

Women's Transnational Theatre Networks, 1789-1914

WOMENTHEATRENET

What would a history of nineteenth-century western theatre look like if the work of women were placed at its centre? WOMENTHEATRENET poses this fundamental question to effect a paradigm shift in the historiography of mainstream western theatre in the long nineteenth century.

The current state of knowledge suggests that women have always been active in the theatre, but their work has been obscured by gendered and classed hierarchies of aesthetic value, and entrenched practices of documentation. The agency and innovation of women's work is minimised, and women's cultural networks regarded as subordinate to networks of powerful male practitioners. This state of the art is exacerbated by the dominance of national theatre histories and elite institutions in most theatre historiography.

WOMENTHEATRENET will make women's theatre work visible through a series of exemplary case studies of the interlinked theatrical cultures of Britain, Ireland, Australia and India, which will investigate and make visible transnational female-centred networks of creative and intellectual exchange. These case studies will be complemented by a study of women's exchanges and networks in Britain and France. The research team, together with a scholarly network of invited Visiting Scholars, will analyse the conditions of women's theatre work as a form of cultural citizenship, within practices of exchange, circulation, translation, and adaptation, in mainstream commercial theatre and 'paratheatrical' practices.

Research Theme 1: Mainstream and popular theatre

WOMENTHEATRENET is centred on women's theatrical activity in the popular theatre. This starting point is derived from the conclusions of the PI's field-defining work, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (2005). Instead of trying to squeeze women's work into conventional categories of (masculinist) aesthetic value, WOMENTHEATRENET hypothesises that the power and influence of women's work lies specifically in the popular and mainstream (or commercial) theatre. Looking at women's work in popular genres requires the scholarly gaze to move from a consideration of distinctiveness located in a concept of genius, instead to recognise the popular as the principal driver of theatre activity in the period. Definitions of 'popular' are much contested and debated, as many of the terms used to describe the products of popular culture combine apparently neutral, documentary descriptions of cultural practices and products with moral and aesthetic judgements of cultural products and their consumers. The project identifies women's transgressive strategies of cultural production within the constraints of the popular culture. This approach is not without risk of essentialising 'masculine genius' and 'feminine populism' as binary opposites, further entrenching the marginality of women in theatre. However, this theme is designed to make this binary visible, and the ideological hierarchies of aesthetic value, and genius, to challenge the focus on 'exceptional' women.

Research Theme 2: Paratheatrical performance

WOMENTHEATRENET adapts the term 'paratheatrical' from mid-20th-century avant-garde practices and applies it to a range of women's performance practices which move beyond, or exist beside, work in theatres. There is growing interest in amateur performance (Newey 1998; Cochrane 2001; Nicholson *et al.*, 2018; Wagner, 'Performing Citizenship,' ERC2020): this expanded concept of theatrical activity beyond the professional, and with specific reference to the work in relation to regimes of femininity in the period, allows us to see women's non-professional work in its ideological as well as aesthetic contexts.

Looking at women's work in a wide range of activities offers an innovative theatre history in two ways, each constitutive of the other. Spreading the net of what constitutes 'performance' and 'theatre' more widely enables a more capacious understanding of women's work within the contexts available to them in this period; concomitantly, focusing on women's work in paratheatrical activities offers a revisionist understanding of theatrical practices in the period. While we accept that twentieth-century avant-garde performance practices destabilised notions of 'theatre,' and the scholarly discipline of Performance Studies similarly questioned the categories of 'theatre' and 'drama,' there is a tendency to see these terms as stable in pre-20th-century theatre. However, analysis of the women's work in the paratheatrical upsets this notion and offers a further way to recognise the influence of women's theatre work. In the case of women's paratheatrical activities for events such as pageants, fairs, bazaars, and fêtes, and in the use of performance in political agitation, issues of place and nation were articulated through domestic and folk forms which WOMENTHEATRENET regards as versions of 'imagined community.'

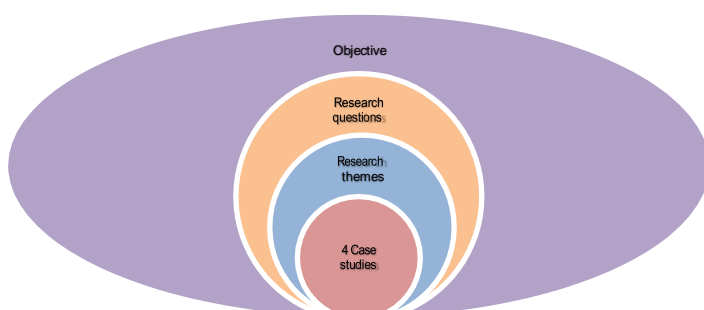
Research Theme 3: Cosmopolitanism and Mobility

RT3 situates women's work in translation and adaptation as forms of cosmopolitan and transnational exchange. WOMENTHEATRENET will trace imperial and diasporic networks through women's physical and textual travel. Attention to the ways in which women writers were mediators or agents of transnational exchanges between and beyond national theatrical cultures will offer further challenges to monolithic and institutional historiographies of national theatre, and will be significant in framing the work of women writers who were themselves often in an uneasy relationship with their cultural and political citizenship.

Cosmopolitanism is understood as a philosophy which emphasises interest in and respect for the national 'Other' and dovetails with an understanding of transnationalism in the long nineteenth century as a 'category of social relations that unfold in tension with and in contradiction to the assertion of national sovereignties' (Osterhammel 2009). WOMENTHEATRENET explores how these two positions might be articulated in and through a broad range of women's writing for performance, obviously including translation and adaptation, but also investigating the ways in which women's work in popular theatre and paratheatrical activities contribute to the concepts of circulation, mediation, and exchange which underpin the research in WOMENTHEATRENET as a whole.

Case Studies:

These are chosen to address the absence of women in national histories, and then to use evidence of women's theatre work to push beyond national narratives, by examining women's transnational networks of creativity and exchange. They are chosen as examples of the ways in which international theatre circuits linked Australia, Britain, and Asia (and the USA) in the nineteenth-century (Deacon, 2008). Three of the case studies (Ireland, Australia, India) examine this flow and exchange within the material and ideological structures of British imperialism; the fourth case study examines exchanges between the metropolitan centres of London and Paris as both competitive, and mutually constitutive, theatrical centres.



The objective of WOMENTHEATRENET is delivered by a set of case studies, which will organise the mass of data we expect to uncover. The research questions and research themes are applied across all four case studies, to mitigate against the high risk posed by the geographic and cultural scope of the project, and to enable meaningful comparative data sets and qualitative analyses.

Case Study 1: London-Sydney-Melbourne: How did women's theatre work travel? How did women participate in the construction of a colonial theatre culture and cultural nationhood in Australia? These questions will be considered within the framework of an acknowledgement of the genocidal impact of European invasion of Australia, and its influence in the theatre (eg Geoghegan's *The Currency Lass* turns on a racist joke). While Jordan (2003) notes that theatrical activity was one of the first activities of the British settlement [invasion] of Australia, there is no extended study of women's work in establishing this theatrical culture, although there are essays which start to lay out the terrain in relation to Eliza Winstanley and May Holt (Newey 2003; Woollard 2017; Fotheringham 2020). Major works by Brisbane (1991), Kelly (2009), and Bush-Bailey & Flaherty (2022) challenge nationalist histories by pointing to the transnational circuits and exchanges of Australian theatre in the nineteenth-century, but there is no overview of women as creators and producers of Australian theatrical culture in the period. The PI will develop a monograph from this case study.

Case Study 2: Dublin-London: The focus here will be on the position of women within the context of the uneasy legal and cultural relationships between the two nations in the period, and the double invisibility – of sex and ethnicity - faced by Irish women. There is very little scholarship which offers an overview of the work of Irish women the nineteenth century theatre such as Clotilde Graves and Anna Maria Hall; their presence has hitherto been subsumed into 'English' drama. *The Golden Thread* (Clare, McDonagh, Nakase, 2021), a collection of essays on Irish women playwrights from 1716 to 2016, starts to address this deficit, but accentuates the need for a sustained and comprehensive study of the work of women in Irish theatre, and Irish women in transnational theatre in the nineteenth century.

Case Study 3: London-Calcutta-Bombay (naming from the period): this case study will focus on performance cultures of Bombay and Calcutta, as cities of the geopolitical global South. Theatre histories of colonised India have focused on the development a national theatre for India, particularly in response to the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act of 1876. Understandably – as is also the case in Australian and Irish theatre history – scholarship focuses on the development of an independent and nationalist Indian theatre, independent of British imperial power and the English language as a tool of that power (Mitra 2015; Chatterjee 2007; Bhatia 2004). Recent work by Nicholson (2021) on Parsi theatre in Bombay, Balme on touring circuits (2019), and Pulugurtha on Kolkata theatre (2013) open out the discussion of the relationships between Indian theatre and global theatre practices; Pulugurtha in particular focusing on Mrs Bristow and Esther Leach as Calcutta actor-managers in the early nineteenth century. By working with concepts of circulation, exchange and adaptation, WOMENTHEATRENET acknowledges the violent power imbalance of imperialism, but seeks to make visible the activity of the many women working within and despite these imperial structures.

Project Activities

Archival discovery and source analysis: these are the foudation of the research and will operate cumulatively and iteratively throughout the project. Archival recovery will be approached a) archival searching to establish a comprehensive index of women's theatre work in the target cities of the

case studies. We will recover and discover evidence of women's work in and about the theatre, including translation, adaptation, paratheatrical writing, theatre theory, direction and management, performance; b) feminist historiographic approaches which pick up and collate data from traces, involving the investigation of absences and aporia; and with a focus on the familial, the intimate, the domestic, and the archive more generally overlooked by preceding scholarship.

Colloquia: The PI has secured commitment from a core of leading researchers with expertise in theatre historiography, women's writing, and theatres of empire. These Visiting Scholars will contribute their research expertise to the project through three colloquia (in person, Years 2-4) and a final open-call Conference (Year 5). The Visiting Scholars will present their current work in relation to the broader themes of the project, with a particular focus on identifying and investigating areas of collaboration.

Practice-research: We will work with theatre company Scary Little Girls (SLG) on a selection of playscripts in a studio exploration of the embodied aspects of women's theatre writing. We will put sections of plays on their feet in intensive developmental workshops, in order to explore performance dynamics (embodied character, space, sound, vocality). The project team and the network of Visiting Scholars will observe, participate, offer research and reference information, work on dramaturgy, offer advice on language and translation, and do visual research to support performers' creative exploration and play with these scripts. The project team will take insights from this exploration into their editorial framing of the project anthology of plays to demonstrate the playability and teachability of women's playwriting to the 21st century industry and the academy.

Project Deliverables

WOMENTHEATRENET will produce:

- 3 monographs
- edited collection of essays
- script anthology

The PI will produce a major monograph on the topic of *Women's Theatrical Empires*. The PDRFs will each produce a monograph from their work on CS 2 and 3 respectively. The PI and PDRFs will edit a collection of essays generated through the collaborative strand of the project, with contributions from team members, Visiting Scholars, ECRs, and PhD students.