwright could be overlooked. But critics were clear in their disapproval of the play's morality. 'The dissoluteness of the King is rather too strongly dwelt upon; and from a female pen the development of such a character is peculiarly indecorous and disagreeable.'[16] That ominous phrase, 'from a female pen,' draws the battle lines for reviewers. Quite simply, and to repeat what is now a truism of Victorian literary studies, the woman author was expected to produce more conventionally moral and decorous writing. But this 'more' was also less: the woman writer's moral gate-keeping role apparently made her unsuited for writing about a full range of lives, situations, actions, and characters. This is clear in the *Athenæum*'s opinion of Hill's portrayal of the libertine king:

> None but fools make a vaunt of their success in matters of this kind [. . .]. A male author would probably have kept this consideration in

> view, but the ladies are ever sorry hands at portraying a libertine, although it is a favourite subject with many of the air who aspire to be authoresses.[17]

The *Athenæum* does not project moral judgements of the play onto Hill's private character (although other critics did do so). Rather, the review accuses Hill of incompetence through lack of knowledge because of her gender. Here is the vicious circle of respectable femininity. Through it, a woman writer could damage her artistry, in what Angela Leighton identifies as the 'dissociation of sensibility' which was 'one of the woman poet's most disabling inheritances.'[18] The pattern Leighton identifies in the production and reception of poetry by women in the first half of the nineteenth century was even more marked in women's theatre writing of this period. State censorship, self-censorship, and managerial and critical censure combined with the gendered ideologies of respectability and domesticity to exert extraordinary pressures on women writing for the theatre.

Isabel Hill's career to 1829 may well have prepared her for such adverse critical reception. Even as a woman barely out of her teens, she was aware of the dilemma of the 'female pen' as a marker of difference, which carried with it the dilemma of feminine exceptionality. In an introductory essay 'An Indefinite Article' to her volume of her early poems and essays, Hill observes that once a woman made public the products of her pen, she was robbed.

> The remark [...] implies that literary celebrity should be left for the lords of the creation; that *we* are sure to be disgraced and spoiled by success, and shunned even if we fail, – as if the mantle of inspiration were the poisoned shirt of Nessus; as if the poet's bays wrinkled a female brow, [...] but gave *all* the Dons a right to exclaim, 'How the d——l came a *woman* in the *press*?' Such is the lot of scribbling spinsters, which I discovered too late.[19]

This ironic introduction is typically energetic and self-aware. In it and subsequent essays, Hill displays a shrewd intelligence and pragmatic approach to earning a living by her pen, notwithstanding her gentlewomanly status. Isabel Hill is perhaps best remembered now as the first English translator of Madame de Staël's novel, *Corinne*, a novel by a cosmopolitan female author who Sherry Simon contends was central in the formulation of 'the terms of an intellectual liberalism which

would be decisive for Romanticism and influential far into the twentieth century.'[20] Hill's translator's note indicates *her* independence of mind and understanding of translation as what Simon calls 'cultural mediation' (42): 'Madame de Staël's diffuse manner obliged me also to transpose pretty freely. [. . .] It may appear profanation to have altered a syllable; but, having been accustomed to consult the taste of my own country, I could not outrage it by being more literal.'[21] This novel, claimed by Ellen Moers as '*the* book of the woman of genius,'[22] might have inspired Hill by its portrait of a powerful and free-spirited woman artist; but Hill's talent and personality moved on a different track. Her brother, Earle Benson Hill, points out her 'industry, and readiness to fulfil any engagement with which she may be intrusted' to Edward Morgan, Richard Bentley's office manager, when soliciting payment on account for her Chateaubriand translation.[23] Hill maintained a stoic attitude to the knife-edge of constant penury, but Bentley's records suggest that neither Isabel nor Benson Hill – who undertook business negotiations on his sister's behalf – was very skilled at selling their literary properties to publishers or theatre managers. Benson's notes and receipts to Bentley and Morgan reveal his constant requests for monies owed to him and his sister, and his soliciting of work at a piece-rate was at a lower rate than other authors and translators were receiving.[24] It is clear from all the extant documents of Hill's life that the exchange of money for words was a central negotiation of her life, but one she found difficult to balance against her gentlewomanly status.

Given her economic circumstances, Hill's determination to be a dramatist takes on added significance. She wrote at least 6 plays, three of which were performed, but unpublished (*The First of May*, *My Own Twin Brother*, and *West-Country Wooing*),[25] an unnamed and unperformed adaptation of the Irish story,[26] and two published, but unperformed plays (*The Poet's Child*, and *Brian the Probationer*). There is evidence in her brother's 'Memoir' of at least another one, if not two, unperformed plays, but these manuscripts are not traceable. She also wrote a three-volume novel *Brother Tragedians* (1834) in which she expounds her theories of the stage as an important medium for both moral and aesthetic education, through Leopold, son of one of the title's tragedians, who argues passionately that 'The world must be amused; it may receive lessons from the stage, more readily than from the pulpit. The very consciences of men are best touched through their senses and imaginations.'[27] In this novel she also speaks directly as a female writer to her readers,