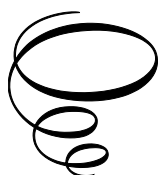# Displacing Female Bodies on the Eighteenth-Century Stage

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By

John Robbins

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To my parents, Nancy and Merritt Robbins;
my wife, Dr. Noor Hashem;
and Mark Lichtenberger, who opened my eyes.

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INTRODUCTION

AN UNATTAINABLE SUBSTANCE

> Not, Silence, for thine idleness I raise
> My silence-bounded singing in thy praise,
> But, for thy moulding of my Mozart's tune,
> Thy hold upon the bird that sings the moon,
>   Thy magisterial ways.
>   —*Alice Meynell, "To Silence"*[1]

> What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.
>   —*Ludwig Wittgenstein, final proposition of* Tractatus
>   Logico-Philosophicus[2]

In the years between 1770 and 1830, women playwrights in England enjoyed a virtually unprecedented degree of social and literary success. For the first time in European history, these women could support themselves and their families entirely by writing plays, and their works in turn exercised significant influence over the views of the inhabitants of London and the surrounding area, arguably the commercial and cultural capital of the world at that time.[3] Women who wrote plays intervened within contemporary philosophical debates, functioned as bell-wethers for major cultural movements such as suffrage and the codification of gender

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[1] Meynell, Alice. "To Silence". In *The Poems of Alice Meynell, Complete Edition*, ed. Wilfred Meynell (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2005), 132.

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness (London: Routledge, 1961), 151.

[3] Anne Mellor, for example, has argued that "women writers had an enormous – and hitherto largely uncredited – impact on the formation of public opinion in England between 1780 and 1830… I see the values of the private sphere associated primarily with women – moral virtue and an ethic of care – infiltrating and finally dominating the discursive public sphere during the Romantic era" (Anne Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England*, 1780-1830 (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), 11).

norms, and even swayed economic and political policy; all told, some of their plays were seen by many thousands of people, including the most prominent citizens and legislators of London.[4] Yet while these playwrights were attaining this elevated status, they were simultaneously some of the most marginalized figures in Romantic society: they were frequently compared to prostitutes in contemporary newspapers and theatrical reviews because of their perceived desire to place their "wares" on display before a paying audience, and were consequently shunned by much polite society; they were financially under the thumbs of male theater managers who controlled when, where, and how often their works would be staged – crucial components of economic success in the Romantic theater. Although a few experienced financial success and independence to a degree that would have been almost unimaginable even fifty years earlier, the vast majority labored unsuccessfully, unable to even get their plays an initial reading. A predominantly male theatrical establishment worked diligently to prevent too many women from entering its ranks at all levels, but especially as playwrights; those women who successfully established themselves as viable writers were the exception, not the rule, and their presence often served to reinforce the general perception that only a tiny minority of women were able to write works worthy of the stage.[5] With increased visibility and opportunities for Romantic women writers also came new systems of silencing and containment to delimit them: censorship laws which favored established male playwrights; social stigmas attached to female writing in general and play-writing in particular; and economic incentives against theaters risking productions by untested dramatists, which constituted the majority of women. A period of the greatest influence for a few was paradoxically also one of the most repressive for women writers as a whole, of continued exclusion masked behind outward success.

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[4] This assertion is based on the ability of the major playhouses such as Drury Lane and Covent Garden to hold upwards of 3,600 spectators from diverse backgrounds in a single evening, and the extremely long run, across many nights and often several seasons, of the most successful works by women from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
[5] Cf. Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1830* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.

This book argues that as a response to this paradox, women playwrights of the Romantic period turned to the concept of absence, extending its already-established eighteenth-century use by applying it to the stage. It asserts that Romantic women playwrights did not view absence as an inability to perform, but instead used it as a tool to comment on the social and political climate in which they were writing. They employed absence as a way of bringing into focus the silences, subjugations, and sacrifices of women, both on the stage and in English Romantic culture at large. This book argues that within their plays these figures created what I will term "negative spaces," in which they conspicuously staged the removal or absence of a variety of textual elements in order to demonstrate the inability of traditional dramatic forms to give voice to their concerns, and to shed light on social, economic, and political issues that would otherwise have remained invisible. Each of the four chapters that follows examines how women writers employed these "negative spaces" to stand for both symptom and mode of resistance across realms such as history, the body, science, and gender roles; focusing on their manipulation of these negative spaces offers a way of understanding both their constraints and their modes of recuperation.

The absence this book describes primarily takes two forms, illustrated by the above quotes by Meynell and Wittgenstein: it gives shape to that which it surrounds, defining by contrast that which is "present" or material; and it serves to draw attention to the unspeakable, to generate recognition of that which cannot be articulated in a way that is otherwise impossible. Both of these definitions are at play in the chapters which follow; the ability of absence to perform both functions simultaneously is part of what made it so compelling to Romantic women playwrights.

Although at first blush we might view absence as antithetical to the production of meaning, the lack or passive negation of existence in the material world (whether that is defined physically, as objects with substance, or metaphysically, as ideas, theories, or philosophical concepts), it need not necessarily take on this definition. Instead, we might understand it as serving a positive function: of working in conjunction with presence to generate meaning. Just as the Alice Meynell poem quoted above acknowledges that her singing is "silence-bounded," so each text exists

only insofar as it differentiates itself from that which surrounds it: both structuralist and post-structuralist thought insist, for example, that discrete units such as linguistic phonemes or musical notes only have meaning insofar as they are differentiated from other potential combinations of sounds or movements – as well as the gaps which distinguish them from that which comes before or after. The term "light," for example, has no value if it is not juxtaposed with "darkness;" the same holds true for all positive/negative binaries, such as sound/silence, movement/stillness, and full/empty. While we may study a play as a performed text, then, we cannot do so without taking into consideration the moments which it proceeds or follows – it is the rise of the curtain before, and its fall after, that bounds the play, differentiating it from the experience of everyday life and lending it its substance. In this way, absence, in a sense, underwrites all presence; they are two sides to the same coin, which could not exist without one another.

Yet the co-formation in which absence participates also bears within it the trace of that formation; within every act of production of a play, reading of a novel, or recitation of a poem, there is the specter of what has been forcibly excluded (or occluded) from its creation and manifestation. Tracing the removal of these elements allows us to reveal those features of the text that bear witness to aspects such as social or cultural exclusion, racial subjugation, or political suppression; aspects that are often (seemingly) effaced from the text itself. A familiar example lies in translation: when the Romantic playwright Elizabeth Inchbald translated plays by August von Kotzebue from German to English, she frequently altered some elements of the source text greatly, and omitted others entirely. In this case, it is often a simple matter to retrieve the original German play, compare the source text with Inchbald's translation to identify the missing or altered elements, and then form hypotheses as to why these may have been left out or changed. However, the kinds of texts this analysis is interested in treating – and the kind of reading hermeneutics it advocates – cannot be approached so simply; it is as though we are attempting to uncover those elements that have been left out, but without a source text to use as a point of comparison. Doing so requires a non-traditional approach: since it is impossible to directly view or interact with what is, strictly speaking, absent, any engagement with it

must necessarily be peripheral or indirect.[6] We must carefully examine those points at which the text bears the traces of removal (whether physically, as in an edited manuscript, or structurally, as with the omission of a significant political or social event in an expected context), and remain attuned to the multitude of ways in which such manifestations may occur. What I wish to discuss may therefore more correctly be termed "absenting" than absence: since we cannot see absence directly, but only its trace, we must examine the process of its removal in order to understand it. So, for example, attending to the material text of a play like Joanna Baillie's *The Bride* (1828) presents us with a colonial drama with a thinly veiled proselytization narrative; however, reading the play in light of Romantic censorship laws, the fraught status of women in the Romantic theater and publishing industries, and the position of women in Romantic society as a whole, as I do in the final chapter, reveals those social and political elements which have been pushed out of the text, and which only exist within it now in the form of the conspicuous void that they create. In attempting to understand those "absent" elements of a text, we can only study their reverberations, or echoes, rather than the source itself directly, which has been occluded.

Absence in this positive form is therefore related to Edmund Burke's conception of the sublime. After describing terror as "the common stock of everything that is sublime," Burke asserts that "All *general* privations are… terrible; *vacuity*, *darkness*, *solitude*, and *silence*;" each is capable of causing the viewer or participant to become unmoored, unable to encompass or delimit the scope of what is before him or her, and thus each leads to a terror that nevertheless generates a feeling of awe and sublimity.[7] He goes on to argue that

> if the pain and terror [of the sublime] are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and

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[6] Such peripheral engagement recalls the story of Medusa, whom Perseus slays by looking at through the mirrored shield provided by Athena.
[7] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1762), 48, 50; emphases in original.

troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror.[8]

Paradoxically, it is the simultaneous presence and absence of the sublime object together that produces delight: if the object is actually experienced as a threat, encountering it is merely paralyzing and horrible, leaving the subject in a state of mental breakdown;[9] it is only in being away from the object, in retaining the ability to view it while preserving one's safety, that the individual is able to experience this "delight." Burke rigidly separates this feeling of delight from what he terms "*positive* pleasure,"[10] which is within the scope of the beautiful; if the sublime and beautiful are opposed, then, it follows that this pleasure which is produced by the sublime might rightly be termed "negative."

The second quality of absence which this book articulates is encapsulated within Wittgenstein's conclusion to the *Tractatus*, which presents the possibility of absence having, paradoxically, a generative capacity, what Leslie Kane calls "the multidimensional, nonverbal expression of silence."[11] Rather than framing absence only as a void that is evacuated of meaning or the lack of substance, we can therefore also view it as a force capable of altering that which is around it precisely *because* of these characteristics. Like a black hole that produces no light, but draws that which surrounds it into itself, absence can exert a form of gravitational pull, radically changing the landscape around it. Kane notes the capacity of silence to convey depths of experience for which traditional language proves inadequate:

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[8] Ibid., 129.

[9] "In this case [being confronted by the sublime object] the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (41-42).

[10] Ibid., 127; emphasis mine.

[11] Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 13. It is important to note here that while I recognize that "silence," "absence," and "negative space" are distinct terms with significant variations between them, this study will view them as engaged in a dialogue with one another that productively contributes to our understanding of negation and absence as a whole, and will therefore draw from current theorizations of each.

> Thus speech, the characterizing signature of humanity, has been superseded by silence to communicate unspoken experience beyond the limitations of human consciousness, such as fear, longing, and death, as well as unspeakable experience beyond the comprehension of humanity such as the dehumanizing or bestial… the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of accusation, the eloquent silence of awe, the unnerving silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death illustrate by their unspoken response to speech that experiences exist for which we lack the word.[12]

By giving voice to these experiences, absence paradoxically enables representation itself. Conspicuously absent literary elements contain the potential to make readers attend all the more strongly to precisely those points at which they perceive gaps or moments of erasure. This status, paradoxically, presents such texts with the opportunity to "place" figures or concepts before the public eye which would otherwise be invisible or utterly silenced, such as moments of trauma or social critique.[13] While a play such as Joanna Baillie's *The Bride*, therefore, bears within itself the evidence of its forced removal from the English stage, this book argues that it simultaneously uses this "scarring" to highlight the fraught position of women in the Romantic theater. Bringing to attention the absent elements within a text allows a writer to precisely delineate and draw into focus to the boundaries of what may be expressed; to articulate which elements may be spoken about, and which must be, as Wittgenstein suggests, "pass[ed] over in silence." The gaps or fissures within a text are precisely those points which can shine light upon elements which cannot be otherwise shown, such as governmental censorship. For example, Thomas Crochunis has described how Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Massacre*

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[12] *The Language of Silence*, 13.

[13] This is not to assert, of course, that all texts contain all "absent" figures within them at all times; doing so would be akin to claiming absurdly that because no elephants are mentioned in *Hamlet*, the play must be about them indirectly. Instead, I am arguing that some works, especially dramas by women of the Romantic period, conspicuously foreground the absence of certain specific elements from their text for the purpose of making their reader aware of the textual caesura that their lack creates.

(1792), the subject of the third chapter, "exerted all the more pressure on readers… because the unlikelihood of its being staged or published in its era raised questions about what kinds of political discourses surrounding gender and revolution were possible."[14] Strictly speaking, such absence exists only within the mind of the observer; it cannot be created, only *imagined*. It therefore represents a site of representational and imaginative potentiality, in which the subject can populate this space with whatever he or she desires.

To better understand absence in this form we can relate it to the methodology of apophatic theology, which posits that God, because of His perfection, is unable to be described in positive terms, since these are necessarily inadequate; therefore, He can only be defined by what He is not. Apophatic theology thus employs negative attributes as a way of approximating a description of God: for example, He is not bounded in space and time; He is unlimited in His power; He is beyond comprehension; He is beyond linguistic description. The goal of these non-descriptions is not to describe the deity directly, but to draw attention to the inability of language to provide adequate understandings of God, leading the believer to the realization that God is above and beyond all language, and that true knowledge can only come through the *via negativa*. Negative language here takes on a generative value; it becomes the sole venue by which that which is inherently indescribable may, paradoxically, be accounted for.

Recent theorizations of absence in art and visual theory also shed light on this generative feature of absence. Theorists in this field describe "negative space" as the area that exists around or between the object or objects in an image. It stands in contrast to the "positive space" occupied by those objects that initially attract the viewer's attention: so, for example, in a traditional portrait, the individual shown occupies the positive space, while the space behind him or her is termed the negative space. Nevertheless, negative space is necessary to define the area around the image; without this surrounding space, the concept of "image" itself would have no meaning, as there would be no differentiation between its

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[14] Crochunis, Thomas. "Pre- and Postrealist Dramaturgy: Women Writers, Silence, Speech, and Trauma". In *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed. Bonnie Nelson and Catherine Burroughs (New York: Modern Language Association, 2010), 336-47 (343).

different components. Rather than representing a lack, negative space actually provides definition, and is the condition of possibility for representation itself. As Alan Fletcher notes, "Space is substance. Cézanne painted and modeled space. Giacometti sculpted by '*taking the fat off space*'. Mallarmé conceived poems with absences as well as words. Ralph Richardson asserted that acting lay in pauses... Isaac Stern described music as '*that little bit between each note - silences which give the form.*'"[15]

At the same time, visual theory has shown how foreground and background can often intrude upon one another, blending together and blurring the lines that would seem to separate the two.[16] Consider, for example, the famous Rubin's Vase image:[17]

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[15] Alan Fletcher, *The Art of Looking Sideways* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 370; emphases in original. See also Yve-Alain Bois' *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) and chapter four of Thomas Puttfarken's *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[16] Cf. Richard Shiff's essay "Constructing Physicality" in *Art Journal* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 42-47, esp. 44. One of the undercurrents of this book is that in the same way, by conspicuously drawing their position as "background" elements into focus, women playwrights were able to become a part of the Romantic theater's foreground.

[17] Image taken from Dilmen, Nevit, "Face or Vase ATA 01." Wikimedia Commons, 11 August 2011.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Face_or_vase_ata_01.svg#filelinks.
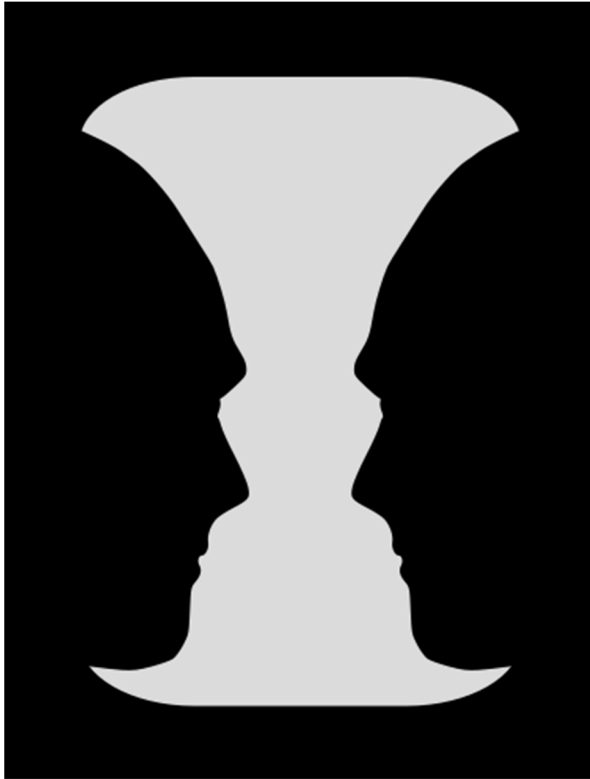
(Fig. Intro-1)

The image produces what is known as the "figure-ground effect," a phenomenon in which the observer is unable to distinguish whether the faces are the image and the vase is the background, or vice-versa. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible for a viewer to perceive both of these objects at once: most individuals vacillate repeatedly between seeing the vase and seeing the faces, their vision alternating back and forth as their eyes attempt to reconcile the duality. However, each of the following propositions is equally true: that the image depicts a vase (defining the vase as the positive space and the faces as the negative space); that the image depicts two faces (defining the faces as the positive space and the vase as the negative space); and that the image depicts both a vase and two

faces at the same time, even if we cannot perceive them simultaneously. In this image, then, what is "absent" in one sense is shown, paradoxically, to have a shape with which it coexists. Such an example illustrates the difficulty of attempting to firmly demarcate presence from absence: the two terms alternate repeatedly, even coming to overlap at points, in ways that are not wholly reconcilable with our visual and cognitive capabilities. Indeed, in order to adequately comprehend the scope of the image, one must turn outside of the visual realm, to language, to describe what is going on; relying on vision alone fails us. Focusing on negative space in an image like the Rubin's Vase urges attention to the relationship between that which we would ordinarily perceive as "present" and that which we term "absent," and draws into question the stability of these terms.[18] It emphasizes the relationality between these terms, the degree to which presence and absence co-exist and are interrelated, and are mutually constitutive of one another. That which is supposedly devoid of meaning becomes interchangeable with the space of the so-called positive "image," demonstrating the instability of these distinctions and imbuing what had been considered "absent" with a form and shape of its own, along with a capacity for itself generating figuration.

The idea that absence is paradoxically able to exert power by its very insubstantiality is not new to modern visual theorists, however, having been well-established since the Restoration and early eighteenth century in fields ranging from poetic discourse and literary criticism, to artistic representation, and even in medical and scientific texts. Henry Fielding describes the subject at length in his delightfully witty "Essay on Nothing" (1743), in which he lambasts the airs of contemporary society by (half) facetiously declaring that "Nothing contains so much dignity as Nothing… the world came from Nothing… Nothing is the end as well as the beginning of all things."[19] In one remarkable trajectory, the Earl of Rochester, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson all take up the theme of

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[18] For a more detailed discussion of this conceptual blending, see Jeroen Stumpel's essay "On Grounds and Backgrounds: Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting" in *Simiolus* 18, no. 4 (1988), 219-43.

[19] Fielding, Henry. "An Essay on Nothing". In *Miscellanies* (London: A. Millar, 1833), 240, 244, and 243.

absence, identified variously as nothingness or silence.[20] Rochester's 1679 poem "Upon Nothing" presents "Nothing" as the originary force out of which all "Things" arose, existing even before time, substance, and place: "Ere Time and Place were, Time and Place were not, / When primitive Nothing something straight begot."[21] "Nothing" for the poet is actually the groundwork upon which all that exists rests and from whence it arises; although humans and animals have the capacity for generation and self-reproduction, they are all merely imitative of Nothing's originary creation. The poet goes on to describe how Nothing was betrayed by its creation "Something," which "from fruitful Emptiness's Hand / Snatch'd Men, Beasts, Birds, Fire, Air, and Land… With Form and Matter, Time and Place did join; / Body, thy Foe, with thee did Leagues combine / To spoil thy peaceful Realm, and ruin all thy Line."[22] Nothing is assisted in its reclamation only by Time, which draws all in existence back toward the state of nothingness from which it originally arose. Alexander Pope picked up Rochester's theme, explicitly signaling his imitation of the earlier poet in his "Earl of Rochester: On Silence" (1712). Pope's poem describes Silence in terms nearly identical to Rochester's Nothing: it existed before all else, is the rightful place of fool and wit alike, and now allies itself with other forces of decay. Yet Pope's Silence lacks Nothing's agency: instead of actively generating Something, as in Rochester's formulation,[23] Silence is overthrown by forces that spring of their own accord, *ex nihilo*:

> Thine was the sway ere Heav'n was form'd, or earth,
> Ere fruitful thought conceiv'd Creation's birth,
> Or midwife word gave aid, and spoke the infant forth.

Then various elements against thee join'd,
In one more various animal combin'd,
And framed the clam'rous race of busy humankind.[24]

By 1779, however, Samuel Johnson had returned to absence the agency it had possessed for Rochester. His gloss of Rochester's poem in *The Lives of the English Poets* takes into consideration Pope's portrayal, but insists, "in examining this performance, 'Nothing' must be considered as having not only a negative but a kind of positive signification; as I need not fear thieves, I have *nothing*, and *nothing* is a very powerful protector. In the first part of the sentence it is taken negatively, in the second it is taken positively, as an agent."[25] Johnson emphasizes that Nothing is both positive and negative: it is simultaneously a declaration of lack, and an assertion that this lack can have very real material consequences (e.g. preventing robbery). As a structure which is capable of having a "positive signification" that generates meaning, Johnson's definition of absence as containing two natures within itself is ultimately one which Romantic playwrights would come to employ as well.

The eighteenth-century scientific and artistic communities similarly shared an interest in the power of absence or voids. Experiments in vacuums abounded, for example, as did representations of these in art. As early as 1659, Robert Boyle had begun conducting experiments in which he suffocated birds or other small animals by placing them in a vacuum and depriving them of oxygen with an air pump. Although initially the purview of a select few wealthy scientists, by the middle of the eighteenth century such experiments had become commonplace, and were often performed for large paying audiences in major metropolitan centers, and even in smaller provinces by wandering showmen, thus giving them wide exposure among the public.[26] This procedure is famously captured in

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[24] Pope, Alexander. "Earl of Rochester: On Silence". In *The British Poets*, vol. 2 (London: C. Whittingham, 1822), 210; lines 4-9.

[25] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets* (London: Jones and Company, 1825), 60; emphases in original.

[26] Judy Egerton, *The British Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 337-8. See also Paul Elliott, "The Birth of Public Science in the English Provinces: Natural Philosophy in Derby, c. 1690-1760" in *Annals of Science* 57, no. 1 (January 2000), 61-100.

Joseph Wright of Derby's 1768 *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*:[27]

(Fig. Intro-2)

Deprivation is the painting's central focus: it is not even air itself, the most insubstantial of elements, which is causing the creature's death, but its *lack*. The entire setting is framed in darkness except for one central, sourceless light, creating the effect of an encroaching blackness, an extinguishing of energy that mirrors the gradual death of the cockatoo in the vacuum. Because the scientist is looking out of the painting, at the viewer, he or she begins in a way to become him- or herself the subject of the experiment, that which is succumbing to the effects of deprivation, of the absence of air, before which the image of the room is quickly fading. The void around which the experiment takes place is ultimately a

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[27] Wright of Derby, Joseph. National Gallery, London. Accessed 25 October 2022. Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3751913.

constitutive element of the painting as a whole, an intrinsic aspect of its construction.

This book asserts that Romantic women playwrights picked up on this preexisting trajectory and altered it by translating absence as it had been understood in these diverse realms to the English stage. The dual nature of absence, as potentially both constructive and generative, made it the ideal medium for these figures to comment on social and political issues which belied conventional representation. Constructing negative spaces in which they could play out and foreground subjects that otherwise evaded direct depiction before a reading or viewing public allowed Romantic women writers to respond in a variety of ways to newly emerging issues such as dramatic censorship, the French Revolution and the threat (or hope) of its spread to England, the economic exclusion of women, and challenges to established gender norms among writers. These playwrights began employing negative spaces on a large scale during this period because conventional representation so often proven inadequate to address these issues. Women of the Romantic period were especially interested in appropriating and applying these conceptions of absence to the stage, as they offered the possibility of expressing a voice in areas in which they were often denied one entirely. Drama emerged as the site in which these figures shaped the "negative spaces" I am describing, since, as it has been traditionally viewed as the most material of genres, it offered the possibility of foregrounding a body onstage, or of staging the conspicuous removal of a body from the public eye; this gesture was particularly powerful when it was a *female* body being displaced in this way.[28]

It is important to note that this analysis is not arguing that Romantic women playwrights were the first figures to use absence this way on the stage: just as a trajectory of treating absence as containing a generative potential had been well-established since the Restoration, this

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[28] It is worth noting, for example, that the term *obscene*, denoting that which is too vile to be shown or discussed publicly, comes from the Latin root *obscaena*, literally "off-stage," indicating the close relationship between censorship, social control, and the stage as a medium for enforcing them ("obscene, *adj*." *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press).
http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/Entry/129823#eid34113151 (accessed March 15, 2013).

approach can certainly be found in works by earlier playwrights as well. Like Romantic playwrights, women writing for the stage throughout the Restoration and the early eighteenth century found absence a particularly fertile site for exploration. As early as Aphra Behn's 1677 play *The Rover*, for example, we find the powerlessness of female characters conspicuously put on display: Angelica and Hellena are both subject to potential social ruination by the (roguish, yet also having real consequence) machinations of Willmore, who insists on enjoying the pleasures of sex without being bound to the social and economic obligations of marriage, and Florinda is threatened with gang rape at the hands of Blunt and Frederick simply because she is a woman in the wrong place at the wrong time. I am not contesting a rigid trajectory, or that there is an *absence of genealogy* for negative spaces during the eighteenth century; rather, earlier writers like Behn allow us to track instead the *genealogy of absence* during this time. While women had been using different techniques for modes of resistance throughout the history of their writing drama, I am arguing that during the Romantic period this engagement became *consolidated* into the manipulation and appropriation of absence. Women playwrights of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began to foreground this concept and feature it much more centrally in their works in a way that it had not been before, and it became their primary mode of engagement with their readers and audiences and with contemporary issues of culture, history, and politics. The history of Romantic drama by women is firmly situated within a lineage of ideas drawing from a diverse set of scientific, poetic, and critical discourses, notably including earlier dramas.

Additionally, this analysis is not asserting that these writers were self-consciously generating what we might call a "theory of absence," collaborating together to form it, or even referring to their own works in these terms.[29] They did not use the term themselves, or explicitly articulate that they viewed their individual writings as contributing to a larger discourse on the subject. Nor did every female playwright use absence in this way: it is easy to find numerous counterexamples in the canon of Romantic plays by women. However, this way of constructing meaning is

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[29] Indeed, Ellen Donkin has noted the striking lack of community among these playwrights during the years between 1776 and 1830 as one of their primary hindrances from greater social and economic advancement.

foregrounded in many of the works of the most prominent female playwrights of the period. The term "absence" is therefore one that I am retroactively using as a tool for talking about a larger pattern based on a framework compiled from the works of contemporary theorists from a variety of disciplines and from the plays themselves. I use understandings of "absence" and "negative space" as a way to retroactively describe (although I hope not *ascribe*) the movement from a positive to a negative framework of representationality which was taking place in this period as a response to the cultural, social, economic, and political factors on which this study focuses.

In adopting a "negative" approach to these playwrights, this book goes against the grain of the traditional narrative of Romantic drama by women, which has presented these figures in largely "positive" terms. Starting in the 1970's, criticism of Romantic drama has followed a track of roughly linear progression. Articles and books from this period usually operated under the assumption that drama from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was simply "bad" or "mental theater" that was not worthy of the stage, and even then only examined plays written by canonical male poets, largely omitting women and professional playwrights from serious consideration. The result was a privileging of poetry, especially the lyric, as the preferred genre of analysis. The late 1980's and early 1990's saw an emergence of critics such as Gregory Kucich, Jeffrey Cox, and Alan Richardson who began to question these inherited assumptions. Examining the cultural apparatus of the theater and its contemporary cultural moment, they argued that Romantic drama was actually worth serious engagement: it was simply that dramatists, especially the canonical male poets, abandoned (or attempted to bypass entirely) the theater because it wasn't a fit medium for the subjects they wanted to convey.[30] Their scholarship focused on the cultural apparatus of the theater: it was noisy; catered to the whims of the audience; was hopelessly political; and demanded spectacle on a large scale, such as animals onstage, elaborate costuming, and even fireworks or huge water tanks in which to situate what were termed "aqua-dramas." These critics

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[30] See, especially, Alan Richardson's *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

argued that the subtleties of thought that "high" Romantic writers wished to express found no place in such a medium, and thus these figures so often turned to the closet as a refuge. Such a formulation set up an implicit hierarchy that cast aspersions on those who wrote expressly for the stage, framing them as pandering to "low" culture and not worth serious study.

Recent criticism has made great strides in leading to a re-evaluation this hierarchy, drastically revising our understanding of the theatrical landscape of the Romantic period. While acknowledging the volatile and chaotic state of the Romantic theater, critics such as Susan Bennett, Catherine Burroughs, Lilla Maria Crisafulli, Ellen Donkin, and Keir Elam have demonstrated the large extent to which plays, both staged and closeted, contributed vitally to Romantic culture, and their great impact upon canonical literature from the period as well. A prominent feature of this new "wave" of criticism has been a focus on women playwrights and actresses, charting their significant contributions to Romantic theater. It has shown how women were some of the most successful figures in Romantic theatrical culture, and that studying them enables us to revise the traditional narratives of theater history in order to better appreciate the contributions of these individuals. While the period's theatrical establishment imposed severe restraints upon these figures because of their gender, they operated within this framework to provide unique commentary on social and political issues such as slavery, child labor, the American and French Revolutions, capitalism, and urbanity. Women playwrights did not write toned-down works that were less thoughtful or philosophically sophisticated than those of their male counterparts; rather, they commented on and shaped the social and political landscape around them, drew attention to the permeability of binaries between public/private and masculine/feminine, and offered revisions of the period's understanding of historiography, all while managing to avoid the threat of the censor and crafting works that would, at the same time, please diverse audiences across multiple settings with widely varying sets of expectations.[31]

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[31] Ellen Donkin describes the multiplicity of limiting factors that inhibited the production of drama by women during the period, including male theater managers eager to take advantage of their precarious positions, the lack of a support network, and prejudices against women writing or acting in drama at all. Given these

While I certainly don't want to return to the views of earlier critics who framed Romantic drama, especially that by women, in pejorative terms, I would, however, like to question the extent to which these works universally understood themselves as participating in the kinds of positive (or, to put it another way, affirmative) discourse that sympathetic critics suggest. This work argues that Romantic women playwrights certainly did innovatively intervene within the debates described above – however, it asserts that they did so primarily through techniques which focused on removal rather than representation; of rendering conspicuous the voids which they created as a way of gesturing toward that which cannot be articulated. At the same time, in focusing on absence as my critical term, I don't want to repeat contentions that privilege the closet as the space in which meaning was produced, to the denigration of plays that appeared onstage. Indeed, while closet dramas occupy the majority of my attention in this study, staged plays, such as Hannah Cowley's *The Fate of Sparta*, were also vitally important, and thus form crucial components of my argument.

Instead of taking its cue for focusing on absence from literary criticism on the Romantic period, this book looks toward recent theorizations of the Early Modern stage for its model.[32] This body of criticism has strongly insisted on the unique position of drama to give voice to that which is otherwise inarticulable, while nevertheless maintaining and preserving the inexpressibility of what it describes.[33] Discussing non-traditional speech acts during the Early Modern period

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impediments, it is astonishing that women playwrights not only succeeded at all, but were able to produce works with such tremendous impact. For a more detailed discussion of these factors, see Donkin's *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[32] I also draw from discussions of Samuel Beckett's stagecraft, such as Ciaran Ross' *Beckett's Art of Absence: Rethinking the Void* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and Les Essif's *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and His Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[33] This is not to assert, however, that these Early Modern dramatists anticipated Romantic writers in employing absence as a critical framework on a large scale. While, like eighteenth-century playwrights, they nevertheless employed it to varying degrees, it did not become consolidated as a response to a nexus of political, economic, and cultural constraints until the Romantic period.

(such as stuttering, slurring, nonsense constructions, and, crucially, remaining silent), Carla Mazzio argues that while these less-recognizable expressions are often eclipsed by an understanding of the Renaissance as an era of intense eloquence,

> at the same time, such generalizations have had the power to overwrite an alternative history of involuted speech forms lodged in language practices, textual formations, and cultural phenomena that seemed, to many in the sixteenth century, antithetical to individual and communal coherence. This alternative history can enable us to see literary innovation from an 'inarticulate' perspective, where playwrights, in particular, fostered alternative forms of communal involvement precisely by staging, rather than burying or disavowing, such involutions of the word.[34]

Mazzio goes on to insist that

> …incoherence was not just the bad 'other' to rhetorical fluency or plain speech but also as a site where meanings and emotions disavowed by dominant cultural formations could be voiced and thought through. Rather than simply asking how individuals and communities shaped their world in and through the power of rhetoric or even ordinary language, it is important to ask what it might have meant, on both the dramatic and the historical stage, to speak indistinctly: to mumble to oneself or to God; to speak unintelligibly to a lover, a teacher, a neighbor, or a court of law; to experience verbal incoherence in situations of passionate extremity or cognitive superflux, or to be utterly dumbfounded in the face of new words, persons, situations, and things.[35]

Under this formulation, moments of inarticulateness (or absence), on the stage in particular, point toward breaks or gaps within structures such as the law, economics, historiography, or even more totalizing frameworks such as society or discourse as a whole. Absence is not just a lack, but capable of having a semiotic function through the gap in signification that it creates. By showcasing, and indeed generating, such points of rupture,

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[34] Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 1.
[35] Ibid., 2.

inarticulacy (whether that takes the form of mangled or malformed utterance, or, more radically, the total lack of articulation) engenders the possibility of opening up a space for entry into, and therefore revision of, these underlying structures.

Since this study treats that which can only be defined by exclusion, it likewise rejects a strict adherence to any one methodological framework, instead drawing from components of many. For example, from theorizations of trauma this study takes attention to those moments in which language breaks down because it proves inadequate to address the scale of what is before the observer, resulting in a failure to process the experience at the time of its occurrence. [36] Like victims of social or personal trauma (although obviously to a severely restricted extent), Romantic women playwrights attempted to re-enact life experiences which belied direct representation by displacing engagement with them to other realms. The mechanisms of trauma theory, such as attending to the trace of the event because the actual experience has been erased from conscious recognition, are essential to understanding works by these figures. Likewise, from psychoanalysis the study takes the prerogative to elicit what is unspeakable for a given play through its seemingly hidden exclamations. The negative spaces that these writers created functioned on the cultural plane like dreams, which expose indirectly that which cannot be articulated by the conscious mind. The promise of dreamwork, and negative spaces, is that such indirect approaches may allow the individual to engage with subjects that would ordinarily be beyond his or her reach. From postcolonial and feminist theory, it takes attention to the categorization of women along the lines of the Other, and their subsequent displacement, often even within their own works. In her discussion of the

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[36] See, for example, Cathy Caruth's observation that trauma is "always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.). In other words, one is able to delimit the event which cannot be spoken of through adopting a circumambulating approach that traces the outlines of what has come both before and after; by "permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (11; emphases in original).

ways in which women are "cut" from representations of North African society and of her own methodology in *Algeria Cuts*, Ranjana Khanna describes how

> the feminist analysis in this study, then, insists on looking at the cuts through representation, sometimes sewing them together and other times acknowledging the pertinence of the gape in such a way as to give the possibility of hope through acknowledging that very impossibility. In *Algeria Cuts*, women are shown to elude and confound the dominant structures of colonial and postcolonial representation present in art, film, literature, politics, and law – even when, and perhaps especially when, the figure of woman seems most present.[37]

Attention to these gaps within both history and text, as well as the paradoxical construction of women as simultaneously present and absent, is woven throughout the chapters that follow.

Moreover, since absence necessarily occurs outside of conventional spaces of representation, the texts on which this work focuses each foreground alternative modes of engagement with their subject matter. Thus, most of the plays the following chapters examine remained unstaged during their own periods, or were written expressly for the closet; those that were written for the stage depict women in ways that trouble or complicate the standard techniques by which female characters are represented. Nick Salvato has described closet drama "not as a designation of a genre with distinct boundaries but as a conceptual tool that can fruitfully guide an analysis of texts with complex relationships to drama and theater; and part of what makes the tool a fruitful one is the elasticity, rather than the givenness, of closet drama as an indexical term."[38] Similarly, describing Joanna Baillie's closet dramas, Susan Bennett insists that Baillie's "response [to the difficulties of having her dramas staged] is not, most definitely not, a retreat into the closet, but an imagining of what might better work as a dynamic theatrical experience to meet the ideas

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[37] Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 6-7.
[38] Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 4.