Getting Into the Act
Women Playwrights in London 1776-1829

Ellen Donkin
GETTING INTO THE ACT

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century in London there was a remarkable surge in the number of produced plays written by women. In fact, it was the largest showing since women had entered playwriting for the first time over one hundred years before. *Getting Into the Act* argues that this infusion was intimately connected to developments in theatre management, and particularly to the career of David Garrick. Garrick’s management of the Drury Lane Theatre made it possible for a number of female playwrights to secure a foothold in the profession. But as these women rapidly emerged from contingency status into full-fledged professional membership, their very success began to undermine the prevailing expectations around gender. By 1829, the momentum of this earlier period was broken, and in critical discourse and public memory, these female playwrights had all but disappeared.

Ellen Donkin explores the careers of seven such women playwrights. This tiny cohort created a formidable pressure and presence in the profession, in spite of contemporary obstacles. However, it is disturbing to discover that women today still make up only about 10 percent of the playwriting profession. Donkin argues that old patterns of male approval and control over women’s drama have persisted into the late twentieth century, with undermining results. But she also believes that by paying close attention to these histories, we can identify the insidious repetitions of the past in order to break through them, and imagine a fuller and more resolute presence for women in the profession.

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London and New York
for Larry
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Finally the family: this book honors the memory of my great-grandmother Mary Sheridan of Ireland and New York; my grandfather, George William McKay Donkin of Nova Scotia and New York; my godmothers Julia Park and Dorothy Fiske Claxton, and Margaret Soltis. Special tribute to my parents, Audrey and Willis Donkin, my husband Larry Winship for unflagging generosity and support, and my daughters, Molly Donkin Winship and Grace Cobb Winship.
In 1660, Charles II issued permission for actresses to join the legitimate theatre.\(^1\) It has been a common error in theatre history to assume by extrapolation that women were thereby also welcomed into other areas of theatre practice, particularly playwriting. They were not. Cultural and economic resistance to women creating meaning by becoming playwrights continued long after it became acceptable for women to carry meaning onstage as performers.

Of all playwrights whose plays were being produced in London from 1660 to 1800 only about seven percent were women. At certain points the percentage was higher, and at others it was lower. But taken as an average, there were ninety-three male playwrights for every seven female playwrights. Perhaps this should not astonish us. There were mitigating factors in the culture, some of which I hope to make plain in this chapter, which made entering the theatre, especially for the daughters of the emerging middle class, which all of our playwrights were, a risky proposition.\(^2\) But two things have astonished me. The first is that for years, it never occurred to me to question why the numbers were so low. The information, such as I had in those days, constituted an unconscious judgment on women’s capabilities and interests, rather than an entry point for inquiry and investigation. In the absence of information, I reflexively constructed for myself a history of defeat.

The second thing that has astonished me, now that I have actually undertaken those investigations, is that there were any women playwrights at all. Given the constraints—economic, educational, social, and legal—the fact that a handful of women made their way to the top of the profession has changed not only how I assess that history of women in playwriting, but also how I assess the historians who erased it. The constraints on women as playwrights did not stop with death or retirement. There was a powerful tendency in historians and critics to minimize or dismiss a woman’s work in the theatre if she were not an actress; to assume after the fact that women’s contributions to most artistic enterprises were a form of pastime, rather like the way young eighteenth-century women of a certain class learned music, drawing, and dancing.\(^3\) The feminist historian is constantly battling an uneasy sense that she is recovering marginal histories and second-rate art, and to what purpose? Setting the record straight? Complicating the dull master narratives? Yes, she is setting the record straight and
complicating the dull master narratives. But at the heart of this operation, she is peeling back the protective layers to expose the mechanics of a system that worked with remarkable efficiency to keep women voiceless, propertyless, and acquiescent.

Playwriting as an art form holds a particular fascination for me because it is a collaborative art form. As such, it is distinctly different from the writing of novels or poetry, which can take place in relative peace and privacy. Writing for the theatre puts a playwright into immediate physical contact with a host of people and tangible objects connected to the fact of production. My operating assumption in this book will be that the work of any playwright is strengthened immeasurably by that contact, and by concrete first-hand exposure to that backstage production process. But my other operating assumption will be that gender expectations in the eighteenth century complicated that contact in ways that need careful clarification. The prevailing wisdom has been that theatre was somehow a more “public” form of writing, that it exposed women (actresses and playwrights alike) to wicked company, and that a woman’s reputation was at risk of contamination on contact. All of these things were true to some extent, but they leave certain questions begging, and in any case they have little resonance for a twentieth-century reader; they seem quaint and distant, of another period and another set of mores. My hope is that in the specificity of the cases I have chosen, this comfortable sense of “quaintness” will give way to something a good deal more disturbing and recognizable.

The seven playwrights who are the primary focus of this study, Hannah Cowley, Hannah More, Frances Brooke, Sophia Lee, Elizabeth Inchbald, Frances Burney and Joanna Baillie, represent about one quarter of the total number of women whose plays were produced in London between 1775 and 1800. They experienced widely different degrees of success, but the fact that they were produced at all meant that they had already negotiated a range of social prohibitions successfully before the fact of production. In fact, because the system was so tightly controlled, it is probably more accurate to think of these women as the designated survivors of the system, the ones chosen to succeed. Ironically, their presence—which ostensibly demonstrated the openness of the field to all comers—had the effect of showing that in spite of the open doors, only a small fraction would succeed anyway, reinforcing a general notion that women were inherently unsuited or unequal to the task. This kind of demonstration had the effect of preserving the status quo: even as it foregrounded the exceptions, it restated and underscored the principle.

The secondary focus of this study is the theatre managers. When I speak of the “system” being tightly controlled, and of these women being the designated survivors of that system, I do not speak metaphorically. The eighteenth-century theatre managers occupied positions of enormous discretionary power with respect to theatrical production in London. In the three theatres which concern this study, Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket, all the managers were male, white, and middle-class. As individual personalities, they were as
distinct from one another as any group of people could be, but as middle-class men of the period they participated in certain social expectations around gender that indelibly marked their working relationships with women playwrights. They are a useful focal point because they give a human dimension and voice to the otherwise rather nuts-and-bolts process of theatre production. In other words, by tracking a woman’s experience of theatre production through her work with one of the theatre managers, we are better able to assess just how that process was inflected by gender.

However, in any analysis of this kind, it is important to contextualize the struggles of women playwrights within the larger economic operations of theatre production. In fact, the obstacles facing any playwright, male or female, were formidable. At the very point when women were finally permitted to perform onstage, Charles II simultaneously restricted the number of theatres that could operate legally in London, from the diverse multitude that characterized Elizabethan and Jacobean London, to only two houses. The process was called “patenting,” and the Crown was the sole giver of patent rights. This maneuver by the Crown was originally rationalized as an economic contingency (the would-be patent holders complained of competition outstripping the market, and the Crown benefitted from payments from the patent holders), but more recent scholarship has suggested that limiting dramatic representation in London facilitated political surveillance and control. As the eighteenth century unfolded, the number of legitimate houses eventually inched its way up from two to three and stabilized there (Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and finally the Haymarket for summer shows on a year-to-year renewable license). Houses for other related kinds of entertainment (music, opera, and animal acts) came and went. But the number of legitimate houses to which a playwright could apply in London was astonishingly small, compared to what it had been in the days before the Common-wealth, and the situation was made worse by the fact of London’s late-eighteenth-century population boom. Frances Brooke, in her novel The Excursion, summed up the state of things from the perspective of a worldly-wise character named Mr. Hammond. It is his painful task to inform a bright and gifted young woman that her play has been dismissed out of hand by a key London theatre manager, who has just made a series of elaborate excuses to Mr. Hammond:

Would it not have been wiser, as well as more manly, [said Mr. Hammond to Maria] to have said in the clearest and most unambiguous terms, “Sir, we have no occasion for new pieces while there are only two English theatres in a city so extensive and opulent as London; a city which, in the time of Elizabeth, when the frequenters of the theatre were not a tenth part of the present, supported seventeen. We will therefore never receive any new production but when we are compelled to it by recommendations which we dare not refuse: nor will I read the tragedy you bring, lest its merit should make me ashamed to reject it.”
In addition to the limited number of places to which a playwright could apply, the material a playwright could draw upon became increasingly restricted. By 1737, the Licensing Act legalized blanket restrictions on any kind of political or religious content in plays. This overt censorship had drastic consequences for the kinds of plays allowed into production for the next two centuries. It was particularly true of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the period on which this study focuses, that the French Revolution created widespread paranoia in England, and that the Licensing Act made it possible to eliminate at the source plays making any reference to social struggle. Most politically volatile plays never made it past the manager and consequently were not even submitted to the censor. Later in the century, the office of the censor also became extremely squeamish about any references to things sexual. For most of the eighteenth century, because the number of legitimate theatres was so tiny, it was possible for the Lord Chamberlain’s office to maintain rather careful control over what they produced.

Censorship could take other forms as well. The eighteenth-century audience was extremely verbal and responsive by today’s standards. A new show could be shut down completely by being “damn’d” by an audience on opening night. Mrs. Inchbald experienced audience response as a form of mob rule. She wrote this oft-quoted statement about the difficulties of being a playwright:

The Novelist [by comparison] is a free agent. He lives in a land of liberty, whilst the Dramatic Writer exists but under a despotic government. Passing over the subjection in which an author of plays is held by the Lord Chamberlain’s office [the Censor responsible for enforcing the 1737 Licensing Act above], and the degree of dependence which he has on his actors—he is the very slave of the audience. He must have their tastes and prejudices in view, not to correct, but to humour them…the will of such critics is the law, and execution instantly follows judgement.8

However, the most immediate problem facing a playwright was where and how to get a script produced. The power of those two or three managers was absolute in the matter of considering scripts: even before a script was submitted to the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain’s office, it had to be read, approved and scheduled by the manager. Managers were deluged with scripts. Playwrights described coming into a manager’s office and discovering stacks of untouched manuscripts numbering in the hundreds. Making one’s way up to the top of that pile required attracting special notice or having some leverage, unless one already had a track record as a successful playwright. In this, oddly enough, women may have had a small advantage, since being female tended to mark them as a curiosity.

One additional complication for new playwrights, male or female, was how to get a good working knowledge of production and stage mechanics. The introduction on the public stage of moveable scenery around 1660 had a
profound effect on the writing of plays. Practical considerations for a playwright might include the following: how quickly and in what sequences could the scenery be made to shift? How long did a line of dialogue need to be in order for an exiting actor to get offstage? How many layers of activity could be simultaneously facilitated by scenic elements to create situations of multiple eavesdropping? What constituted audience expectations for elapsed time between scenes? If a novice playwright was not a working actor, or at least a company hanger-on, and had not learned the craft through performance itself, the only other avenue of entry into a working knowledge of theatre craft was to watch a great number of plays or to be carefully edited by a manager willing to take the time. But in the first case, attending plays regularly, there were certain logistical difficulties. Seats in the London theatre were not reserved except in the case of people who owned boxes or could send servants ahead to wait in line and hold their places. For everyone else, there was a considerable wait before the doors opened under conditions that were always inconvenient, and often unsavory. It was a situation that probably discouraged a number of would-be theatregoers, particularly women without an escort or without means.

Conversely, if a novice playwright was lucky enough to receive the editorial attentions of the manager himself, there was yet another level of complication. Those managers who were the most astute and capable editors of drama were themselves also playwrights. David Garrick (1717–1779), Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816) and both the George Colmans (the Elder 1732–1794, and the Younger 1762–1836), are conspicuous examples. Their playwriting experience at once conferred upon them a special competence for dealing with novice playwrights, but it simultaneously put them in the awkward position of being in competition with those novices. During the eighteenth century, a manager’s annual salary was generally fixed for a given year. Additional income could come from several sources, one of which was producing his own dramas. As a general rule, playwrights received a benefit on the third, sixth and ninth evening, if they were lucky enough to have a play last that long. A benefit meant that once a certain specified amount of overhead had been cleared at the box office, the remaining box-office take went to the playwright. The play’s copyright could be purchased either by the theatre or by a publisher, although once it was printed, it was in the public domain. As a whole, playwrights made their money on their benefit nights, or by negotiating a flat fee with the manager before the run, which necessarily put the risk back onto the manager, since the playwright was supposed to get paid whether the show failed or succeeded. This kind of arrangement, however, seems to have been reserved primarily for playwrights with a proven track record. As a general rule, in any given season it was economically prudent for management to use as many “old” plays as possible, that is, plays already in the public domain. This way he maximized the amount of income for the house and minimized the amount going out in playwrights’ benefits.
However, the public understandably expected a certain amount of novelty. Deciding who would be placed in one of the limited available slots and how many slots there would be for new plays was an important part of the manager’s job. If the manager himself also happened to be a playwright, it was clearly to his personal advantage to reserve some of these openings for himself. This was never called a conflict of interests; it simply was the way things worked. The unchallenged prerogative of the manager was to designate how many open slots there would be and who would get them. It made the prospects for a beginning playwright very narrow indeed.

For the time being, however, let us imagine that our playwright, female or male, has maneuvered past these obstacles and miraculously (or otherwise) had a script read and accepted by one of the theatre managers. A fair copy together with a letter of application signed by the manager has been submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s office, and (with a handful of negligible changes) has been returned to the manager with permission to perform. There were still a host of contingencies connected to production which could materially affect a playwright’s chances for success. There was the cast. The actors could protest a script, learn its lines incorrectly, or simply fail to show up for an opening performance. Two examples from the experience of the women will illustrate, although this was by no means a problem experienced by women playwrights alone: Aphra Behn’s *The Dutch Lover* (1672) was allegedly sunk by an actor who never learned his lines and ad-libbed his way through the entire performance. Later, Susanna Centlivre’s comic classic *The Busy Body* (1709) was rejected by the actors, who were at some pains to sabotage rehearsals and create bad publicity for its opening. Needless to say, it rarely mattered to an audience whether problems like these were the fault of the playwright or not. If a show was poorly performed and damned by an audience, it could be closed on the same night it opened. There would be no further performances at all, and no benefit night for the playwright. The play had to survive into a third night for the playwright to see any financial return. By the second half of the eighteenth century, a successful play could generate as much as five or six hundred pounds for its playwright, which was a very substantial sum for the period, certainly enough to keep the playwright comfortably provided for until the next script was forthcoming. So a great deal rode on production itself, the area in which playwrights frequently had very little control, especially on opening night.

There were other dangers connected more directly to the discretionary power of the manager. If a manager was unscrupulous and wanted to use a play without paying a large sum to the playwright through legitimate benefit nights, he could delay its opening to a period of the season in which normal box-office receipts were low anyway, or when end-of-season actors’ benefits made it difficult for anything else to play successfully. Even if the play was a success, it meant that he paid out a lower amount of cash overall than he would have if it had played at the height of the season. After the ninth night, if it lasted that long, he could purchase the copyright cheaply and milk it for as long as it brought money into
the theatre over the next fourteen years. Maneuvers of this kind were always
difficult to prove, but the evidence of Hannah Cowley’s experience with Richard
Sheridan (see Chapter 3) strongly suggests that Sheridan’s legendary delays and
graceful excuses to playwrights with accepted scripts almost certainly had an
underlying economic motive.

We come now to a more difficult and elusive area, which is the way women
faced obstacles to becoming playwrights that were a consequence of gender. I
have broken these down into two rough areas: education and conduct. Both
areas were indirectly but deeply connected to theatre. They constituted the
preparation that would have preceded a woman’s actual entry into a manager’s
office with a manuscript in hand, and also a template for behavior once the play
had moved into production.

Education was a potent means for imposing separate sets of expectations on
female and male children. One of the things that characterizes the backgrounds
of male playwrights is some access to formal education. There were schools for
boys and colleges for men. The schools often encouraged theatricals as a part of
routine training at the secondary level, and so a young man heading off to
university was already familiar with Terence and Seneca, and had perhaps
memorized and performed hundreds of their lines. By contrast, schools for young
women at the secondary level were comparatively rare in the early part of the
eighteenth century. They proliferated during the century (Sophia Lee’s school in
Bath and Hannah More’s in Bristol are two examples among many) but there
were frequent debates in journals and other publications about whether young
women were getting any substantial training, or if these institutions were really
in place to instil airs and graces. I have found no evidence to indicate that young
women during this period were trained in declamation or oratory; the emphasis
seems to have been on music and drawing. College education for women in any
formal sense did not exist. There is an apocryphal story that as a very young
woman, Susanna Centlivre cross-dressed and followed a male friend into his
rooms at Cambridge, where she stayed and studied in disguise for several months
before finally getting caught. The incident is usually offered to illustrate
Centlivre’s youthful high spirits or the illicit love lives of women in theatre, but
it has struck me that its real subtext is that in order to obtain education, a woman
had to enter the university in drag.

Typically a girl’s primary education was handled privately at home on a
probationary basis, often by an indulgent father or male relative. If there was a
tutor, it was because he had been hired to teach a brother, so access to tutoring
was contingent upon how long the brother studied at home. This form of
teaching ran the twofold risk of alienating an ambitious young woman from her
mother, who was often without formal training, and of laying the groundwork for
a later sense of dependency on a primary male figure to give her access to
intellectual life. The system, such as it was, conspired to underscore her sense
that agency in the world of letters was only hers through the auspices of the male
mentor or guardian. As Vivien Jones sums up, the overwhelming effect of
available education for young middle-class women “was to reinforce rather than undermine obtaining gender definitions.”

In the absence of extensive education, role-modelling could provide certain compensations. For example, the playwright Edward Moore (1712–1757), whose formal education was actually quite limited, began life as a linen draper and wound up a playwright (his most successful plays, *The Foundling*, 1748, and *The Gamester*, 1758, were a standard part of the repertory well into the nineteenth century). He appears to have suffered none of the anxieties one might have expected in making the transition. As his biographer points out, “it was quite natural that the son of a minister who had written at least one small book, the grandson of another who had written a controversial pamphlet or two, and the nephew of a schoolmaster who had a book to his credit, should turn to letters as a means of livelihood.”

The career of the playwright Richard Cumberland (1732–1811) offers a useful insight into the way women within the family often were positioned in the course of a young man’s educational development. Cumberland’s maternal grandfather was the noted literary critic Dr. Richard Bentley (1662–1742). It is clear from Cumberland’s memoirs that the presence of this grandfather was a powerful one, but his early training in literature was actually managed by his mother, Bentley’s daughter Joanna. Cumberland wrote:

She had a vivacity of fancy and a strength of intellect in which few were her superiors: she read much, remembered well, and discerned acutely: I never knew the person who could better embellish any subject she was upon… All that son can owe to parent, or disciple to his teacher, I owe to her.

The complexity of Joanna’s contribution to Cumberland’s development is that she established an intellectual *conduit* from the grandfather, but did not attempt to establish herself autonomously as a woman writer or to move in intellectual circles outside of the family. Cumberland’s expectations of himself (to fulfil a Bentley tradition in letters) and of women (to service his professional development but not their own) are paradigmatic for a man of the age. In the chapters that follow, there are two documented incidents of his overt hostility to two other would-be women playwrights: Charlotte Lennox in 1769 and Frances Burney in 1779. These incidents suggest that Cumberland’s sense of world order did not include tolerating women either as colleagues or as competitors.

Formal schooling also led to connections outside the academy that were to offer important professional introductions and develop into a network later on. Cumberland, for example, was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and was subsequently employed by Lord Halifax as a secretary. Halifax, by chance, owned the country estate next door to David Garrick’s. Upon hearing that young Cumberland had written a play, Halifax marched over to see Garrick, play in hand, and insisted that Garrick read it in hopes that he would approve it for
production at Drury Lane. This at least got Cumberland to the top of the manuscript pile. After two days, Garrick returned the piece with the requisite apologies, but the connection had been made, and Cumberland was to follow it up to advantage in later years. His story contrasts vividly with Hannah Cowley’s, who submitted her first play to Garrick and then waited humbly for a year before daring to approach him for some kind of response.\footnote{Moore’s networking was rather more circuitous. In the 1740s he became a friend to Henry Brooke, a distinguished literary and political figure, who subsequently introduced him to George, Lord Lyttelton, himself member of a literary circle into which Moore was invited. Brooke is probably responsible for having introduced Moore to Thomas Arne, a composer at Drury Lane, and the brother of the well-known actress (and sometime playwright) Susanna Cibber, who in 1748 helped to make Moore’s first play a major success. It was in fact Arne who encouraged Moore to be a dramatic writer, and who probably introduced Moore to David Garrick.

The significance of these convoluted paths to success is not that women were barred outright from literary circles \textit{per se} (Hannah More was a familiar figure among the \textit{literati}), nor that they were prevented from making acquaintances in the theatre. But a young woman whose background was genteel enough to have included education was unlikely to be as mobile in public as this kind of networking made necessary. No matter how educated, she could never have become a secretary to anybody. Nor was it possible for her simply to be a hanger-on at coffee houses or the theatre itself, picking up ideas and gossip and a sense of the way theatre worked, without seriously compromising her reputation. Education was difficult, role-modelling was very difficult, but informal opportunistic networking was almost impossible if respectability and reputation were to be maintained.

By contrast, middle—and upper-class males in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries belonged to an educational tradition and had literary ancestors with whom they could identify They felt themselves mobile within a network of possibilities. This is not to imply that they did not meet with their share of setbacks, but it does suggest that they had more equipment at their disposal for surviving those setbacks. They operated from a sense of entitlement and mobility that was a gendered legacy.

The second area that had important consequences for a woman’s decision to be a playwright was the area of conduct. Barring formal prohibitions against women being playwrights, what kinds of messages were women getting about appropriate female conduct that might have prevented them from putting themselves forward, as professionals, as writers, as playwrights? In other words, even if the theatre had not presented itself as a place of dubious morality, were there deeper constraints which mitigated against “committing art” (to use Joanna Russ’s term) of any kind, and particularly an art form like theatre which required collaboration?\footnote{The second area that had important consequences for a woman’s decision to be a playwright was the area of conduct. Barring formal prohibitions against women being playwrights, what kinds of messages were women getting about appropriate female conduct that might have prevented them from putting themselves forward, as professionals, as writers, as playwrights? In other words, even if the theatre had not presented itself as a place of dubious morality, were there deeper constraints which mitigated against “committing art” (to use Joanna Russ’s term) of any kind, and particularly an art form like theatre which required collaboration?}
I am imagining now a young woman with a modest education who has seen some plays, and realizes that she is starting to spin scenes in her head. She wants to commit them to paper. She does. She conceives of taking them into London and submitting them to a manager. She does. The play is accepted. It is approved by the censor. She is given some suggestions for revision by the manager. She listens to it being read informally by actors in the green room, and discovers she has some revisions of her own. She is anxious to know how the scenery will look, how the piece will be cast, and what production date is assigned. She watches rehearsals, makes further cuts, strengthens and focuses a character in response to an actress’s inspired—interpretation. She consults with the manager about a scene that feels dead, no matter how it is played. She cuts the scene. The actor whose scene it was is upset. She inserts more lines for him in another section of the play, and he is mollified. It is opening night. One of the actors turns up drunk, but he sobers up in time to get his costume on and make his entrance. She sits with her family in the manager’s box; there is a ripple around the house as the news spreads that she is the author. She feels faces in the crowd turning in her direction. The play meets with approval. After the epilogue, there are shouts of approbation. The audience now turns en masse to applaud her in her box. Electrified, she nods her acknowledgement.

The obvious place to begin is with the conduct books. There is one extended passage which I will quote in full because it imaginatively counters opposition from young women with thwarted ambitions. The writer is Thomas Gisborne, M.A., and the year is 1797:

The sphere of domestic life, the sphere in which female exertion is chiefly occupied, and female excellence is best displayed, admits far less diversity of action, and consequently of temptations, than is to be found in the widely differing professions and employments into which private advantage and public good require that men should be distributed…

Young women endowed with good understandings but …disappointed at not perceiving a way open by which they, like their brothers, may distinguish themselves and rise to eminence; are occasionally heard to declare their opinion; that the sphere in which women are destined to move is so humble and so limited, as neither to require nor to reward assiduity; and under this impression, either do not discern, or will not be persuaded to consider, the real and deeply interesting effects which the conduct of their sex will always have on the happiness of society.

Gisborne goes on to name the three “particulars in which the effect of the female character is most important:”

First, in contributing daily and hourly to the comfort of husbands, of parents, of brothers and sisters, and of other relations, connections and friends, in the intercourse of domestic life, under the vicissitudes of
sickness and health, of joy and affliction. Secondly, in forming and improving the general manners, dispositions, and conduct of the other sex, by society and example. Thirdly, in modelling the human mind during the early stages of its growth, and fixing, while it is yet ductile, its growing principles of action; children of each sex being, in general, under maternal tuition during their childhood, and girls until they become women.

Are these objects insufficient to excite virtuous exertion? Let it then be remembered that there is another of supreme importance set before each individual; and one which she cannot accomplish without faithfully attending, according to her situation and ability, to those already enumerated; namely, the attainment of everlasting felicity, by her conduct during her present probationary state of existence.23

The conduct books of the eighteenth century have been carefully considered by feminist historians elsewhere; my particular contribution to this larger discussion is only to remark that if we imagine a young woman growing up with these kinds of expectations—stated or unstated—circulating around her, it is difficult to conceive of the circumstances that would allow her to leapfrog over this long line of people who, according to Gisborne, have a prior claim to her care and attention, and plunge into a deeply absorbing activity that not only demanded all of her resources but also required that she be away from home. It is interesting in this context how many women who do take the plunge are careful to frame their artistic activities in terms of family duty, providing for children, and so forth. Charlotte Lennox wrote Garrick in 1775: “I am not indifferent to theatrical rewards; could I obtain them, they would assist me to bring up my little boy and my girl…,”24 Strained family finances were a central motivating factor for many women who ventured into theatre (why else would anyone take on the risks involved?), but given the expectations around conduct for the period, it is small wonder that family emergency was a necessary precondition for many women to justify their venturing outside of the home in the first place. In any case, their determination to provide for their families constituted them as cultural males, but in the context of family survival, their willingness to undertake professional exposure was deemed to be an unfortunate and necessary sacrifice, more deserving of sympathy than of censure.

There is another area of discussion in Gisborne’s conduct book which gives us some clues about middle-class daughters and prevailing attitudes towards the theatre. It comes as something of a surprise to learn that although he is disturbed by what a young woman might hear by attending a public performance, he is even more concerned about the impact on her of doing amateur theatricals in a private home:

Among the usual causes by which female modesty is worn away, I know not one more efficacious, than the indelicate scenes and language to which women are familiarised at the [public] theatre…