The Aesthetics of the Marketplace: Women Playwrights, 1770-1850

Katherine Newey

From the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century some 520 women writers produced around 1,200 plays for the theatre in all its forms. Surprisingly, given the way that feminist and cultural studies have been so active and invigorating in the last twenty years in recuperating lost or forgotten texts, there is little work done in this field. Most, if not all, of these writers and their plays are now unheard of, as indeed is much of the entire dramatic and stage literature of the nineteenth century. And this obscurity is part of the significance in the histories of women playwrights. Not only were they women, who were not supposed to write—or if they did, they were not supposed to take it seriously, if we remember Southey's advice to Charlotte Brontë: 'Literature is not the business of a woman's life, and it cannot be'.[1] But the theatre of the nineteenth century is also generally seen as a lost era—canonical literary opinion suggests that there is nothing of note in the English language produced for the stage for the century between Sheridan and Shaw. I am interested in how women writers fared in this convergence of silences in our literary and cultural history. How did they survive in a field of writing which was not usually considered by their contemporaries to be 'literature', and certainly is not today, in which success was usually very crudely measured by box office receipts and audience applause? How did they operate as professionals in a business which was public, collaborative, gossipy, and club-like, when women were constrained by views of feminine behaviour which required them to be private, domestic, pure of mind and behaviour, and dependent, with very real difficulties if they contravened these codes?

Before I investigate these issues through the careers of Elizabeth Inchbald and Catherine Gore, I want to sketch in as background some of the general difficulties faced by playwrights in the nineteenth century. Broad statements about the diminishing role of the playwright in the English commercial theatre are common. Charles Dickens' fictional account of Mr Crummles' expectations of Nicholas Nickleby's facility for turning out pieces to order is not far from the autobiographical accounts of the role of hack writers that William

Thomas Moncrieff, Douglas Jerrold, and Edward Fitzball give us. In an argument typical of the debate, 'Philo-Dramaticus' in *Blackwood's*, 1825, gives his explanation for the 'decline of the drama', in the reversal of the 'proper' or 'natural' state of things:

> The author must obey the directions of the performer; the whole order and process of the work is reversed, and the dramatist is expected to mould his character to fit the actor, instead of the actor's modelling his performance to the conceptions of the author. [2]

This was a common view of the degradation of the theatre in the nineteenth century. But equally common was the view that the drama was not declining, indeed, that it was very healthy, except that its health was not evinced in poetic dramas modelled on the Elizabethan writers, but in the melodramas, spectacles, burlesques, and farces which were produced in their thousands in the minor theatres. In this respect, my title, 'the aesthetics of the marketplace' is not an oxymoron, but refers to a cultural *industry*, where having your voice heard depended on reaching a large popular audience, and getting them to pay for it.

As Douglas Jerrold and his colleagues made very clear, it was hard for anyone to earn a reasonable living writing only for the theatre. Very few women earned their livings or their reputations principally or only as playwrights. A common way women became involved in writing for the theatre was as part of their general occupation as 'women of letters'. These were novelists, poets, journalists, essayists and translators, who wrote, translated, or adapted plays together with other work, but who were probably better known in other fields. Examples of such writers include Florence Marryat, Maria Edgeworth, Catherine Gore, Barbarina Brand, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Catherine Crowe, Anna Maria Porter, Mary Braddon, and Anna Maria Hall. They experienced a number of difficulties, not the least of which was that for most of the century theatrical writing did not pay very well, in comparison with other types of writing. They also needed access to the club-like and gossipy atmosphere of the playwright's profession, and the professional networks of the theatre. We can assume that many of the writers I have mentioned were part of writers' networks, but the theatrical profession seems to have presented more obstacles in this regard than the publication of poetry or fiction. As John Russell Stephens describes this world, it would appear to be almost exclusively masculine in the freedom of public movement and association involved:

> Outside the clubs, many of the better-known playwrights were also members of social and literary circles, where, especially in the second half of the century, they mixed as a matter of course with prominent men in Victorian letters.... The majority of the best-known nineteenth-century dramatists were connected to the mainstream of literary life; but the proliferation of Bohemian clubs, coteries, and societies, especially in the middle and later Victorian period, helped to promote more ready contact with men of all professions and callings.[3]

This issue of access to networks presented a difficulty for any woman wanting to work as a playwright, as most of the clubs and organisations of the theatrical world were male-only institutions. In its early years, the Dramatic Authors' Society invited women to become Honorary members, but their placement in this category suggests that they were regarded as decorative additions, rather than as working professionals of equal status.

Elizabeth Inchbald was active in the theatre profession between 1772 and 1810 as an actor, playwright, editor and critic, and a novelist. Her career offers a good example of the ways in which women had to comport themselves to make a living in the theatre, and some of the difficulties they faced, although she is unusual in that she is probably one of the very few woman to earn her living almost completely in the theatre. Timing is important in this respect: playwrights at the turn of the century could still draw their primary income from the stage, and Inchbald was in the company of George Colman jnr, Thomas Morton, Frederick Reynolds and Thomas Dibdin in doing so.[4] In this period, the stage was the most lucrative and public (or indeed notorious) form of writing for women aspiring to careers as professional writers.[5] There was immediate response from an audience, and the possibility of long-lasting popularity, as we see in the performance and publication frequencies of the comedies of Susannah Centlivre, Aphra Behn, and Elizabeth Inchbald—the three most popular women dramatists in the eighteenth century.[6]

Elizabeth Inchbald actually became one of the most prolific dramatic editors and critics of the early nineteenth century, but this point in her career was reached only after a long struggle for autonomy in her life, and especially for financial independence. The main theme of Inchbald's life-narrative is that of the struggle for control—control of her career, her reputation, and her personal and financial security. Even the portraits which were made and distributed as publicity were subject to an attempt at control of her own public image.[7] Her story also demonstrates some of the particular difficulties faced by a

beautiful young woman in establishing herself as a theatre professional with a modicum of self-respect and self-definition. In English society of the late eighteenth century, Elizabeth Inchbald was marginalised through interlocking systems of English citizenship: not only was she a woman (and therefore legally equivalent to a child or a lunatic), and an actress (therefore like a 'rogue and vagabond'), but she stuttered, and she was also a Roman Catholic.

Her story is conventionally 'romantic' in some ways: in April, 1772, at the age of 18, she ran away from the family farm, Standingfield, in Suffolk, to become an actress. In June 1772, she married Joseph Inchbald, also an actor and a Catholic, although almost twice her age and of indifferent health, and they worked together in provincial and touring companies. Her most recent biographer, Roger Manvell, suggests that this marriage may have been one of convenience,[8] although after her husband's early death in 1779 she took on the responsibility for his illegitimate son. Whatever the state of their married relationship, it certainly provided some protection for Elizabeth from attempted seductions by theatre managers—the casting couch was not a recent invention of Hollywood.

Although she was very beautiful, worked her way up to playing principal roles in the provinces, and numbered among her good friends Mrs Siddons, Elizabeth Inchbald never achieved great fame or any sort of fortune from acting. The difficulties of an actor's life were many in this period: touring was slow and expensive, performers were reliant on the whim and honesty of managers, and were expected to provide their own costumes, to have in their repertoire a range of parts ready for performance, and were not paid for rehearsal. An additional hazard for actresses was the innuendo and behaviour we now call sexual harassment. In a letter to Tate Wilkinson, the most powerful manager of the northern circuit based around Hull and York, Inchbald outlines the difficulties she faced under his management:

> as you think the Countess of Salisbury of such material consequence [I shall] get through it as best I can rather than keep money from the House—I have nothing to say against Mrs. Smith, she is a Woman I admire very much—I will make this observation, that had she been compelled to play second parts in the tragedys [*sic*] with me, as I have in the comedys [*sic*] with her, she might have been thought as little of as I am at present—so far does the success of an actor depend on the partiality of a manager. Under you I never could be a favorite anywhere.... Mrs. Smith ... is not the first by a Dozen that you have

> preferred to me—I have been three years with you at an inferior salary which before I never received. I have laboured ... through the most disadvantageous tho: consequential fast—I have lost my Beauty and what is worse my Health by an uncommon attention to my Business—and with a Prudence that almost amounted to Penury during the whole time,... I could not leave the company without parting with some few properties I brought with me to it—[9]

If Wilkinson is guilty of even half of the prejudice and unfair dealing of which Inchbald accuses him, it is not surprising that she worked steadily at her writing and editing career as a way to independence. In 1778, with the encouragement of the actor John Kemble, she began to write the novel which was later published as *A Simple Story* (1791) and, at about the same time, she began writing a farce.[10] Her work was encouraged by George Colman, then manager at the Haymarket, who produced *A Mogul Tale* in 1784, by which Inchbald made 100 guineas.[11] However, Colman had overlooked or forgotten the manuscript of an earlier play of Inchbald's, and when it was performed the next year had rather imperiously given it his own title—*I'll Tell You What*—with no consultation with the playwright. From then on, Inchbald's plays were successful at either the Haymarket or Covent Garden, and she developed such confidence in naming her terms to theatre managers that the £800 she received from Colman for *Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are* was one of the highest payments of this period.[12] In spite of this success however, in 1810, Elizabeth Inchbald began to retreat from her literary and theatre work, turning back to her religion, and according to James Boaden from May 1811 'her studies appear to be exclusively religious'.[13]

Inchbald developed a style in comedy and farce which appealed to the typical audience of the legitimate theatres of the late eighteenth century: educated, genteel, if not aristocratic, and alert to verbal wit and character-based comedy. Her plays were in the mode of the comedy of manners, but show a particular interest in abnormal or dysfunctional domestic situations, with divorce, remarriage, and illegitimacy featuring in her plays perhaps more than in those of her contemporaries. These interests are not completely extraordinary for the time, but singular enough to mark her as having a different voice, and one influenced by a point of view which comes from the margins. Her translation of Kotzebue's Romantic drama *Das Kind der Lieber* as *Lovers' Vows* is a case in point. This translation of a minor member of the *Sturm und Drang* school of German Romantic drama highlights

her membership of the loose group of radical writers and publishers in London centred on William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Holcroft,[14] such that Gary Kelly calls her 'the natural interpreter of Kotzebue for English theatre audiences'.[15] *Lovers' Vows* is probably best known in the English-speaking world as the play that is stopped by the return of Sir Thomas Bertram to Mansfield Park, and Chapman's edition of Jane Austen's novel includes Inchbald's translation. This is invaluable for an understanding of the dynamics and sub-text of the first volume of *Mansfield Park*, but it is also significant in revealing Inchbald's broad political sympathies. The main plot of the play involves a seduced and abandoned village girl, Agatha, and her illegitimate son, Frederick, as the protagonists. Frederick's father (Agatha's seducer), the Baron Wildenheim, is finally brought to realise the wrong he has done Agatha and, after asking for her forgiveness, asks her to marry him. The play's sub-plot, which is more in the style of the bourgeois comedy of manners, involves the Baron's legitimate daughter, Amelia, and her tutor, Anhalt, a clergyman. Amelia loves her tutor, and in a playful comic scene, proposes to him in much the same way that Miranda proposes to Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. Apparently, Inchbald had to make extensive changes to Kotzebue's original in order to make it suitable for the English stage, but even in its English form the play is sufficiently challenging to the settled morality of its audience.

Her comedy, *I'll Tell You What*, is typical of her comic writing in its concern with the domestic arrangements of the aristocratic and genteel classes. It makes comedy out of the confusions and double entendres possible when the plot involves divorce. Through divorce, Sir George Euston has two wives, both alive, much to the titillation and bewilderment of his family and friends, and the confusion of Sir George when his rich uncle Mr Anthony Euston returns unexpectedly from the West Indies. Sir George needs to hush up his affairs because he must ensure that he remains his uncle's heir. For Sir George to become Mr Euston's heir, Mr Euston's own son must be disinherited, and as we might expect in a comedy, such a situation is 'unnatural' and needs to be rectified. Ultimately, it is, accompanied by a subversive comic sub-plot which involves the machinations of both of Sir George's wives in trying to get rid of their current husbands. There is a potentially melodramatic scene at the end of the play where father and son—Anthony and Charles Euston—are reunited, and the woman that Charles Euston married against his father's will is accepted into the family in her rightful place. But the play is interesting for its frank

and straightforward—even joking—treatment of marital infidelity and divorce. Roger Manvell argues that her interest in the vagaries of relationships is in part autobiographical,[16] given her own often difficult marriage, but her interest in personal liberty and fulfilment is also of a piece with her Jacobinical sympathies.

Inchbald's different point of view, evident in her treatment of the comedy of manners, probably helped to give her an 'edge' in the marketplace, as Judith Phillip Stanton's figures reveal, with Inchbald coming third behind Susanna Centlivre and Aphra Behn as the most successful female playwrights of the eighteenth century.[17] However, in her life-long pursuit of financial security, Inchbald's work as a dramatic editor was also rewarding. She started with the selection, editing, and commentary for the 25 volume series *The British Theatre*, published by Longman in 1808. Her job as editor and writer of critical introductions to this collection constitutes a massive work, covering some 105 plays, and a modern collection of her prefaces makes a tome of around 1,000 pages. *The British Theatre* was so successful that it was followed by *The Modern Theatre* (10 volumes in 1809), and *Collection of Farces* (7 volumes in 1809). Inchbald was paid sixty guineas as retainer for *The British Theatre* and ffty pounds and fifty guineas respectively for the later publications. All the anthologies sold well and provided a model for other collections of plays,[18] although only the first series had prefaces written by Inchbald. She found the job a 'dreadful task'[19] and after the first series refused to do more than allow her name to be attached to the anthologies.

The commission to select, edit, and write prefaces for Longman's anthology proved to be more fraught with difficulty than Inchbald had expected. With his awareness of the stringencies of the market-place, and its pragmatic necessities, Boaden writes that such a task was 'calculated to open various sources of displeasure against a person whose interest it assuredly was to conciliate everybody'.[20] But the difficulties were not only the injured pride of authors, or their corresponding wrath with her own works; Boaden makes it clear that Mrs Inchbald's position as a lady was a central problem. 'There is something unfeminine, too, in a lady's placing herself in the seat of judgment.'[21] Not surprisingly, then, as a critic Inchbald does not cross the narrow line between propriety and subversion, as she does as a playwright; she is critical of bawdiness, particularly in the women playwrights Aphra Behn and Susannah Centlivre. Cecilia Macheski argues that this is a strategy for reform of the stage so as to make it

possible for women to work in the theatre without damage to their reputations.[22]

A mid-Victorian assessment of the early nineteenth-century writer Mary Berry gives a good example of the particular difficulties concerning morality and reputation facing female playwrights. Berry's play, *Fashionable Friends*, had a successful amateur performance in 1802 at Strawberry Hill, and then in 1803 was produced professionally at Drury Lane. However, the play was not successful because of 'its lax morality'.[23] In 1865, this judgement is confirmed:

> it is certainly not deficient in skilful arrangement of dramatic position, in stage intrigue, or in pointed and epigrammatic dialogue, but, on the other hand, it must be confessed that no such play would be written by a lady of the present day, or be performed in private theatricals, or be offered to the public as the representation of fashionable manners. A greater proof of the happy change that has taken place, in the course of the last sixty-three years, in the manners, the morals, and the refinement of the higher classes could not well be adduced.[24]

The same kind of comment is made in a review in the *New Monthly Magazine* of Caroline Boaden's new play of 1832, *A Duel in Richelieu's Time*. The review judges the play 'as clever and effective as it is offensive to good taste and injurious to good morals.... [a] clever and worthless production ... [which] we are the less inclined to tolerate ... that it is the work of a lady'.[25]

On occasion, Catherine Gore received a similarly admonitory response. Best known as a novelist of fashionable life in the 'silver fork' school, with novels such as *The Hamiltons* (1834), *Diary of a Désennuyée* (1836), and *Mothers and Daughters* (1834), Mrs Gore's career as a playwright in the 1830s and 1840s suggests some of the subtle obstacles faced by women who wanted to join the 'literary gentleman's club', as Julia Swindells calls it.[26] In 1843, Gore won the £500 first prize in Benjamin Webster's competition for 'the encouragement of dramatic literature' with her comedy, *Quid Pro Quo*. The range of public comment and discussion of Webster's competition suggests that it had a symbolic significance beyond that of its commercial presence: it was part of the debate of the 'National Drama' of this period. The announcement of Mrs Gore as the winner brought condescending comments from the popular press:

> not one writer of any distinguished grade has entered the lists—so that the prize comedy should not be considered as a fair sample of what the dramatic talent of the day could effect.

After having made this apparently neutral general comment, the writer concludes:

> Of the comedy chosen we cannot possibly yet give any opinion: it is the production of a lady in a department of literature which has been ornamented by many female pens. Mrs. Sentlivre [*sic*], Mrs. Cowley, Mrs. Inchbald, and several other writers are sufficient to prove that a good comedy *can* emanate from a feminine brain, and we trust there will be another proof of it when Mrs. Gore's is produced. Still we cannot help regretting that none of the "favourites have been in the field," although we admire the generosity which held them from the contest for the "stakes".[27]

When the play was produced in June 1844 some of the criticism, and even outrage, at her play is quite clearly aimed at her social reputation as a 'lady' in terms which would have been unthinkable for a male writer—even a gentlemanly one. *The Illustrated London News* is particularly and more than usually blunt:

> On Tuesday night last the long-talked of "Prize" Comedy was produced at ... [the Haymarket], and unfortunately turned up a "Blank!"—To write a sterling comedy requires a combination of the abilities on the part of the author rarely to be met with united in one person. A thorough knowledge of life—an almost intuitive perception of the *nuances* of character—a perfectly graphic pencil to sketch them—a smack of sentiment—a considerable fund of humour—a deep mine of wit, that does not always exhibit its riches—a vein of corrective, not invective satire—a constructiveness that can invent a probable series of incidents—a felicitous power of making everybody speak after his own fashion ... —and above all, Good Taste, are necessary possessions, or equipments, before one may venture on the task of comedy. And were these discernible in the "Prize Comedy"? Not one of them. The piece is incoherent and plotless.

The review goes on to discuss the characters (but not the incidents as the play is deemed plotless) without once mentioning its title or author—except for this parting blow:

> One word at parting: if ladies will write such things and ladies play such *smoking* parts as the Etonian Gamin [referring to Mrs Nisbett in travestie playing the young Etonian son of the protagonist], if vulgarity rudely turn out politeness, and coarse thoughts garbed in bad grammar take precedence of refined idea—why then indeed, farewell to comedy.[28]

The general ridicule of *Quid Pro Quo* might not be of any great importance, as bad reviews, carping comments, and burlesque versions

of notorious plays are not entirely unknown in the close world of the theatre. However, the play's status as the 'Prize Comedy' gives it a role in the renovation of the 'English National Drama': a topic of great concern for the literati of the 1830s and 1840s. Indeed in 1832 there had even been an enquiry by a Select Committee of the House of Commons into the state of Dramatic Literature. As Mrs Gore recognises, playwrights did not have the kind of security of a generally homogeneous bourgeois audience which Elizabeth Inchbald enjoyed. She alludes to the disappearance of this audience in her Preface to *Quid Pro Quo*:

> Were the boxes often filled ... with those aristocratic and literary classes of the community who have absolutely withdrawn their patronage from the English stage, for *their* more refined pleasure, a new order of dramatic authors would be encouraged to write, and of performers to study. But no one familiar with the nightly aspect of our theatres will deny that they are supported by a class requiring a very different species of entertainment, for whose diversion, exaggeration in the writing and acting is as essential as daubing to the art of the scene-painter.[29]

In the concern for the state of contemporary English drama, I would argue that we can see a form of cultural nationalism which Benedict Anderson invokes in his concept of a nation as an 'imagined community'. In the theatre of the 1830s and 1840s, cultural nationhood was constructed through social class, and particularly class difference. But when women enter into this arena, as playwrights, theatre managers, or occasionally, as critics, the debate becomes marked by ideological or political ideas about gender. In their separation and elevation into the 'angels of the house', through their difference and separation from the 'common people', women became the representatives—the material presence—of the idealised values of the middle-class, which caused particular difficulties for their participation in such a commercial marketplace as that of the nineteenth-century theatre.

Notes

1 Quoted in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, New Haven, 1979, p.8.

2 Philo-Dramaticus, 'A Letter to Charles Kemble, Esq. and R. W. Elliston, Esq. on the Present State of the Stage', *Blackwood's Magazine*, June, 1825, p.72.

3 John Russell Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre, 1800–1900*, Cambridge, 1992, p.12.
4 Stephens, p.19.
5 Judith Philips Stanton, ' "This New Found Path Attempting": Women Dramatists in England, 1660–1800', in *Curtain Calls: British and American Women and the Theatre*, eds. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski, Athens, Ohio, 1991, p.325.
6 Stanton, p.334.
7 Cecilia Macheski, 'Herself as Heroine: Portraits as Autobiography for Elizabeth Inchbald', in Schofield and Macheski, p.45.
8 Roger Manvell, *Elizabeth Inchbald: England's Principal Woman Dramatist and Independent Woman of Letters in 18th Century London*, Lanham, Maryland, 1987, p.11.
9 Manvell, p.188.
10 *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald*, ed. James Boaden, London, 1833, vol. I, p.103.
11 Boaden, vol. I, p. 185.
12 Stephens, pp. 27-28.
13 Boaden, vol. II, p.171.
14 Cecilia Macheski, Introduction to Elizabeth Inchbald, *Remarks for the British Theatre (1806–1809)*, ed. Cecilia Macheski, Delmar, New York, 1990, p.8.
15 Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel*, Oxford, 1976, p. 65.
16 Manvell, p.50.
17 Stanton, p.334.
18 Stephens, p.124.
19 Boaden, vol. II, p.103.
20 Boaden, vol. II, p.84.
21 Boaden, vol. II, p.84.
22 Macheski, Introduction, pp.9–10.
23 *The Berry Papers*, ed. Lewis Melville, London, 1914, p.208.
24 *Extracts of the Journals and Correspondence of Miss Berry from the Year 1783 to 1852*, ed. Theresa Lewis, London 1865, Vol. II, p.198.
25 'The Drama', *New Monthly Magazine* n.s. 36 (August, 1832): 348.
26 Julia Swindells, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: the Other Side of Silence*, Oxford, 1985, p. 91.
27 *The Illustrated London News*, June 1, 1844, p.356.
28 *The Illustrated London News*, June 22, 1844, p.395.
29 Catherine Gore, Preface, *Quid Pro Quo*, London, n.d., p.iv.