

BATTLE OF THE SEXES ONSTAGE: EXPLORATIONS OF CHANGING
GENDER ROLES BY FOUR AMERICAN WOMEN
PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE 1910S-1930S

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014

ABSTRACT

Battle of the Sexes Onstage: Explorations of Changing Gender Roles by Four American Women Playwrights of the 1910s-1930s analyzes plays by Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, and Dawn Powell in order to discover how these playwrights dealt with changing female social roles throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. To provide a context for analysis, the first chapter includes an overview of major events in those decades that shaped women's rights and background information on each playwright whose work is discussed.

The plays are categorized according to the marital status of their protagonists in order to compare how each playwright portrays characters in similar situations. Rachel Crothers's *Mary the Third* (1923) serves as an introduction with three different female characters from three generations with varying marital statuses. The first group of plays focuses on women trapped in unhappy marriages and includes *He and She* (1911) by Rachel Crothers, *Trifles* (1916) and *The Verge* (1921) by Susan Glaspell, and *Machinal* (1928) by Sophie Treadwell. The second category deals with married women who choose to leave their husbands and includes Crothers's *Let Us Be Gay* (1929), Treadwell's *Ladies Leave* (1929), and Dawn

Powell's *Big Night* (1933) and *Jig-Saw* (1934). The final category of plays focuses on single women who have never married and includes Glaspell's *Inheritors* (1921), Powell's *Women at Four O'Clock* (1929) and *Walking Down Broadway* (1931), and Crothers's *When Ladies Meet* (1932). In addition to close analysis of these plays, production history and selected reviews and criticism are cited to provide a context for how the plays were received and interpreted in the decades in which they were written and beyond.

Analysis and comparison of the work of these four playwrights highlight issues that were most pressing to women during the 1910s-1930s, the social spheres in which inequality of the sexes existed most drastically, and various ways in which women fought and re-defined traditional feminine roles in American society.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Battle of the Sexes Onstage: Explorations of Changing Gender Roles by Four American Women Playwrights of the 1910s – 1930s,” presented by Stephanie E. Demaree, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1910s through the 1930s were among the most exciting decades of theatrical development in American theatre history. The popularity of nineteenth-century melodrama and recycled European plays began to wane and these works were replaced by daring new plays from emerging playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill and Clifford Odets who were just beginning to refine new American styles. The founding of college theatre programs and the Little Theatre movement developed professional actor training programs, promoted artistic experimentation, and expanded access to theatre across America. The Harlem Renaissance permeated American culture and gave voice to artists of color. Musical theatre emerged as a uniquely American genre that would prove popular all over the world.

These decades were also a time of extreme social change. Marked by World War I, the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression, and ending under the threat of World War II, the United States was rocked by political, cultural, and economic extremes. For women, the 1910s through the 1930s were among the most dramatic decades in history in terms of increased freedom and advancement.

In order to fully examine the effects of social change on women of this period, what better place to look than the theatrical works created by the women playwrights of these decades? Though the theatrical world was still dominated by male producers, directors, and critics, the 1910s through the 1930s saw the emergence of a number of groundbreaking female playwrights in both professional and amateur theatre who experimented with various genres and styles, and many of whom achieved mainstream success. Their perspectives on changing women's roles in marriage, business, politics, and throughout society unfolded onstage for all kinds of audiences. Nonetheless, much of their work is often overlooked or

forgotten completely in the modern American dramatic cannon, and modern productions of plays by women from this period are rare.

Among the strongest women playwrights from these decades whose work focuses on changing gender roles in every sphere of society are Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, and Dawn Powell. Though these four women were by no means the only female playwrights tackling gender issues during this period (Zoe Akins, Zona Gale, and Lillian Hellman are among the many others), the work of Crothers, Glaspell, Treadwell, and Powell represent a variety of styles and genres and also enjoyed varying levels of success in the professional theatre world. Crothers was arguably the most successful and most popular female playwright of the period, with Broadway productions of nearly every play she wrote during these decades and positive recognition from the critics. Glaspell was instrumental in the founding of the Provincetown Players, and her artistic experimentation found moderate success in both art and commercial theatre. Treadwell achieved international recognition for *Machinal*, one of the best-known plays from the period which is still recognized today as exemplary of American Expressionism, but the rest of her work is little known as she had no other equally successful productions. Powell's dramatic works are virtually unknown today, but her wit, cynicism, and candor make her plays stand out. She also worked briefly with two of the most influential theatre companies of the 1930s during their infancies: the Theater Guild and the Group Theater.

In order to effectively analyze how these women's plays deal with changing gender roles throughout the era, the first chapter of this paper will provide a summary of societal factors that led to changes for women and background information on each author whose work is examined. Chapter One also includes an analysis of Rachel Crothers's *Mary the*

Third, because its characters serve as an effective introduction to some of the ways in which female roles changed across three generations leading up to the 1920s. The following three chapters are organized by the type of protagonist featured in each play: Chapter Two deals with married women trapped in unhappy marriages and unable to divorce, Chapter Three focuses on women who choose or have chosen to leave their husbands, and Chapter Four examines women who are not and have never been married. Within each chapter the plays are presented in chronological order. By closely analyzing how each playwright depicts the issues these protagonists face according to their marital status, this paper will illustrate various female perspectives on the problems that women of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s encountered as they attempted to re-define their roles and demand equality in every social sphere.

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEIR CHANGING WORLDS IN THE 1910S-1930S

The 1910s through the 1930s were a period of dramatic change for American women, and nowhere is that change more apparent than in the work of the leading female playwrights of the period. While the four playwrights examined here all had very different careers in the theatre and experienced varied levels of commercial success, each one created plays in which female protagonists experiment with feminine identity and how to fit into a society with constantly-changing rules.

Throughout the 1910s, women in America took on expanding roles in the political arena through the battle for suffrage, the campaign for prohibition of alcohol, and social activism during World War I. More women entered the workforce and joined labor unions. Along with the effects of the passage of the 18th Amendment (Prohibition) and 19th Amendment (granting women the right to vote), the Roaring Twenties saw increased professional opportunities for women and greater female independence as marriage rates declined and divorce rates increased. In spite of the Great Depression, the number of women in the workforce continued to increase throughout the 1930s; the marriage rate, on the other hand, rose throughout the decade to return to where it had been at the beginning of the 1920s. Throughout each decade, society's norms for acceptable female behavior were up for debate as nostalgia for Victorian ideals of "womanliness" vied with the "New Woman" and a growing demand for equality of the sexes. For Crothers, Glaspell, Treadwell, and Powell, the stage provided an ideal venue to present their own arguments.

The women playwrights of this era deal with all of these societal changes in a variety of ways, but each of them makes dramatic comments on marriage—what it means to pursue

or reject marriage, how to end or escape a bad marriage, what responsibilities a married woman has, and how far marital fidelity (and forgiveness for infidelity) should extend. In order to better understand how each playwright presents marriage and explores the changing roles of women in this period, some background information on each author and her career in theatre is needed.

Rachel Crothers

Rachel Crothers (1878-1958) enjoyed the longest and most commercially successful career in theatre of the four playwrights examined. Her interest in the theatre began when she was a teenager. At age eighteen she entered the Stanhope-Wheatcroft Dramatic School in New York City and remained there as a teacher for several years. There she staged her first one-act plays and went on to act in several New York stock companies (Lindroth & Lindroth 3-4). Her first success as a playwright came in 1906 with *The Three of Us*, her first Broadway production, which received “almost universal critical praise” (Lindroth & Lindroth 15). In the three decades relevant to this study, Crothers had a total of twenty-one plays produced on Broadway. The style of her plays is consistently realistic, as she argued it is “the highest form of dramatic writing. I believe that the most imaginative, poetic, or mystical drama is most powerfully written in realism” (qtd. in Londré 84). Colette and James Lindroth point out that “It is worth remembering that she began to write in an era which favored, at least for popular consumption, lightweight farce or romantic escapism; this makes her successful insistence on slice-of-life realism, without the grim determinism of the naturalists, the more significant in the light of her enduring popularity” (4). Beginning with *A Man’s World* in 1910, Crothers also took charge of the staging of most of her productions “at a time when directing in America was an infant enterprise” (Gottlieb 9). Crothers is also

the only playwright in this study who never married, and some scholars have suggested she may have been homosexual, though there is no definitive evidence that she ever self-identified as a lesbian (Marra and Schanke 57).

Crothers is also remembered for her social activism; she founded the Stage Women's War Relief in 1917 which "not only provided quantities of hospital supplies, clothing and other materials to soldiers and civilians, it also made free stage shows available to servicemen in New York City and gave financial assistance to theatrical families whose principal wage-earners were away at war" (Lindroth & Lindroth 6). In 1932, she created the Stage Relief Fund to aid those in the theatre industry who were hardest hit after the stock market crash of 1929 led to a downturn in ticket sales and productions on Broadway, and in 1940, shortly after World War II began in Europe, she founded the American Theatre Wing Allied Relief Fund, and her work with that took precedence over her playwriting. Although she wrote a few plays after the war, none was produced.

While Crothers was undeniably a great success on Broadway throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, and can be considered "a pioneer woman in a man's field" (Lindroth & Lindroth 10), the significance of her plays in more recent years and her status as a feminist has been widely debated. Especially when compared to the other female dramatists of this study, Crothers's protagonists overwhelmingly choose traditional marriage and typical family dynamics after being presented with more liberating choices. However, these protagonists are generally offset by supporting characters who make different choices, and represent varying ages, marital statuses, and viewpoints. While her happy endings may have been chosen to please a popular audience, she still presents the debate in a realistic manner while providing a variety of perspectives. Her plays *Mary the Third* (1923), *He and She* (1911),

Let Us Be Gay (1929), and *When Ladies Meet* (1932) explore issues related to marriage and female sexuality across multiple generations.

Susan Glaspell

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) is probably the most-studied female playwright of the 1910s and 1920s today. Compared to Crothers, her career in theatre was relatively short, but it was far more experimental. Her works have been analyzed by scholars within numerous frameworks including feminism, expressionism, and modernism as well as through comparison with the works of other Provincetown Players.

While Glaspell's plays were largely successful and reviewed favorably by many important critics when first produced (her play *Alison's House*, based on the life of Emily Dickinson, even won the Pulitzer Prize in 1931), they subsequently faded from the American dramatic canon for many years, overshadowed by the success of the more famous playwright to emerge from the Provincetown Players, Eugene O'Neill: "Whereas O'Neill's plays were collected and anthologized by major publishing houses, Glaspell's were allowed to go out of print until . . . 1987" (Aston 112). In addition, her contribution as a founding member of the Provincetown Players is often overshadowed by that of her husband, George Cram "Jig" Cook. The lack of recognition for her significant theatrical contributions may have been in part due to her unassuming nature, as Barbara Ozieblo explains in her biography of Glaspell, ". . . in spite of living an extraordinary life for a woman of her time and her undoubted triumphs and popularity as a playwright and novelist, Glaspell constantly ceded center stage to the men she loved, making it extremely difficult to reconstruct either her life or her personality" (3).

However, many feminist critics, such as Elaine Aston, insist that Glaspell's "disappearance from the canon" occurred because "Glaspell's women did not conform to the dominant views on gender" and cites this as the reason that "they met with critical hostility and could not therefore make the same transition on to the mainstream stage as was the case with O'Neill's drama" (115). For evidence of this gender bias, one need only look at reviews from some of the foremost critics of the time. As an example, Aston quotes Alexander Woollcott's *New York Times* review of *Inheritors*: "Miss Glaspell has thought it all out, and then poured her thought promiscuously into a watery play, more completely undramatic than any the season has seen—a play as artless as one a high school girl might dash off for commencement . . ." (114). Woollcott's choice of language, especially "promiscuously" and "high school girl," are both dismissive and misogynistic. Further proof comes from Stark Young, a writer for the *New Republic*, who defended Glaspell against an overwhelmingly negative response to *The Verge* by asserting, "No play of Susan Glaspell's can be passed over quite so snippishly as most of the reviewers have done with *The Verge*" (qtd. in Bach 250). Whatever the cause of her disappearance, over the last few decades critics have regained an interest in Glaspell's work and her significance as an American dramatist is gradually being explored.

While best known for the one-act *Trifles*, during her time with the Provincetown Players in the 1910s and early 1920s, Glaspell experimented with a number of styles, genres, and formats for writing plays (a total of fourteen between 1915 and 1944). Despite this variety, her plays share one consistent theme—they present female protagonists who struggle within or strive to break free from the societal roles prescribed to them by the dominant men in their lives. In addition, "Her plays exhibit a close engagement with radical movements of

the time, including the campaign to protect free speech, to secure women's access to birth control, and to establish greater equality between the sexes. Bracketed by World Wars I and II, her dramaturgy mirrors the nation's preoccupation with these conflicts and their aftermaths—politically, socially, and culturally” (Gainor & Dickey 37). Often, the women in her plays are forced to commit acts of violence or civil disobedience in order to defy their oppressors, and as a result have often been painted as hysterical or insane by male critics. Eugene Solow of the *New York World* writes, “Susan Glaspell's heroines are among the most distinguished achievements in the entire range of American drama. They are rebels, every one of them—idealistic rebels” (qtd. in Craig 51). Veronica Makosky takes this idea a step further, claiming “The rebellions . . . of her dramatic heroines sometimes lead them to the public sphere of demonstrations, courts, and prison; these heroines do include two murderesses, a number of confessed adulteresses, and a police-basher” (61). *Trifles* (1916), *The Verge* (1921), and *Inheritors* (1921) are among her most notable plays because of their strong female protagonists who challenge societal injustice and traditional feminine roles.

Sophie Treadwell

Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970) is most famous for her expressionist masterpiece *Machinal* (1928), but she also wrote a number of largely-forgotten plays (only *Machinal* and *Hope for a Harvest* were published until three more of her plays were rescued in a 2006 anthology of her writings assembled by Jerry Dickey and Miriam López-Rodríguez), and had a fascinating career in journalism. After discovering a passion for both theatre and journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, she briefly performed in vaudeville before obtaining a position as a typist for actress Helena Modjeska, who encouraged her passion for theatre and writing. Treadwell then made use of her acting talents as an

undercover journalist, which included obtaining an exclusive interview with Pancho Villa and posing as a homeless prostitute. During World War I, she lived in France and became America's first female war correspondent (Burke 77). In 1915, she settled in New York with her husband, William O. McGeehan, a sports writer. Around this time, Treadwell gave up acting and began to write plays because of—as she would later describe to students at the American Laboratory Theatre—“an uncontrollable hanker to go deeper, perhaps soar higher in my work . . . In writing plays I wasn't limited to just . . . the stereotyped parts that might be handed out to me. In writing I played, and I played from the very beginning of their creation, any and all parts that might be handed out to me” (qtd. in Dickey & López-Rodriguez 69).

Treadwell's earliest works were highly experimental one-acts, but her first produced plays were fairly conventional: *Gringo* (1922), based on her experience with Pancho Villa, “employed the thrilling spectacle, local color, and plot contrivances of turn-of-the-century melodrama” while *O Nightingale* (1925) used “the format of a standard boy-meets-girl sentimental comedy” (Gainor & Dickey 46). Her first critical and commercial success was *Machinal* in 1928, “a play that uniquely merged modernist dramatic form with feminine content” (Gainor & Dickey 46). Throughout the rest of her career, Treadwell struggled to market her plays, as she aimed for production on Broadway but refused to compromise her artistic vision to make her work more commercially appealing. In addition to *Machinal*, her 1929 “modern comedy of morals,” *Ladies Leave*, is examined for its utilization of a strong female protagonist who experiments with sexual freedom and questions traditional marriage.

Dawn Powell

Dawn Powell (1896-1965) has been rediscovered as an important and brilliant novelist within the last few decades; however, the plays that she wrote are little known and only a few have ever been produced. Only *Big Night* and *Jig-Saw: A Comedy* were produced during her lifetime, but they received productions from two of the most innovative theatre companies of the 1930s: the Group Theater and the Theater Guild, respectively. While neither of these productions was a huge success, Powell continued to write plays, and wrote in her diary, “The theater has a harsh truth about it that appeals to my own desire for truth. It doesn’t soften its blows or its cruelties for me and I need not pull my punches for it. It is a worthy foe—no false excuses or restraints—no *politesse* but back and forth honest blows. It is an open battlefield . . .” (qtd. in Page 132).

Big Night (1933) and *Jig-Saw* (1934) were both published in a 1999 anthology of Powell’s work alongside two of her unproduced plays: *Women at Four O’Clock* (1929), an experiment in Expressionism, and *Walking Down Broadway* (1931), which was later adapted into the film *Hello Sister!*. These four plays explore a variety of themes including marriage, commercialism, hypocrisy, morality, feminine identity, and sexuality with a casual wit that effectively satirizes not only the time period in which they were written, but also echoes into our modern era. Powell subtly broaches topics such as infidelity, abortion, and the use of sex for professional gain, which were taboo in the twenties and thirties and are still controversial today.

Mary the Third: Three generations of women and changing views of marriage

Perhaps no play of the 1920s more clearly dramatizes how changing gender roles were viewed by different generations than Rachel Crothers’s *Mary the Third*. The original

production in 1923 fell right in the middle of Crothers's thirty-year career and was fairly successful, running 160 performances with mixed critical response (Lindroth & Lindroth 53-54). Some critics considered it one of Crothers's best plays to date, but many who praised the play's themes and premise disliked what they considered a "falsely happy ending" (qtd. in Gottlieb 110). Still others responded negatively to what they considered an all-out attack on marriage, and the *Brooklyn Times* took their critique to a personal level, declaring "The institution of marriage came in for a lot of pretty hard knocks at the hands of Rachel Crothers . . . Perhaps Miss Crothers [is attempting] to justify the fact that she managed to retain the prefix of 'Miss' to her name" (qtd. in Lindroth & Lindroth 54). Such a personal attack would be unheard-of today, but reminds a modern reader of the controversy that any criticism of traditional marriage could cause, particularly in a male-dominated circle of theatre critics. Lois Gottlieb's 1979 critical biography of Crothers highlights *Mary the Third's* "close attention to the impact of love and marriage on the New Woman's freedom and . . . how a forceful young woman deals with the impact in a complex, transitional society" (104), but argues that the play's incoherent structure and tone are its greatest weaknesses, suggesting that Crothers is "too successful in creating the pain of an ugly marriage breakdown to swing the play back to comedy in the younger generation" (110).

The play opens with two prologue scenes, and in the first we see twenty-year-old Mary the First in 1870, secretly meeting with the man she will eventually marry and exchanging vows of love. The second prologue takes place in 1897, as Mary the Second (at the same age) decides between her two beaux, eventually choosing and exchanging vows with Robert, the less refined but more forceful personality of the two. The remainder of the play is set in 1922, and all three Marys (Granny [the First], Mother [the Second], and twenty-

year-old Mary the Third) are now living under the same roof. Like her mother, the youngest Mary is being courted by two men, Hal and Lynn (types that echo her mother's two options), but she has a very modern and potentially scandalous plan for how to decide between them: she, her two boyfriends, and another young couple will go camping (un-chaperoned) for a couple of weeks to see how they get along together away from their families and their middle-class comforts. Based on this, Mary will determine whether she wants to marry Hal, Lynn, or neither. In spite of her parents' and grandmother's objections, Mary goes ahead with the plan, but at the last minute she worries about how her disappearance and the resulting scandal will affect her family and returns home. Shortly after her return, she witnesses an argument between her parents in which they reveal that most of their marriage has been a failure and that they no longer love each other. The next morning, Mary advocates for her mother to seek a divorce, and after much debate among the entire family (Mary and her brother Bobby in favor of divorce versus Father and Granny against), Mother decides to leave her husband. Though disillusioned with the idea of marriage, through the experience of the previous night Mary realizes that she loves Lynn, and although she is still reluctant to marry him, he convinces her by saying "there's nothing the matter with marriage—it's what people do with it . . . Why don't we begin to make marriage better instead of chucking it? Why don't we make it honest and decent and fair—and if we have made a mistake we'll *quit*" and "we're going to be side by side—both on the same level—both on the square" (104). As hopeful as their plan for a "trial marriage" with man and woman as equals seems, the final vows of love exchanged by Mary and Lynn so closely echo those of Mary the First and Mary the Second in each prologue that the potential for success of Mary the Third's marriage becomes ambiguous.

Each of the three Marys represents a very recognizable type from her respective generation in appearance, action, and viewpoint. In the prologue, Mary the First is dressed in mid-Victorian fashion: “a skirt voluminous with ruffles and lace . . . Her arms bosom and shoulders are bare,” and Crothers describes her as “soft and pretty and flower-like. Her voice is sweet. Shyness and modesty are her manner. Her movements are graceful and coy and mincing—full of a conscious charm” (3). This picture of Mary the First as simultaneously demure and coquettish fits perfectly with her actions in the prologue, in which she successfully seduces William, an ex-beau whom she discarded in favor of a wealthier man. Now that William has inherited a fortune, Mary cleverly wheedles him away from his new fiancée with remarks like “Oh, I’m not *hiding* anything about Lucy . . . I only meant that under her sweet little purring ways, she’s very, *very* strong and stubborn and always gets what she wants” (5) and “Oh, but you’re a great, big, strong man. You can do as you please and still control your feelings. I’m only a weak little thing” (6). By insinuating that her rival is strong and stubborn whereas she is weak and demure, Mary hints that she would make a better wife and simultaneously flatters William’s ego. Throughout the scene she proves that she is an expert at manipulating men for her own purposes. After the prologue, Granny’s opinions on marriage and how to deal with its challenges continue to reflect this mentality. Gottlieb describes Mary the First as “. . . manipulative and flirtatious, catering to men, but always pulling the strings behind their backs, and almost reveling in masculine stupidity. She sustains the fiction of dominant male/helpless female as though it were the cornerstone of society” (106). When Mary the Third insists that her mother and father shouldn’t go on living together if they’re unhappy and don’t love each other, Granny replies

It’s new-fangled nonsense. Modern selfishness. That’s what it is. A man and a woman have no right to expect to be happy *all* the time—every minute—day and

night. You *have* to have a good fight now and then to clear the air. Your grandfather and I had plenty. You women now-a-days don't know how to manage men. That's what's the matter with you. Of course they get the best of you because you're trying to make 'em think you know as much as they do, and they won't *stand* it. You're such simpletons. You oughtn't to let 'em ever see how smart you are. Why I had my way about everything on earth. The madder your grandfather got the more I cried and the softer I was. I just twisted him round my finger—like that. And he thought I was right under his thumb (89).

Granny found a way to thrive and secure her own happiness within the restrictions of traditional marriage, but her daughter either does not know how or chooses not to use similar tactics, and her granddaughter is disgusted by the very idea of wife manipulating husband in that way, and responds “Oh Granny—how can you? Mother isn't Father's mistress you know” (89). Meanwhile, Granny's current living situation depends on the survival of Mother and Father's marriage, and both she and Mother's economic reliance on Father illuminates the major problem with seeking a divorce in an era when most married women were still not financially independent of their husbands.

Mary the Second is described in her prologue as “the perfect Gibson type—in dress and hair and figure” (12). A more glamorous version of the “New Woman” just emerging at the turn-of-the-century, the Gibson Girl was athletic, flirtatious, well-educated, and independent, but also upper-class, morally upright, and politically conservative—a Gibson Girl was unlikely to participate in the suffrage movement. Mary the Second is a fascinating representation of this “in between” state of female emancipation. She is far less decisive than her mother or her daughter, both as a young woman choosing between her beaux and as a forty-five year-old wife and mother attempting to handle her rambunctious children and salvage her marriage. Gottlieb suggests “She feels trapped by propriety and mediocrity, knows that something is wrong with her life but fears to look too closely” (106). It's worth noting that although Mary the Third is the play's true protagonist (it is named for her, after

all), Mary the Second is of the same generation as Rachel Crothers (in fact they are almost exactly the same age at the time the play was written), and is probably the most accurate representation of the playwright's voice. Mary the Third's difficulty in making decisions may reflect the experience Crothers observed from her own generation caught between the struggle for gender equality with greater female independence and a fear of completely disrupting society by throwing out traditional values. Father voices this concern when he remarks "The whole country's going to collapse if we don't look out—with this reckless extravagance. Everybody's living beyond their income—everybody. Same wild looseness there is in every other direction. There's a general lowering of standards and ideals that is undermining society and civilization" (49). To a young audience member in 1923, this might have sounded like a typical tirade from a parent that could be shrugged or even laughed off, but to a post-Depression audience such a remark resonates as eerie foreshadowing of the economic collapse looming at the end of the decade.

Compared to the highly conservative Father, Mother is more sympathetic to her daughter's desires but still cautions her against the most radical ideas, saying "You can't try things the whole world knows have nothing but danger and disaster in them" (31), and "There's nothing new about the relations between men and women and there's nothing true or right but the same old things that have always been true" (32). She understands that the best way to rein in Mary the Third is not to explicitly forbid her to do things (as Granny and Father would do) but to trust her and give honest advice. Unfortunately, Mother's strategy is only half successful, as her advice is undermined by the failure of her own marriage, in which she and Father have maintained a false illusion of happiness throughout the lives of their children. While both Mother and Mary experience epiphanies and make strong choices

by the end of the play, Mother's decision to leave Father (without any plan to support herself) is surprisingly the more radical decision. The fact that she makes this decision offstage is a potential dramaturgical problem with the play, but she does hold her ground in an onstage confrontation with Father after announcing her choice. In the final act, as Father and Mother debate their children's demand that they get a divorce, they argue the merits of Mary the Third's ideal of marriage:

- FATHER: See here Mary—some of the nonsense that child has spouted has got hold of you. Don't let any of her silly . . .
- MOTHER: She isn't silly. She's brutal because she's so young—but she's honest and—
- FATHER: She's the product of this damnable modern loose-thinking.
- MOTHER: And she's thinking nearer the truth than *we* ever did. She's got something dangerous and ridiculous in *one* hand and something big and real in the other (93).

While she acknowledges that Mary's beliefs are radical due to her youth and lack of experience, Mother defends those beliefs as representative of progress, and an improvement over the lie their own marriage has become. Mother's final advice to Mary is that she not give up marriage as an institution just because her own marriage failed, insisting that "it isn't our marriage that was wrong—it's what we've done with it" (102). Mary the Second represents a generation of women whose traditional marriage structures often no longer hold up against modern ideals.

Mary the Third is the true New Woman of the 1920s, in fashion as well as ideas. Crothers describes her as "slender and strait as a boy. She wears a slip of a frock—which leaves her free—and she vibrates with vitality and eagerness—rather dynamically interested in her own affairs" (27). This description evokes a strong visual contrast to the more confining styles of her mother's and grandmother's youths. Crothers uses changing fashion as an effective metaphor for the changing ideals of feminine roles, and this metaphor is

apparent in her character descriptions as well as a comic exchange between Granny, Mother, Father and Mary over Mary's evening dress:

GRANNY: I don't know how you can expect to be good in that dress.
MARY: What's the matter with this dress? It's a love. Isn't it, Mother?
MOTHER: It's very pretty, dear.
GRANNY: Yes, you uphold her in her nakedness, instead of making her put on clothes enough.
MARY: Oh, Granny.
GRANNY: I'll wager you haven't got a sign of a petticoat on.
MARY: Of course I haven't.
FATHER: What's the reason you haven't?
MARY: Heavens—nobody wears a petticoat, Father.
GRANNY: I do. Look at her. She might just as well be stark naked for all the good her clothes are doing her.
MARY: You needn't talk, Granny. I think it's much better to show my back than the way you used to show your front (45-46).

This exchange resonates strongly to the modern reader or audience member as a recognizable situation representing differing generations' ideals of modesty and fashion, and is a reflection of changing ideals of feminine identity.

Just as modern as her dresses, Mary the Third's ideas about relationships and marriage are also representative of the New Woman. She believes she has discovered the cause of increasing numbers of failed marriages: "People don't *know* each other before they're married. That's why most marriages are merely disappointing experiments instead of lifetime mating. That's why experimenting ought to be done *before* marriage" (29). Although "experimenting" for Mary does not necessarily mean sexual experimentation (it is unclear whether or not Mary is sexually active), she is fairly unabashed in talking about sex (for the time period), explaining to her mother "We aren't going away just so we can sleep together. We could stay right at home and do that, let me tell you" (29). Later, in private conversation, she goes even further:

. . . I've just about decided that free love is the only solution to the whole business anyway . . . I don't know that I *could* live all my life with one man—however much I loved him. Of course you and Father are satisfied with each other because you've never had anything else. But you don't know *what* you might have been, Mother, if you'd lived with a lot of men (32).

Mary's naïveté about her own mother's experience with men is yet another symptom of her youth; the audience knows that Mother had at least two beaux in her youth, but whether Mary the Second has had any sexual experiences other than with her husband is open to interpretation. By the end of the play, however, Mary the Third has pulled back from her most radical ideas of "free love" in favor of the trial marriage. She recognizes that wives' financial dependence on their husbands is a primary reason for inequality in marriage, and vows "I shall *have* my own money. I'll *make it*. I shall live with a man because I love him and only as long as I love him. I shall be able to take care of myself *and* my children if necessary. Anything else gives the man a horrible advantage. It makes the woman a kept woman, of course" (92). She also recognizes that "Women will have to change marriage—men never will" (91). Unfortunately, her decision to try to improve rather than reject marriage is somewhat undermined by the return to starry-eyed romance at the end of the play. Lynn's statement "No man ever loved a girl the way that I loved you" (103), and the Mary's final line "And we must make it the most wonderful love that was ever in the world" (105), are almost identical to lines spoken by both the First and Second Marys and their lovers in the prologue. This echo insinuates that Mary the Third and Lynn will make exactly the same kinds of mistakes that her mother and grandmother made before her. Nonetheless, the play offers a fascinating look at marriage through the lenses of three generations of women and openly addresses important issues of gender equality in marriage.

CHAPTER 2

REPRESSIVE MARRIAGES: WOMEN WHO FEEL TRAPPED

A common feature of plays by American women during this era, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, are female protagonists who have chosen marriage, but then find themselves confined within it, unable to pursue what makes them happy, while they are repressed or victimized by their husbands and often shunned by society for their rebellious responses to the confinement. Different playwrights have approached these types of marriages from a variety of frameworks, using a variety of styles. They come up with very different solutions, though all tend to be tragic for the protagonist, and violent behavior is a frequent outcome. Rachel Crothers's *He and She* gives the least extreme example of such a marriage with its realistic depiction of a highly relatable situation, in which a wife finds herself forced to give up a promising artistic career as the only way to salvage her relationship with her husband and daughter. Susan Glaspell also uses a realistic approach in her one-act *Trifles*, based on an actual trial in which a wife was found guilty of killing her husband. In this play, the protagonist is absent, but the two female characters onstage discover her motive for killing her husband, and recognizing the repressive nature of her marriage, they cover up the evidence. In *The Verge*, Glaspell departs from realism, using Expressionist techniques throughout the play to present the subjective experience of a woman who feels trapped not only by her marriage, but by a society that does not deem her botanical creations and modes of expression appropriate for a wife and mother. Finally, Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* provides the ultimate example of a woman who feels forced by societal and economic pressure to marry and can only escape her unhappy marriage through an act of violence.

He and She: The problem of the working wife and mother

Crothers began working on *He and She* early in her career; it was first produced in Albany in 1911, but it took her nearly a decade of tours and revision to bring the show to Broadway in 1920, where it ran only 28 performances. Crothers had to take on the principal role herself during the Broadway run, after the leading actress (Viola Allen) quit during the Boston tryout because “she found Ann Herford’s role too unsympathetic” (Lindroth & Lindroth 44). Both the early productions and the brief Broadway run provoked controversy and split reactions from critics. A review of the first production from *The Boston Transcript* states that the purpose of the play was “to enforce on women the importance of their work as mothers and homemakers” (qtd. in Gottlieb 61). Many critics thought the play was too harsh in its treatment of the male characters, while others (especially after the New York production) found the ending to be contrived and anti-feminist. In spite of all the controversy, a number of critics praised the production, including Alexander Woollcott of the *New York Times* who called it “an interesting, thoughtful, and provocative play” and insightfully remarks that “this play by Miss Crothers rehearses the tragedy of the new woman with her longing for a creative career and the obligations of her home warring within her” (Woollcott 16).

When the play begins, Ann Herford and her husband Tom seem like a perfectly happy and very modern couple, content with the situation of working side by side in their sculpting studio while their daughter Millicent is off at boarding school. Although Tom dominates in the artistic field, he doesn’t resent Ann’s presence in his world, and is eager to hear her criticism of his work (though he doesn’t take her comments very seriously). In contrast to their apparent stability, Tom’s apprentice Keith and his fiancée Ruth are in

constant conflict over Ruth's successful career as a magazine editor. Keith insists that Ruth should give up her job once they're married in order to make their home, but Ruth refuses:

- KEITH: This time next year you could be in your own home—away from those damnable office hours and the drudgery—if you only would. If you only would.
- RUTH: It never seems to occur to you that I might be a little less tired but bored to death without my job.
- KEITH: If you really cared for me the way you used to—you wouldn't be bored (902).

Keith's belief that a wife should stay at home and keep house is supported by two other characters present in the Herford home: Tom's sister Daisy, an independent woman who dislikes her lonely single life and Ann's father Dr. Remington, who represents the more traditional viewpoint of his own generation. Daisy asserts that she would gladly give up her work as her brother's secretary if a man were to ask her to marry him, and clearly resents Ann and Ruth for taking their relationships for granted: "Ann and Ruth both have men to depend on if they want them. I'm taking care of myself because I've *got* to—and I must say this soul tragedy of choice stuff makes me a little tired" (906). Remington's beliefs about women and marriage stem from a scientific premise commonly accepted at the time:

The development of women hasn't changed the laws of creation . . . Sex is still the strongest force in the world . . . And no matter how far she goes she doesn't change the fundamental laws of her own . . . mechanism. And when the sensitive—involved—complex elements of a woman's nature become entangled in the responsibility of a man's work—and the two things fight for first place in her—she's got a hell of a mess on hand (905).

Ann and Tom's solid relationship seems untouchable by these debates until the second act, when the couple finds out that Ann's design for a frieze has beaten Tom's to win a prominent sculpture contest. At first, Tom, though clearly disappointed, is able to congratulate her, but his true feelings come out when he insists that he will not touch the money Ann receives for winning:

ANN: Why shouldn't you use my money as well as I yours?
TOM: That's about as different as day and night.
ANN: Why is it?
TOM: Because I'm taking care of you. It's all right if you never do another day's work in your life. You're doing it because you want to, I'm doing it because I've got to. If you were alone it would be a different thing. But I'm here, and so long as I am I'll make what keeps us going (920).

Tom goes on to say that while he thought it was right to encourage Ann to pursue her art because she wanted it, he now thinks that it's distracting her from her duties as a wife and mother, and asks her to give it up completely, finally demanding:

I am a man—and you're my wife and Millicent's our daughter. Unless you come back to the things a woman's always had to do—and always will—we can't go on. We can't go on . . . Good God, Ann, can't you see? You're a woman and I'm a man. You're not free in the same way. If you won't stop because I ask it—I say you *must* (921).

Ann is appalled, and suspects that much of Tom's attitude stems from jealousy. She asks him to take it back, exclaiming “you can kill our love by just what you do now” (921), but their argument is interrupted when Millicent returns unexpectedly from school declaring that she does not intend to go back. In the final act, Tom expresses remorse for his reaction and for his demands, but Ann learns that during a holiday break when she wanted to work and made Millicent stay at school, Millicent started a relationship with the school chauffeur, and she now intends to marry him. This relationship could severely damage Millicent's reputation, so Ann convinces her daughter to postpone the wedding for a trip to Europe, believing that this will give her time to dissuade Millicent from going through with the undesirable match. In the final pages, Ann asks Tom to complete her frieze design for her, and realizes that she may resent herself, Tom, and Millicent because of this choice, but feels that her daughter has to take precedence, stating “It's my job. She is what I've given to life. If I fail her now—my whole life's a failure” (928).

While it may seem like a stretch to call this a repressive marriage—Tom is neither abusive nor tyrannical in the end—it is exceedingly clear that Ann is prevented from pursuing what would have likely been a successful and rewarding artistic career by the choice she made (nearly two decades before the play began) to marry and have a child. While Ann’s happiness is obviously important to Tom, his deep-seated beliefs of male dominance come out in several places during the play. He seems eager for Ann’s honest opinion of his own frieze design, but when she suggests that it’s “a little conventional” and “that inexplicable thing which made it great—is *gone*—for me. Perhaps it's just me—my imagination—because I care so much,” he dismisses her critique with “It is imagination. It's much stronger than when I began” (898). Later, she shows Tom her own design, which she firmly believes is better, and even offers to let him use it as his entry. He agrees that Ann’s is beautiful but has difficulty explaining why he thinks his own is better for the contest: “This is imaginative and charming and graceful—full of abandon and fantasy and even vitality—but ye gods, child, it isn't in *this* class” (909). Tom’s condescension is echoed in Keith’s analysis: “. . . too fanciful, isn't it? Would the crowd understand it? Needs a big clear striking thing like that” (910). Keith’s statement implies that Ann’s design is inferior largely because it lacks the masculinity of Tom’s “big clear striking thing”. While Tom does not object to Ann submitting her design to the competition, when her design beats his own the resentment that pours out of him is shocking. When Ann asks why her winning the significant commission isn’t a good thing for the entire family, Tom responds “I don't know that it's a good thing from any standpoint to have it known that I failed, but my wife succeeded” (920), but he quickly redirects his resentment into a full-out attack on Ann: “It's taking you away from everything else and there'll be no end to it. Your ambition will carry

you away till the home and Millicent and I are nothing to you!” (921). By changing the issue from his own disappointment at having lost the competition to accusing Ann of selfishness and putting her work ahead of family, Tom successfully reasserts himself and forces Ann to question the validity of her position. When Millicent’s timely arrival seems to confirm Tom’s statement that Ann has neglected the family, Tom can safely retract his earlier statements as having been made in the heat of the moment, while still maintaining his dominance of both home and work life.

At the end of the play Ann finds herself duty-bound to her husband and daughter, but at the price of her own happiness and self-realization. In full recognition of the sacrifice she is making in allowing Tom to create her frieze, she tells him:

I’ll hate you because you’re doing it—and I’ll hate myself because I gave it up—and I’ll almost—hate—her. I know. I know. You needn’t tell me. Why I’ve seen my men and women up there—their strong limbs stretched—their hair blown back. I’ve seen the crowd looking up—I’ve heard people say—“A woman did that” and my heart has almost burst with pride—not so much that *I* had done it—but for all women. And then the door opened—and Millicent came in. There isn’t any choice, Tom—she’s part of my body—part of my soul (928).

In Ann’s case, her status as a mother, more than her status as a wife, is what convinces her to give up her career, but in a more egalitarian marriage the responsibility of dealing with Millicent’s issue would not be solely her own, nor would she feel the need to take the blame for having caused Millicent’s trouble in the first place. Unfortunately, Ann recognizes that Tom (like most fathers at the time) is in no way equipped to relate to his daughter, and his attempts to “settle her” would likely drive Millicent straight back to her boyfriend. Ann is trapped by the accepted social convention that mothers should take on the full responsibility for their children’s (especially their daughters’) upbringing.

The other principal female characters are similarly denied at least part of what they want due to the restrictions of male-dominated society. Ruth maintains her strong desire to pursue her career in spite of Keith's protestations, and she firmly believes that their marriage can only work if they are both willing to make sacrifices: "We must hang together dear— And understand and give things up for each other. But it must be fifty-fifty, dearest" (902). Ruth envisions the possibility of an equal marriage and the practicality of two working spouses as she explains to Keith, "We can *afford* more if I work, too. We can *pay* someone to do the stuff you think I ought to do. And you'll go on climbing up in your work and I'll go on in mine and we'll both grow to something and *be* somebody and have something to give each other. It will be fair—we'll be pulling together—pals and lovers . . ." (903). But Keith cannot picture a comfortable and happy home life with a working wife, and he refuses to compromise: "All right—I'm selfish—but I'm human—and I'll bet my hat I'm just like every nine men out of ten. What in the name of heaven does loving a girl amount to if you don't want to take care of her from start to finish?" (914). Although Ruth loves Keith, the double-standard of his demands are clear to her, and she refuses to give up the career she has been working for her entire life: "What you ask of me is to cut off one half of my life and throw it away. What I ask of you is only an experiment—to let me try and see if I can't make things comfortable and smooth and happy for us—and still take this big thing that has come as a result of all my years of hard work and fighting for it" (914). Keith, on the other hand, argues that her unwillingness to quit her job is proof that she does not really love him, and when Ruth realizes that he will never change his mind, she ends the relationship. After the break-up, Ruth is not seen again in the play. Though her romantic future is uncertain, if Keith truly is like "every nine men out of ten", Ruth's choice of work over marriage in this

case will likely be the choice she is forced to make for the rest of her life, making a clear statement that women of the period cannot have both successful careers and successful marriages—they must choose one or the other.

Unlike Ruth, Daisy would be thrilled to give up her work and settle down as a wife and mother, but she too is prevented by societal conventions from actively pursuing her desire: “The trouble is—a *woman* can’t *ask*. Even if a man is—just at her hand—and she knows she could make him happy—she can’t tell him—she can’t open his eyes—she has to hide what might make things right for both of them. Because she’s a woman” (916). Much of Daisy’s bitterness comes from the fact that she has feelings for Keith, but he is completely oblivious to them, as he is too wrapped up in his own conflict with Ruth. After Keith and Ruth’s breakup, Daisy hints shamelessly that she would make exactly the sort of wife Keith is looking for: “But there are lots and lots and lots of women taking care of themselves—putting up the bluff of being independent and happy who would be so glad to live in a little flat and do their own work—just to be the nicest thing in the world to some man” (916). Though it’s possible that Keith starts to get the message, in the end it is only the direct interference of Dr. Remington that ensures Daisy and Keith will have a romantic future. Even though she is supposedly a strong and independent woman, Daisy does not have the self-confidence to go after what she wants without Dr. Remington’s help.

In spite of its lukewarm reception in the 1910s and 20s, *He and She* is one of Crothers’s only plays to receive recent revivals including professional productions in 1971 and 1980, and a staged reading in 2005. A review of the 1920 New York production by Burns Mantle asserted that the play’s central issue was “insoluble . . . until generations of men and women yet unborn have struggled with it” (qtd, in Gottlieb 62). Reviews of the

revivals sixty and seventy years after the original production imply that more recent generations are not yet finished struggling with issues of marriage equality and women balancing careers and home life. The 1980 revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music once again provoked mixed responses from the critics, with some finding it “dated”, “conventional”, and “repetitious” while others found it “as strong as almost anything in Ibsen” (Lindroth & Lindroth 45). One of the more positive reactions came from Marilyn Stasio of the *New York Post*, who suggested “Entire lines from this play are probably being spoken at this very moment . . . at Weight Watchers meetings, in the dressing rooms in Bloomie’s, in the checkout lines at Zabar’s and in beds throughout America” (qtd. in Lindroth & Lindroth 46). Though the original script is now over a century old, the themes of *He and She* remain relevant and fascinating to modern society, as well as revealing the hypocrisy and double-standards of commonly held beliefs in the 1910s and 1920s.

Trifles: Isolation and repression in the rural Midwest

Trifles, first performed in 1916, is Glaspell’s second one-act play (the first, *Suppressed Desires*, was in collaboration with her husband), and is based on a true murder case which Glaspell had reported in her previous career as a newspaper journalist. The play takes place in the kitchen of a farmhouse, the day after farmer John Wright has been found murdered and his wife Minnie has been arrested as the primary suspect. The County Attorney, the Sheriff, and Mr. Hale (a neighboring farmer) arrive to investigate the crime scene, bringing along Mrs. Peters (the Sheriff’s wife) and Mrs. Hale to collect some things to take back to Minnie in the jail. While the men cross on and offstage looking for evidence, the two women remain onstage in the kitchen. Their observations of minute details lead

them to find the key piece of evidence, a strangled canary, and they are able to infer the motive for the murder, but in the end they decide to hide their discovery from the men.

From the beginning, the male characters casually dismiss the two women's observations, joking that "Women are used to worrying about trifles" (7). As the tension builds and the women begin to understand what happened, they realize that Minnie was completely isolated and trapped in what appears to have been an abusive relationship. Mrs. Hale, who knew Minnie and her husband, is hesitant to speak out directly against John Wright but implies in several places that their marriage was not a happy one:

MRS. HALE:	It never seemed a very cheerful place.
COUNTY ATTORNEY:	No—it's not cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct.
MRS. HALE:	Well, I don't know as Wright had, either.
COUNTY ATTORNEY:	You mean that they didn't get on very well?
MRS. HALE:	No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it (7).

At this point, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have not yet discovered the evidence of Minnie's motive for the crime, and on the surface her statement appears to be merely a defense of Minnie's housekeeping. However, her reluctance to state outright that the Wrights' relationship was dysfunctional implies that she already realizes how such a statement might be perceived as evidence against Minnie by an all-male jury. Later, in private to Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hale explains how Minnie had changed since her marriage: "Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid . . . She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was thirty years ago" (8-9). From this statement, it is clear that marriage to Wright both changed Minnie's lively personality and isolated her completely from the rest of the community, of which she had once been an active

part. Though Mrs. Hale never states outright that Wright abused Minnie, she does go so far as to say that “. . . he was a hard man, Mrs. Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him— Like a raw wind that gets to the bone” (11-12). After they discover the bird with its neck wrung, Mrs. Hale has no doubt that Wright is responsible, and she asserts “No, Wright wouldn’t like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too” (13). Though Mrs. Peters never knew Minnie and is less sure than Mrs. Hale about what has happened, she still finds ways to identify with Minnie’s situation as she remembers, “When I was a girl—my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes . . . If they hadn’t held me back I would have—hurt him” (13), and later, “I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then—” (13). Mrs. Hale also identifies with Minnie, even feels responsible for not having visited her more often, and exclaims, “I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing” (14). These vague but revealing glimpses into both women’s lives imply the kind of repression and isolation that they have experienced in their society, and probably within their own marriages. Linda Ben-Zvi asserts that Glaspell “concretizes the conditions under which these women live and circumstances that might cause them to kill . . . in doing so, she stages one of the first modern arguments for justifiable homicide” (38-39). Karen Alkalay-Gut echoes this conclusion, arguing that in the play “Women. . . are trapped by a social system that may lead them into crime and punish them when they are forced to commit it” (72).

When the men return in the final moments of the play, still stumped as to the motive of the murder, Mrs. Peters quietly defies the County Attorney's labeling of her as "married to the law" (14), by choosing not to reveal what they have discovered. The two women hide the evidence while the men are not looking, knowing that without it the jury will be unlikely to convict a woman. This is significant because, as Ben-Zvi puts it "Not waiting to be given the right to vote or to serve on juries, Glaspell's women have taken the right for themselves" (39). *Trifles*, in addition to being a textbook example of a well-constructed one-act play, brings to light the issue that Glaspell witnessed as a reporter of how these repressive marriages can lead to acts of violence, and suggests that women must support one another and fight to defend their rights within both marriage and the legal system.

The Verge: Rebellion through botanical experiments and Expressionism

The Verge, arguably Glaspell's most experimental and controversial play, was first performed in 1921. The play's protagonist is Claire, a kind of Dr. Frankenstein of botany, who attempts to create new breeds of plants that are completely different from those in existence, or "other". Her two notable achievements include the Edge Vine—a plant on the edge of becoming something new, but not quite there—and her masterpiece, the Breath of Life, which is "alive in its otherness" (30).

The first act takes place in Claire's greenhouse as her work is interrupted by the three men in her life, comically named Tom, Dick, and Harry. Harry is Claire's second husband; her first was an artist whom she describes as a "stick-in-the-mud" and with whom she had a daughter, Elizabeth. Claire divorced the artist and married Harry, thinking that his career as an aviator indicated that he had the same reckless sense of adventure as she possesses, and she remarks that she married him because she "thought he would smash something" (38).

Unfortunately, Harry has turned out to be just as traditional as her first husband, and does not at all understand her botanical experiments: “That’s an awfully nice thing for a woman to do—raise flowers. But there’s something about this—changing things into other things . . . Give it any name you want it to have—it’s unsettling for a woman” (33). Meanwhile, Claire is sleeping with Dick, an artist and a family friend, and she even goes so far as to joke about it openly in front of Harry (who is completely oblivious to the affair). Tom is an old friend of Claire’s, and comes the closest to understanding her desire for “otherness”; his surname of “Edgeworthy” certainly implies his willingness to go with Claire to the verge of something new, but in the end even he is unable to follow Claire beyond the boundaries of society’s expectations.

The real conflict begins when at the end of the first act Claire is confronted with her daughter Elizabeth, who has been raised mainly by Claire’s sister Adelaide “who is fitted to rear children” (45). In anticipation of Elizabeth’s arrival, Claire says, “A daughter is being delivered unto me this morning. I have a feeling it will be more painful than the original delivery. She has been, as they quaintly say, educated; prepared for her place in life” (39). Claire is disgusted by Elizabeth’s conventional attitude and lack of substance. When Elizabeth comments on Claire’s botanical work and expresses a desire to help her with it, the principal argument between the mother’s and daughter’s points of view become clear:

ELIZABETH: But I *want* to. Help add to the wealth of the world.
CLAIRE: Will you please get it out of your head that I am adding to the wealth of the world!
ELIZABETH: But, mother—of course you are. To produce a new and better kind of plant—
CLAIRE: They may be new. I don’t give a damn whether they’re better.
ELIZABETH: But—but what are they then?
CLAIRE: They’re different . . . These plants—Perhaps they are less beautiful—less sound—than the plants from which they have diverged. But they have found—otherness . . . they have been

shocked out of what they were—into something they were not; they've broken from the forms in which they've found themselves. They are alien. Outside. That's it, outside; if you—know what I mean.

ELIZABETH: But of course, the object of it all is to make them better plants. Otherwise, what would be the sense in doing it? (45-46)

This discussion of between mother and daughter of the purpose of Claire's experiments could be interpreted as each woman's point of view on female identity. Elizabeth has been raised or "cultivated" (43) to be beautiful, poised, and take up some sort of hobby or occupation because "One does, nowadays, doesn't one?—if you know what I mean. It was the war wasn't it, made it the thing to do something?" (44). Claire is repulsed by the idea of being useful or beautiful because it is in fashion, and instead desires to break every rule that society has ever put in place, and believes that doing so is the only way to arrive at something new and worthwhile. In Karen Malpede's essay "Reflections on *The Verge*", she suggests "If Claire could have made a new species, she would have made a new woman—one capable of life on life's own terms, a free, unfettered being" (124).

At the end of the act, Claire violently uproots the Edge Vine (which also happens to be shaped like a cross) because "It isn't—over the edge" (47), and exclaims to Elizabeth:

Do you know it is you—world of which you're so true a flower—makes me have to leave? You're there to hold the door shut! Because you're young and of a gayer world, you think I can't *see* them—those old men? Do you know why you're so sure of yourself? Because you can't *feel*. Can't feel—the limitless—out there—a sea just over the hill. I will not stay with you! (47-48)

Claire's words and actions demonstrate a complete rejection of her daughter and everything she represents, as well as a symbolic rejection of the traditional Christian values of her Puritan ancestors. She is convinced that there are no limitations whatsoever on what she might achieve, but her desire to go beyond the edge of otherness has begun to make it impossible to communicate with and relate to the rest of the characters, who are still

operating within traditional social confines. They see her self-expression as shocking and vulgar; only Tom remains behind with her in the final moments of the scene.

In Act Two, Claire confines herself to her study in an irregularly-shaped tower. This scene is the most Expressionist of the play, as the tower (described by Glaspell in the stage directions as “thought to be round but does not complete the circle. The back is curved, then jagged lines break from that . . . The whole structure is as if given a twist by some terrific force—like something wrong” [49]) can be interpreted as a projection of Claire’s psyche. Harry has invited a psychiatrist over to see Claire, believing her outburst in the previous act to be a sign of hysteria and instability. Claire is also visited by her sister Adelaide, a traditional woman of her generation who defends conforming to society’s expectations: “There’s something about being in that main body, having one’s roots in the big common experiences, gives a calm which you have missed” (53). However, Claire is entirely resistant to Adelaide’s arguments, and viciously calls her “a liar and thief and whore with words!” (53). Their argument culminates when Adelaide says, “A mother who does not love her own child! You are an unnatural woman, Claire,” and Claire replies, “Well, at least it saves me from being a natural one” (55). This seemingly heartless statement reflects the lengths to which Claire will go to avoid traditional gender roles: “Claire’s estrangement from both her sister and her daughter mark her utter rejection of the female world that had privileged motherhood and sisterhood above all other relationships” (Nelligan 93). In complete opposition to Anne of Crothers’s *He and She*, Claire chooses her own work, happiness, and sense of self over any sense of duty to her daughter, but as a result of this choice she is labeled insane. Tom is the only character who tries to understand Claire, but even he cannot quite reach her. Though they speak as if they love each other, something prevents Tom from

running away with Claire (perhaps a reluctance to let her passion for him interfere with her uniqueness?) and at the end of their scene, he rejects her. Still reeling from this rejection, Claire reveals her affair with Dick to Harry, Adelaide, and the psychiatrist, demonstrating that her refusal to adhere to traditional gender roles extends to marital infidelity.

In the final act, Tom, who has been planning to leave, changes his mind and tells Claire that he wants to be with her. However, when he promises to keep her safe from “farderness—from harm” and claims “You are mine, and you will stay with me!” (72), Claire responds, “I’d rather be the steam rising from the manure than be a thing called beautiful! Now I know who you are! It is you puts out the breath of life!” (72). She realizes that staying with Tom would just be a return to the conventional and limiting relationships she has already experienced with her first husband, with Harry, and with Dick. In order to save herself from this, she strangles Tom and pushes him through the glass wall of the conservatory, killing him. The play ends on an eerie note as Claire admires her Breath of Life plant while singing the hymn “Nearer my God, to Thee.” This hymn echoes Claire’s final line to Tom in the first act “. . . say something pleasant—about God. But be very careful what you say about him! I have a feeling—he’s not far off” (48). These references to her nearness to God do not appear to be suggestions of spirituality, but rather imply that Claire feels her ability to push beyond the limits of nature and create a new form of life makes her godlike. This blasphemous suggestion, along with her utter rejection of motherhood and marriage vows (the most sacred of society’s conventions) and her final act of violence make her a difficult character with whom to empathize. Nevertheless, her character makes for a fascinating psychological exploration, and her ideals demonstrate a remarkably radical view of feminism for her era.

The response to this play was highly mixed after its 1921 production, and most critics simply did not know how to respond. Yvonne Shafer explains, “Glaspell created a woman so complex, so different from the conventional wife and mother that many critics were baffled by the play and dismissed it as an ineffectual portrayal of a neurotic feminist” (*Reformers* 79). As an example, she cites a “typical” review by Robert A. Parker who dismissed Claire as “the type of erotic, neurotic, ill-tempered, and platitudinous hussy who dramatizes herself into a ‘superwoman’ and even ‘puts it over’ on her gentlemen friends” (*Playwrights* 52). Aston compares *The Verge’s* reception to that of Ibsen’s plays: “The American critics could no more understand Claire than their European counterparts had been able to understand Ibsen’s Nora Helmer or Hedda Gabbler” (116). The *New York Times* review by Alexander Woollcott called Claire “a study of an abnormal and neurotic woman” and claimed, “It is not the authenticity of the portrait at which the average passerby will strain and choke, it is the author’s own reverent, heroine-worshipping attitude towards this particular manifestation of the divine discontent . . . which provokes combativeness in the onlooker” (23). The critics of the time could not conceive of Claire as a tragic heroine, or consider how the restrictions of society’s limited acceptable roles for women might have led to her so-called “neurosis.”

In spite of early confusion and mixed reviews, the revival of Glaspell studies has led to a number of feminist readings that provide a more positive picture of what Claire’s character represents. In her essay “‘The Haunting Beauty from the Life We’ve Left’: A Contextual Reading of *Trifles* and *The Verge*,” Liza Mauve Nelligan eloquently describes Claire as “a heroine who privileges her right to self-development over maternal and wifely devotion, articulately demands satisfying and egalitarian relationships with men, and is committed to exposing and destroying the conventional social boundaries that crush her

individuality” (91). She goes on to assert that “Glaspell was deliberately attempting to reconstruct the political and personal dilemmas of feminist women who . . . saw their own lives as experiments in womanhood, experiments that continue to rekindle the feminist imaginations of our own times as well” (99). Undoubtedly, the extremes to which Claire is willing to go to maintain her sense of individual identity make her one of the most radical representations of feminist thinking onstage in the 1920s.

Machinal: A woman crushed under the machine of society

Perhaps the ultimate theatrical depiction of the repressive marriage in the 1920s, Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*, which premiered on Broadway in 1928, features a Young Woman (described by Treadwell as “an ordinary young woman, any woman” [173]) who is pressured into marriage and eventually kills her husband. Like Glaspell’s *Trifles*, the story was inspired by an actual murder case, which caused a sensation in the press largely because the couple appeared to be so ordinary.

Treadwell unfolds the story through a series of nine Expressionist episodes, each focusing on a different aspect of a modern woman’s life. The first episode, “To Business,” depicts an impersonal, mechanized world in which the Young Woman is ill-suited to survive. The abrupt and rhythmic dialogue of her office coworkers, punctuated by the sounds of typewriters, adding machines, and ringing telephones, overwhelms the Young Woman (and the audience) with the mechanical. The Young Woman also describes a feeling of claustrophobia on the subway:

YOUNG WOMAN: I had to get out!
ADDING CLERK: Out!
FILING CLERK: Out?
STENOGRAPHER: Out where?
YOUNG WOMAN: In the air!

STENOGRAPHER: Air?
YOUNG WOMAN: All those bodies pressing.
FILING CLERK: Hot dog!
YOUNG WOMAN: I thought I would faint! I had to get out in the air!
FILING CLERK: Give her the air.
ADDING CLERK: Free air.
STENOGRAPHER: Hot air.
YOUNG WOMAN: Like I'm dying (181).

The sense of being stifled that the Young Woman experiences repeats throughout the play as she feels herself forced into situations she does not choose. Though she is repulsed by her boss, George H. Jones, his attraction and desire to marry her places her in a virtually inescapable situation. When the Young Woman expresses her repulsion to the Telephone Girl (the coworker who comes closest to a friend), she replies:

TELEPHONE GIRL: No! Tell him no.
STENOGRAPHER: If she does she'll lose her job.
ADDING CLERK: Fired.
FILING CLERK: The sack.
TELEPHONE GIRL: [*On the defensive*] And if she doesn't?
ADDING CLERK: She'll come to work in a taxi.
TELEPHONE GIRL: Work?
FILING CLERK: No work.
STENOGRAPHER: No worry.
ADDING CLERK: Breakfast in bed.
STENOGRAPHER: [*Sarcastic*] Did Madame ring?
FILING CLERK: Lunch in bed!
TELEPHONE GIRL: A double bed!

The Young Woman's coworkers make it clear that she is in no position to deny Jones's advances, while accepting them would mean freedom from the work that exhausts and stifles her. However, the final line of the Telephone Girl serves as a succinct reminder that sexual submission to the boss is the price of this freedom, and amounts to little more than prostitution. At the end of the scene, her telegraphic monologue allows the audience to witness her inner turmoil as she cries out for ". . . something—somebody" (186).

In Episode Two, “At Home,” the Young Woman is further pressured by her mother to accept Jones’s proposal, because like Mary the First of Crothers’s *Mary the Third*, she relies on her daughter for financial support. Once again, economic dependence on males becomes a clear cause of female repression.

Episode Three, “Honeymoon,” jumps to the wedding night of the Young Woman, at which point she is forced to submit sexually to the husband she did not desire. At the end of the scene, she repeats her earlier cry of “Somebody—somebody—” (200), but there is no one to help her.

The logical next step of womanhood follows in Episode Four, “Maternal.” The Young Woman lies in a hospital bed after delivering a baby girl. Barely able to speak and nauseated by the smells, she displays no desire to see her newborn daughter or her husband (she even begins gagging when he comes to visit), and wishes only to be left alone. Her final monologue expresses defiance as she repeats “I’ll not submit anymore—I’ll not submit—I’ll not submit” (206).

In the fifth and sixth episodes, “Prohibited” and “Intimate,” the Young Woman finally gains an individual identity as she is introduced as Helen Jones by the Telephone Girl to two young men (interestingly, they are named Dick and Harry, playing on the common names and popular saying just as Glaspell does in *The Verge*). Once the Telephone Girl takes off with Harry, the Young Woman experiences freedom and release for the first time through her love affair with Dick, an adventurer who has fought off Mexican bandits using only a glass bottle filled with stones.

The final three episodes relate the Young Woman’s crime and punishment, as she contemplates the murder of her husband in the seventh episode, “Domestic,” is tried for the

murder in Episode Eight, “The Law,” and prepared for execution by electric chair in the final episode, “A Machine.” During “Domestic,” the Young Woman is inundated by outside voices that propel her toward her crime—she reads newspaper stories about women leaving their families and husbands, or finding a husband dead, and in the final moments, a story about a revolution in Mexico and repetition of the word “stones” jars her memory of how her lover escaped from the bandits with his glass bottle full of stones. She is forced to confess her crime (to a courtroom in which she is the only female), when she is betrayed by a signed affidavit from Dick confirming that he had an affair with her and gave her the stones which were used as the murder weapon. The Young Woman gives the same reason as Dick did for committing murder in Mexico: “To be free” (248). Through both these scenes, Treadwell clearly implies that in modern society, women have less right to freedom than men, and she subtly evokes this implication as the Husband (Jones) quotes a newspaper editorial with which he “absolutely” agrees: “All men are born free and entitled to the pursuit of happiness” (229). The irony of this statement is clear in that while both principal male characters, Jones (the Husband) and Dick (the lover), are free to live their lives as they choose and pursue whatever makes them happy, the Young Woman has had no choices and in the end is condemned by the single pursuit that did give her happiness—her affair with Dick. In the final scene, a machine is appropriately used as the method for her punishment, and she finds no peace in her final moments as she is once again forced to submit to the cutting of her hair in preparation for the electric chair. The Priest likewise offers her little comfort; he seems to speak a language she does not understand and cannot answer her most pressing questions:

I’ve been free, Father! For one moment—down here on Earth—I have been free!
When I did what I did I was free! Free and not afraid! How is that, Father? How can that be? A great sin—a mortal sin—for which I must die and go to Hell—but it made me free! . . . And that other sin—that other sin—that sin of love—That’s all I ever

knew of Heaven—Heaven on Earth! How is that Father? How can that be—a sin—a mortal sin—all I know of Heaven? (252).

In the final moments of the play, the Young Woman cries out a final time “Somebody! Somebody—[*her voice is cut off*]” (255), and we see that no one in society—family, peers, husband, lover, or even God—has heard her cries.

In her book *American Feminist Playwrights*, Sally Burke suggests that “In addition to the physical machines, Treadwell presents the crushing forces of the abstract machinery of business, marriage, sex, motherhood, religion, the legal system, and the state” (78). Judith E. Barlow expresses a similar idea in the introduction to her anthology *Plays by American Women*, arguing “The villain of the piece is not Helen’s materialistic husband . . . Nor is it the cavalier lover . . . who considers her just another conquest . . . Rather, the villain is a rigid society that has no room for human feelings and dreams, especially those of women” (xxix). Burke believes that Treadwell’s harsh critique of society, particularly the ways in which it represses women, accounts for the original production’s run of only 91 performances (83). Whether or not this is true, *Machinal* undoubtedly received a more favorable reception than *The Verge*, perhaps because the more blatant Expressionist techniques show each scene entirely from the Young Woman’s perspective, which forces the audience to empathize with Treadwell’s Young Woman and gives greater insight into the reasons for her rejection of traditional feminine roles and her final act of violence. In spite of its limited New York run, the play’s popularity led to international productions in Paris, London, and Moscow, where it was directed by Tairov and ran for a year (Shafer *Playwrights* 262). But like much of Glaspell’s work, after *Machinal*’s initial success it disappeared from the dramatic canon for several decades, and Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* was instead recognized as the quintessential example of American Expressionism. However, revivals of *Machinal* in the

1960s, 1990s, and beyond (including a Broadway production by Roundabout Theatre Company in early 2014) have made it one of the most-produced plays from the 1920s, as its resurgence has led to modern productions not only in New York but also in regional and educational theatres throughout the United States. Treadwell's masterpiece is now considered one of the greatest examples of American Expressionism, and its demonstration of how her society's machines limited freedom of choice, especially for women, still resonates today.

CHAPTER 3

DYSFUNCTIONAL MARRIAGES: WOMEN WHO LEAVE THEIR HUSBANDS

A sharp rise in the divorce rate during the 1920s (1.6 per 1,000 population up from 0.9 per 1,000 in the previous decade [U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services]) demonstrates that not all women felt trapped in their unhappy marriages, and many chose to leave their husbands to pursue independent lives, careers, or other lovers. Such women are frequently featured in the work by female playwrights of the 1920s and 30s, perhaps inspired by Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which by the twenties had finally gained recognition and acceptance in the United States. Rachel Crothers, Sophie Treadwell, and Dawn Powell each explore the positive and negative sides of walking away from an unsatisfying marriage in plays that tend to be mainly comedies, though often with a dark and cynical edge. In Crothers's *Let Us Be Gay*, the disillusioned protagonist encounters her unfaithful ex-husband in an unexpected place and questions her new lifestyle. Sophie Treadwell pokes fun at the psychology fad as it prompts a bored housewife to pursue an affair and eventually leave her husband in *Ladies Leave*. And Dawn Powell takes a cynical look at New York society in both *Big Night*, in which the protagonist's husband tries to use her attractiveness to a potential client to make a business deal, and *Jig Saw*, in which an un-domestic divorcée competes with her own daughter over a young lover.

***Let Us Be Gay*: Generational and gender double standards in the era of divorce**

Marital struggles and divorce are a frequent topic of plays by Rachel Crothers, and *Let Us Be Gay* (1929) is a brilliant and surprisingly funny example. The play begins with a prologue in which a young idealistic Kitty Brown, having learned of her husband Bob's

infidelity, decides immediately to divorce him. Three years later, a now cynical and flirtatious Kitty is invited by her older friend Mrs. Boucicault to come to her country house for the primary purpose of seducing a man whose flirtation with her granddaughter Deirdre is endangering Dierdre's relationship with her fiancé Bruce. The unwanted third party whom Dierdre is so shamelessly pursuing turns out to be none other than Kitty's ex-husband Bob. Sophisticated wit and farcical situations ensue as Kitty and Bob attempt to hide their history from the eclectic group Mrs. Boucicault has invited for the weekend. *Let Us Be Gay* is a cleverly-written piece that successfully combines comedy of manners and drama to both entertain and comment on important social issues.

As in *Mary the Third*, three generations of women are represented in *Let Us Be Gay*, and through each generation we see changing views on marriage and morality. Mrs. Boucicault represents the oldest generation, but in general has much more progressive views than did Mary the First. She has accepted and even embraced some of the changing morals of more recent generations:

I'd like to live another fifty years—without the bother of living—to see this thing through. I've watched a long procession of men, women, and morals through three generations. I'm seventy-six, and I don't know anything . . . I always knew my husband wasn't faithful to me, but I lived in hell with him for fifty years because I knew divorce wasn't respectable. My only daughter had three divorces—which I was tickled to death to see her get—and here's my grandchild in the middle of this modern moral revolution and I'm helpless . . . (31-32).

While thrilled that changes in society have made divorce acceptable and completely unopposed to Kitty's modern lifestyle, Mrs. Boucicault still has trouble accepting total sexual liberation when it comes to her own granddaughter. What Dierdre really wants is to experience sex with a man whom she finds attractive before committing herself to Bruce, but Boucicault's views are not quite progressive enough to tolerate this, even though she casually

watches her married friend Madge flirt with a man who is not her husband, and is willing to use Kitty as sexual bait for Bob to distract him from Dierdre. Boucicault's hypocrisy is not lost on Dierdre, however; she (referring to the other women staying for the weekend) brashly states "I don't know why you expect me to be so different from anybody else" (69). The clash between the generations in *Let Us Be Gay* demonstrates that the so-called decaying morals of the younger generation are actually a result of changes that have been occurring in previous ones—if marriage is no longer a sacred institution and fidelity cannot be expected, then what is the point of chastity before marriage?

In addition to the double standard inherent in the differing expectations of female chastity among different generations, there is the double standard of fidelity during marriage, which society deems absolutely essential for women but not for men. This double standard is apparent from the very beginning of the play when Bob attempts to explain his affair to Kitty: "*It has nothing to do with you—nor the way I feel towards you—nor what I am to you . . . You still don't know the actual honest to God truth about the man and woman business. If you did understand you'd forgive me*" (7). Bob implies that Kitty's naïveté about sex (and possibly also her own sexual inexperience in comparison to his) is the only reason she is so shocked and upset. Later, when they meet again in the country house and are able to speak alone, Bob is shocked (and almost has trouble conceiving) that Kitty has had many casual affairs since their marriage:

KITTY: Like you I've been amusing myself with anything and everything that came my way. I know how a man feels about that too.
BOB: You're very glib but I don't know just what you mean. What—do you—exactly? (96).

They are interrupted before Kitty can respond, though her meaning seems perfectly clear. In the final scene, when Bob asks Kitty outright if she's been with other men and she replies

that she has, his shock seems especially hypocritical, and she retorts, “I suppose you think I ought to have stayed at home with a broken heart, for the rest of my life—hugging my ideals. But I didn’t seem to be able to do that. I had to get out and find out what it was all about—to see why *you* did it” (165). Kitty’s practicality and independence (which includes financial independence, as she now owns her own business) have allowed her to enjoy exactly the same experiences as her ex-husband, but she is viewed very differently by the rest of the characters because of this.

The double standard of male and female promiscuity is also evident in the younger couple Deirdre and Bruce. In attempting to dissuade Dierdre from continuing to pursue Bob, Bruce makes it clear that he’s had experiences with other women, and says, “You’ll get over it. I’ve been that way—lots of times . . . Believe me there’s nothing in it but what you’ll be terribly sorry for—and ashamed of afterwards” (143). Even so, he expects Dierdre to be a virgin when they are married, and he expresses the traditional view:

There’s no new slant on this old stuff at all. Either a girl is decent or she isn’t. There’s no half way business about it—and when a fellow gets down to brass tacks, he wants the girl he’s going to marry—the one who is going to be the mother of his kids—to be the straightest, finest, cleanest thing in the world (144-145).

But once again, Dierdre points out the hypocrisy inherent in his statement:

DIERDRE: And if a girl wants the darling boy she marries to be the same thing—where the hell is she going to find him?
BRUCE: It’s not the same thing at all for you and me.
DIERDRE: It is!
BRUCE: It isn’t!
DIERDRE: It is—exactly the same thing. Why should I marry you and settle down and pretend that’s all there is to it when I know damned well it isn’t? . . . Why shouldn’t I have Bob for a while and marry you, too?
BRUCE: *Because you can’t.* You simply can’t. That’s all there is to it.
DIERDRE: Do you mean to tell me if I’d *had* an affair with Bob—and it helped me to know I wanted to marry you—you wouldn’t marry me? (145-146)

Bruce's failure to respond to Dierdre's questions with any kind of rational argument demonstrates that the only reason her behavior is deemed unacceptable (while his is not) is that she is a woman.

The end of the play raises some questions about what the audience should conclude. In the final scene, Kitty reveals to Bob that her casual love affairs have left her feeling empty and lonely. She says, "I wanted to find out whether I'd been a fool or not—whether I had exaggerated what you did. Well, I hadn't. It was just as horrible as I thought it was. Bob, marriage means just one thing—complete and absolute fidelity or it's the biggest farce on earth" (165). Bob insists that he could be faithful if she would come back to him, but Kitty is sure that he will hurt her again. She resists him until almost the final line of the play, but ends by asking him to take her back. This ending has caused many feminist critics to write off the play as catering to the popular audience rather than maintaining a feminist stance, but Kitty's final willingness to go back to her husband seems true to the final point that meaningless affairs and false "gaiety" are ultimately unsatisfying. Though Kitty does not truly enjoy her independence as much as modern feminists might like, she certainly proves herself more than capable of getting by without a husband, and both she and Dierdre help to demonstrate the hypocrisy of society's views on sex and marital fidelity.

The happy ending also certainly helped make the play one of Crothers's greatest successes, though critics also praised her dialogue, wit, and treatment of social issues. The original production ran 132 performances, and it was made into a film in 1930 (Lindroth & Lindroth 61). Surprisingly, *Let Us Be Gay* has had no notable revivals; perhaps because so many believe that the happy reunion at the end undermines any feminist message (though this has not impeded revivals and new adaptations of Clare Boothe's *The Women*), or perhaps

because the style and some of the content are too dated for more modern productions. Nevertheless, the play contains some truly fantastic wit and comedy and sheds light on both generational and gender double standards.

Ladies Leave: Self-realization through psychoanalysis

Less than one year after the successful production of *Machinal*, Treadwell's *Ladies Leave* was also produced on Broadway in 1929, but with a much more lukewarm reception, and it ran only fifteen performances (Shafer *Playwrights* 264). Labeled by the *New York Times* critic as a "drawing room comedy" that "never quite lives up to its early promise" (though he stipulates that overacting on the part of two performers is one reason that some of the comedy fell flat), the play focuses on bored housewife Zizi Powers, who is inspired by the lectures of a Viennese psychologist to pursue a love affair with one of her husband's subordinates, but discovers that she is unsatisfied with both this new relationship and the one with her husband, and at last decides to leave both of them and travel to Vienna.

From the beginning of the play, it is clear that Zizi is viewed as a possession by her husband Burnham, a wealthy owner of a popular women's magazine, who explains to the psychologist Dr. Jeffer that after various affairs with older and younger women in New York City he had to go back to his small hometown to find an "old-fashioned girl—untouched by modernity" (143) to marry. Near the end of the play, Zizi even acknowledges that after her marriage she had "an awful sense, too, of being sold: Is that what all the poetry and the novels are about?" (189). But after time spent in New York, and reading the books and attending the lectures of Dr. Jeffer, Zizi starts to realize that sometimes, as Jeffer puts it, "Immorality is moral" (173). The first act ends as Zizi makes the decision to go ahead and

have an affair with Phillip, the young editor of her husband's magazine who has been pursuing her for several months.

Though Zizi seems to blossom as a result of her affair with Phillip (both her husband and Dr. Jeffer comment on her increased vitality and attractiveness), she also recognizes that while it is liberating, it is no more emotionally satisfying than the relationship she has with her husband. Even when pushed by Phillip, she cannot bring herself to call the affair "love". It quickly becomes clear that Phillip has the exact same desire as Burnham to possess her:

PHILLIP: One reason that I wanted you so much was that then I thought I'd have you.

ZIZI: Have me?

PHILLIP: Yes. I was so green I thought that when a woman took a lover she—(*Hesitates*) she did something that—well—put her in his power, somehow. Not that he'd ever turn it against her—no; but that he'd have to be very careful and considerate. You act as though you had me and didn't give a damn instead of my having you and being careful and considerate!

ZIZI: (*Laughing*) Phil, you are sweet. (172).

Phillip's idea that sexual conquest of a woman equals the man's complete dominance of her is ridiculous and antiquated, and Zizi's amused response demonstrates that her maturity and understanding far exceed Phillip's. The true discovery that Zizi makes through her affair with Phillip is that real love, or "what all the poetry and novels are about" requires something more than she has found in her previous relationships, and she describes this to Jeffer:

ZIZI: Love is a lover plus—plus—(*Hesitates helplessly, then.*) X! . . . But X is always the unknown quantity, isn't it? And it varies for every equation. That's the very secret of its X-ness.

JEFFER: (*Interested. Slowly.*) What is X for you?

ZIZI: Oh, I can't define it. It's made up of so much—so many different quantities. It's A and B and C and—

JEFFER: And you don't know what any of them are?

ZIZI: Well, one of them is pride—pride in the—the—beloved. (185).

Zizi realizes the lack of pride and respect she has felt (for and from) both Burnham and Phillip, and recognizes her need of these in order to have an emotionally satisfying relationship.

In addition to gaining a more mature understanding of love and relationships, Zizi also gains from Jeffer's teachings a stronger sense of individuality and equality with the men in her life. She recognizes when she is being belittled or patronized by Burnham and Phillip and begins to push back. For example, when Burnham comments on the "newfangled patter" of "you girls," Zizi responds "Don't say 'You girls,' Burnham, please . . . Not 'You' anything. I won't be herded, Burnham. I won't!" (165). Just a few lines later, when Burnham laughs at the idea that she might be able to convince Jeffer to write an article for the magazine (after both Burnham and Philip have failed to do so), Zizi accuses Burnham of "Deliberately planting an inferiority complex in me" and protests "I won't have it. That's all" (165). Though many critics wrote off *Ladies Leave* as "a frothy satire of psychoanalysis and the American marriage" (Dickey & López-Rodríguez 77), Zizi's transformation and self-discovery indicate that Treadwell took much of psychoanalysis quite seriously. Dickey and López-Rodríguez assert that "Treadwell . . . was drawn to the psychoanalytic theory that sexual fulfillment and openness led to an emergence of the authentic self" (76), and Treadwell's personal life appears to confirm this as Gainor and Dickey point out that her "activism led to newfound sexual freedoms, especially those originating in openly discussed pre- and extra-marital relations" (45). *Ladies Leave* may even be inspired in part by her own "passionate relationship with western painter Maynard Dixon from 1916 to 1920" (Gainor & Dickey 45).

In complete contrast to Zizi's journey of self-realization is the trajectory of her houseguest Mrs. Irma White, who is also the source of much of the play's comedy. Irma has left her small-town home and husband of many years due to boredom and, as she puts it, "dying of dry rot" (157). She also wants to work on her novel, which she was unable to do at home because of feeling "inhibited" (158), but she also never manages to work on it in New York due to being "too stimulated!" (167). The source of her stimulation is an over-the-top infatuation with Phillip (who flirts with her only to make Zizi jealous—unsuccessfully), and this infatuation eventually leads Irma to eavesdrop on a conversation between Zizi and Phillip, in which she discovers their affair and later reveals it to Burnham. In spite of her profession to be following the same liberal ideology as Zizi (she too, is a fan of Jeffer) her grasp of his theory is clearly much shallower than Zizi's. Irma continues to depend on the financial support of her husband, faults her "weak body" for her moral failings (176), and though titillated by the idea of having an affair herself with Phillip, expresses disgust towards Zizi for having an extra-marital affair. In the end she decides to return to her husband, making her entire trip seem like a joke. Irma's hypocrisy does satirize the idea of psychoanalysis as a fad, rather than as a theory that when taken seriously and fully understood can lead to self-discovery.

Zizi's final decision to leave both her husband and her lover comes off as fully justified, particularly after Phillip shows up with the intent to have a "showdown" with Burnham, and both make complete fools of themselves. Both men also make only half-hearted attempts to convince Zizi to stay, which she points out might have convinced her grandmother or her mother, but do nothing to persuade Zizi. After she leaves, both men are almost instantly (and quite comically) distracted by a business success and dinner being

served. However, the final implications of Zizi's choice to go to Vienna is open to interpretation, as it is unclear whether she is leaving to seek out an independent existence or merely following Jeffer. At first, Zizi expresses the intention to leave without having any particular place in mind to go, and only after Burnham insists that she must be planning to go somewhere does Vienna occur to Zizi. Even then, she does not mention Dr. Jeffer as part of her plan. Various critics have interpreted this ending quite differently. Shafer asserts that Zizi "leaves to catch up with the attractive psychiatrist in Vienna" (*Playwrights* 263), while Gainor and Dickey write that Zizi is "leaving for a life of her own in Europe" (45), and Dickey and López-Rodríguez point out that "Jeffer anticipates that Zizi will follow him, presumably to continue her self-exploration and growth in the capital of psychoanalysis" (76). The varied takes on Treadwell's ending demonstrate that it could be very much up to the reader or audience to determine whether *Ladies Leave* is in fact a "frothy satire" in which a bored housewife uses psychoanalytic theory as an excuse to leave her husband for an exotic European or is a more serious look at a modern woman's journey of self-discovery in which the satirical character Irma White is used for contrast and comic relief. Shafer's interpretation that *Ladies Leave* falls short of both a significant feminist message and successful comedy is supported by her citation of critic Stephen Rathbun:

Mrs. Zizi Powers is a feminist to the extent of insisting upon living her own life . . . But it is hardly feministic of the frankly honest Zizi to be interested only in men. She lives in a man-centered world. Thus her newly acquired freedom is but an illusion. And that is why this drawing room comedy is an unimportant play and is just the fleeting diversion of an idle evening (qtd. in Shafer, *Playwrights* 204).

While Rathbun's conclusion may be reinforced by the rapid closing of the original production and subsequent lack of recognition of the play by many scholars, there is no concrete evidence in the text to support the idea that Zizi's decision to leave is "man-

centered” or that her new freedom is merely an illusion. The interpretations of Gainor, Dickey, and López-Rodríguez are much more likely to represent Treadwell’s intentions for the ending as a demonstration of Zizi’s maturation, self-realization and independence. In fact the choice of Vienna as Zizi’s destination was inspired by Treadwell’s own life, since “Vienna would prove an intermittent stopping point and residence for Treadwell throughout much . . . of her life” (Dickey & López-Rodríguez 76). Though the original production undoubtedly fell short of achieving Treadwell’s intentions, *Ladies Leave* still demonstrates a modern and fascinating look at a female protagonist who decides to demand more of herself and her relationships.

Big Night: The business world and sexual exploitation

Big Night was Dawn Powell’s first play to be staged, and was produced by the Group Theater in 1933. She began writing in 1928 under the title *The Party* and submitted it to the Theater Guild, which passed it up, but the Group Theater took it on to fill a gap in their season and cast Stella Adler as Myra, the leading lady. The production went through almost six months of rehearsal and re-writes, including a change in the ending (possibly under Adler’s influence) in which Myra storms out of the apartment just like Nora from *A Doll’s House*. Powell was unhappy with the Group’s interpretation: “The Group has put on a careful production with no knowledge whatever of the characters—as they might put on a picture of Siberian home life—made up bit by bit of exact details but the actual realism of the whole missing” (qtd. in Page 130). The majority of critics were also unimpressed, one stating: “Mrs. Powell’s drama is even more tiresome than the odious little microbes with whom it is concerned” (qtd. in Page 130). Robert Bentley of the *New Yorker* gave the only positive reaction, describing Powell as a “keen and humorous observer” and remarking that

“If unpleasant characters are to damn a play, Mr. O’Neill has been getting away with not only incest but murder all these years” (qtd. in Sexton and Page 4). A Group Theater member and longtime friend of Powell who acted as assistant stage manager for the production bluntly stated, “The Group Theater ruined *Big Night*” (qtd. in Sexton and Page 3).

Like *Ladies Leave*, *Big Night* features a married protagonist, Myra, who gradually awakens to her own dissatisfaction with her marriage and in the end decides to leave her husband. However, the tone of this departure is far more cynical than Zizi’s in *Ladies Leave*, for while Zizi appears to be embarking on a journey of self-discovery, Myra leaves with another man who will likely use her in the same ways that her husband has.

In *Big Night*, Ed Bonney, an account man for an advertising agency, throws a party for a potential client, Bob Jones, head of a successful clothing company whose business will make or break Ed’s career. The problem is that Ed’s wife Myra, a former model, lost her job several years before after rejecting the very same Jones’s sexual advances—the first evidence of the theme that the business world, dominated by men, has no place for women who are unwilling to compromise their integrity or use their sexuality as a method of advancement. Ed too values Myra primarily for her beauty and considers this a primary asset to help him attract new clients. When Myra expresses her discomfort with the situation before Jones arrives, Ed replies:

ED: Now, Myra, honey, you’re just all shot to pieces tonight. A little party for a new prospect, that’s all, and you act as if I was sellin’ you for a white slave.

MYRA: That’s the way I feel, Ed. Dressing up for your customers, laughing at their nifties, letting ‘em think that someday we’re going to have a beautiful friendship . . . you know, Ed, sometimes I think you’d want me to do that, too, if there was a big enough commission in it. (22-23).

Over the course of the evening, it becomes clear that this is exactly what Ed wants. As the party gets wilder and the guests (which include an over-the-top bimbo neighbor, a competitor of Ed's, the competitor's wife, and at one point a night club singer) get drunker, Jones makes more and more brash advances toward Myra, who continues to reject him. When Jones asks Myra why, she alludes to the night years before when he made unwanted advances, and Jones protests "All I wanted to do was show you a good time and you nearly gouged my eyes out. You made a big mistake, Myra . . . because you were the best-looking model in New York and I could've done things for you. A lot more than this Bonney fellow" (52). Myra left the modeling business and married Ed primarily because she did not want to be part of this system, and she thought that Ed was different. She tells Jones:

- MYRA: You were the worst and you knew it—because you were the biggest buyer there, that's why, and Moses gave you the Betsey Dale for your harem. You were King Solomon in that place. As if you didn't know it—
- JONES: I only went after you—you were the only one—
- MYRA: Because I was the only one you couldn't get, that was all, so you thought you had to run me. Oh, I'd been hounded before, all right, but not like that. You run me down like I was some wild animal.
- JONES: You were, too, damn you.

This is not the only time that Jones refers to Myra as a wild animal; he later refers to her as "a kind of Arabian horse—a fine thoroughbred like you see in the circus. Meant to run wild through the desert but instead, a slave to some squirt of a trainer made to jump through paper hoops and things" (60). Just like Phillip in *Ladies Leave*, who believed that his affair with Zizi would put her in his power, Jones views the sexual conquest of Myra as a way to tame and dominate her. Myra continues to resist his advances (and even scratches his face) until Ed complains that she isn't "being nice" to his business friends. Myra replies, "There'd've been the devil to pay if I'd been nice the way you mean", to which Ed says, "I suppose you

think I give a damn what you do, with Jonesie or anybody else . . . I've got the guts to see something through and by God that's more than you have" (72-73). After this statement, Myra allows Jones's advances, and the act ends with a passionate kiss between the two.

The next morning, neither Ed nor Jones seem to remember much of the previous night, but when Jones reveals that he's already contracted to another ad agency, Ed realizes that he is about to lose his job. He takes it out on Myra, whom he accuses of "double-crossing" him with Jones, and implies that entertaining men sexually was her "trade" as a model. Myra replies, "You thought all the buyers had me . . . and you married me anyway, because you could use a good whore in your business" (96). She admits to sleeping with Jones (though it is unclear whether she actually did), and Ed is crushed, but to smooth things over, Jones promises to give Ed his business. Ed's mood changes almost instantly and he rushes to his office acting as if nothing has occurred between him and Myra. The play ends with Myra deciding to leave with Jones, even though he clearly intends to use her in all the same ways that Ed has.

Like Zizi, Myra recognizes throughout the play that she wants something more out of a relationship than to be exploited and dominated, but she lacks Zizi's educated background and a guide like Dr. Jeffer to help her understand exactly what this is or how to find it. Early in the play she attempts to express her dissatisfaction to Ed:

What I mean, Ed, is you don't get me at all. I don't know how to explain but . . . Ed, didn't you ever feel as if there was something you was missing? Something—you didn't know what? . . . Something you want more than anything—like the Atlantic Ocean or the sky—something you never could have only it's swell just to be wantin' it. It just lasts a minute . . . (*As the dream evaporates*) . . . and then you see a fur coat in Jaeckel's window and you figure, I guess that's what I meant. (24-25).

Without ever having witnessed any type of relationship other than exploitative ones and years of being told that she has no need to use her brain because she is so beautiful, in the

end Myra has no real choice but to sell herself to the highest bidder. She gives up the dream that she can't reach (because she's not sure it actually exists) in exchange for the fur coat. Since Ed turns out to be no different from Jones (or any other man she's ever met) she might as well go with Jones because he can buy her a more expensive one.

The play is a scathing satire of the advertising industry, full of mercenary and shallow characters, but the dialogue is extremely witty, and the hypocrisy of the characters is both shocking and comic. At the end of the play, Jones laments Ed's exploitation of Myra, but then within a page or so plans how he will use Myra to help get him into an exclusive nightclub. The effect is highly disturbing, and this play would be tricky to perform without losing the comedy on the surface of its dark themes, but the theme of sexual exploitation of women in the business world is certainly one worth exploring.

Jig-Saw: Intertwined affairs with a piece missing

In spite of the poor reviews Powell received for *Big Night*, she did not give up on the theatre, but noted: "At first, I was dashed, then challenged and even flattered—to be attacked as a menace to the theater was the first real sign that I had a contribution to make there . . . the only defeat or failure is in being ignored or being told you have appeased it" (qtd. in Sexton and Page, 7). She completed *Jig-Saw* only a few months after the closing of *Big Night* and it was produced one year later (in 1934) by the Theater Guild. It ran forty-nine performances and while not a huge success, received much better reviews praising her wit, dialogue, and characters, though several criticized it for a lack of action and weak plot. Nonetheless, it was Powell's only play to be published during her lifetime, and has received the most productions.

Jig-Saw is a clever satire of the leisurely high-society of New York City. The plot centers on Claire Burnell, an attractive divorcée approaching forty, as she juggles two men (a long-standing affair with the slightly older and married Del Marsh and a brand-new infatuation with the “casual” twenty-something Nate Gifford) and attempts to hide her affairs from her daughter Julie, who has just returned from boarding school. Julie’s thoughts are entirely on marriage and babies, much to the chagrin of the un-domestic Claire and her sophisticated friends. Frank, a neighbor, exclaims, “Here she is eighteen—and doesn’t want to be a dancer or an actress, or study art, or interior decorating—any of the normal things . . . just babies . . . a curious case” (164). This statement, while certainly expressed with some irony, demonstrates exactly the opposite sentiment of Victorian ideals of womanhood. It is no longer considered fashionable (at least among this upper-class group, all of whom are either divorced or engaged in extra-marital affairs) for a young woman to pursue marriage and a family as her primary goal.

The plot’s twist occurs when Julie recognizes Nate as a man she flirted with in Paris and immediately targets him as a potential husband. This match is encouraged by Del (who naturally wants Claire to himself) as he tells Julie “I don’t think you could have made a better choice than Gifford, here. He’s a born philanderer so that he’ll always be feeling guilty and making it up to you. You know you’ll find no more thoughtful, considerate husband than the guilty one” (178). Nate tries to resist, insisting that he has no interest in marriage or young girls, but Julie is so persistent that she even breaks into his apartment to wait for him there. Del urges Nate to go through with the marriage, explaining:

. . . in a little while you’ll be reaping the real benefits of the married state . . . In breaking off little affairs you have only to say—This must stop because it isn’t fair to my wife . . . A clean break, you see, with you in a noble position instead of being

looked upon as the villain. Oh, you'll find a wife a great advantage in your future social life (207).

Del's tongue-in-cheek statements about marriage are spoken from experience (as he has his own wife in Baltimore) and they demonstrate how ridiculous and flimsy the institution seems when fidelity is not really expected by either side. Claire's friend Letty presents another example of this attitude towards marriage, as she has been married for many years to a doctor who lives in the country (where she can't stand to be), and spends most of her time entertaining Frank, a playwright (also married) who lives upstairs. The casual, intertwining relationships of Powell's characters echo Kitty's statement in *Let Us Be Gay* that without fidelity, marriage is "the biggest farce on earth", but Powell makes this clear with a much lighter and slightly cynical tone.

In the end, Nate runs off with Julie in hot pursuit, but Del helps Claire save face by insinuating that she was only interested in Nate because she wanted to make sure that he'd be a good match for Julie. Despite Claire's intentions to leave Del, he manages to convince her that he truly cares for her, even offering to divorce his wife and marry her, but Claire refuses, saying "I'd rather be the woman you run away to. It wasn't true love, perhaps—and it was awfully casual—but it's a damn sight more dignified" (223). Claire chooses a relationship in which even though something still seems to be missing for her (Frank comments that her continual pursuit of idle pastimes shows that "she doesn't know what it is she lacks" [200]), she feels greater self-respect as Del's mistress than she would as his wife in an unfaithful marriage. As the play ends it seems that the status quo has returned, with Del and Claire happy in their casual affair.

A stand-out image of the play is the use of an incomplete jig-saw puzzle onstage, which reflects not only the complicated and interwoven love-affairs of the various characters,

but also the meaninglessness of the activities in which they engage, such as bridge, shopping, new fads in beauty-regimens, and fortune-telling. Frank points out, “You’d think it was a priceless bit of tapestry she was doing. But a puzzle. A thousand pieces of nothing put together to make nothing” (199), and he throws one of the pieces off the terrace. In a review of Tim Page’s compilation of Powell’s plays, Catherine Sheehy points out:

The moment is pure Powell. The playwright doesn’t have any of the other characters gasp in astonishment or admonish Frank or make any mention at all of the willful if largely benign act of destruction. In fact, it never comes up again, even as the heroine’s lover sits down to work on the thing as the curtain rings down. But the audience knows the picture will never be complete (124).

Despite the seemingly happy ending, this image of the incomplete puzzle reflects the fact that a sense of purpose is still missing from the characters’ shallow lives. In the same scene, Frank goes on to state, “What a life you women lead. Sitting around hotels, filling every minute of the day with some new game or gadget so that there isn’t a chink left for reality to creep in. What do you get out of it? What will happen to you all, come the revolution?” to which Claire’s friend Letty blithely replies, “I’ll sit out the revolution” (199-200). When one considers the dire situation the United States was in at the time, several years into the Great Depression and mid-way between two world wars—from an historical context these lines are a remarkably astute commentary on the pointless lives that the characters have chosen to lead. *Jig-Saw*, like *Big Night*, is a satire of characters who are not particularly admirable and exposes them for all their self-delusion. Even so, though Claire can hardly be called a noble feminist heroine, *Jig-Saw* does present realistically-drawn female characters who drive the action, make their own choices, articulately state their world views, and prove themselves every bit as clever (and also just as self-deluded) as the male characters. It is an extremely funny and effective satire which proves the strength of Powell’s voice as a playwright.

CHAPTER 4

SINGLE LADIES: WOMEN WHO LIVE AND LOVE OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

Though marriage, infidelity, and divorce are frequent subjects of plays by women in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, there are several plays which feature female protagonists who are not and have never been married, for a variety of reasons. These independent women of various ages and backgrounds make decisions that take them away from traditional marriage, and often struggle against societal pressures in the male-dominated worlds of business and politics. In *Inheritors*, Susan Glaspell depicts a young student whose mind is far from marriage or romance as she stands up for the rights of two foreign classmates and faces dire consequences as a result. Dawn Powell uses Expressionist techniques to show a young secretary struggling to find love in a world of consumerism and corrupt morals in *Women at Four O'Clock*, and in *Walking Down Broadway* she examines the effect of an unexpected pregnancy on a young unmarried couple trying to support themselves in the big city. Finally, Rachel Crothers places a successful unmarried author in a fascinating moral dilemma when she meets the wife of the man with whom she intends to have an affair in *When Ladies Meet*.

***Inheritors*: Activism and American ideals across generations**

Glaspell's *Inheritors* was first performed on Broadway in 1921, a few months before *The Verge*. It received mixed reviews; some critics praised its timely political message and themes while others criticized it as overwritten and excessively preachy. Though it is somewhat overwritten, the play has been revived many times, once in the late twenties by Eva Le Gallienne and again in the thirties as part of the Federal Theatre Project. It was also produced by the Hedgerow Theatre in Pennsylvania every Memorial Day and every

Independence Day for nearly thirty years, serving as their “signature piece” (Witham 13). More recently, it has received revivals in New York, one in 1983 and another in 2005. A review from the 2005 revival calls *Inheritors* a “remarkably prescient drama” and asserts that “the play’s depiction of America at a crossroads presents the same battles being fought today” (Gluck “Inheritors”).

The play uses a realistic style to tell the epic story of a Midwestern pioneer family spanning three generations. Act One takes place in 1879 and features Silas Morton, the patriarch of the family, deciding what he will do with the beautiful and valuable hill that his family owns. His mother, Grandmother Morton, wants him to sell it or leave it to his grandchildren. She is the first strong female character of the play, and her toughness has allowed the family to survive and prosper in the harsh conditions of the American Frontier: “The fact that Glaspell has Grandmother Morton describe how *she* fought the Indians helps establish a motif of female courage and strength for the play that we see carried through each generation and inherited by Madeline [the protagonist]” (Gainor 118). The way that Native Americans have been treated by the pioneers and the U.S. government comes up several times in the debate. Grandmother, even after having personally fought the Native Americans during the Blackhawk war, still expresses an understanding of their position: “We roiled them up considerable. They was mostly friendly when let be. Didn’t want to give up their land—but I’ve noticed something of the same nature in white folks” (76). Silas comments, “A seeing how ‘tis for the other person—a *bein*’ that other person, kind of honesty. Joke of it, ‘twould do something for *you*. ‘Twould ‘a’ done something for us to have *been* Indians a little more” (84). Through these statements, both Grandmother and Silas demonstrate a great capacity for empathy for “the other,” a capacity which most of the other characters lack but

which Madeleine also inherits. Silas, inspired by his well-educated friend Fejevary who escaped political oppression in Hungary by fleeing to America, finally decides to give the land away to build a college on the hill, and he sees this plan as a sort of redemption for having stolen the land from the Native Americans.

Acts Two, Three, and Four take place in 1920, and Silas's granddaughter Madeline now attends the college, while her uncle Fejevary runs the board of directors. These acts center on Madeline's choice to defend two Hindu students in danger of being expelled and deported back to India, where they will be victims of political persecution for protesting British rule. In their defense, Madeline assaults a police officer and faces imprisonment. None of the other "one hundred percent American" characters can understand why Madeleine is willing to risk her future for the sake of two foreigners (evidently having forgotten that America was also once a colony protesting British rule). In explanation to her uncle, Madeline says, "They're people from the other side of the world who came here believing us, drawn from the far side of the world by things we say about ourselves. Well, I'm going to pretend—just for fun—that the things we say about ourselves are true" (117). This not only echoes the American Dream and democratic ideals, but also her own grandfather's sentiments from the first act, as he advocated for the Native Americans and praised the Fejevary family for giving up everything to protest a repressive government. However, the repercussions of Madeleine speaking her mind and standing up for her beliefs are extremely high, as her uncle warns, "You could get twenty years in prison for things you'll say if you rush out there now. (*she laughs*) You laugh because you're ignorant. Do you know that in America today there are women in our prisons for saying no more than you've said to me here today?" (119). This statement is a reference to the Espionage and

Sedition Acts of 1917-1918, which led to the imprisonment of many men and women who spoke out against the government in any form (including many labor organizers and suffragettes) during World War I.

At the end of Act Three, Madeline defies her uncle, and with help from her idealistic professor Holden, escapes to defend one of the Hindu students from brutal treatment by the police. Her exit is punctuated by a slamming door, which Noelia Hernando-Real suggests is a “straightforward reference to Ibsen’s Nora. At this very moment, Madeline emerges as a New Woman. Her fight for defending outsiders has become her only principle, a principle that has placed her outside the gates of society” (85). Madeleine also comes to understand that her idealism will prevent her from being able to enjoy a traditional family relationship when she sees that Professor Holden is unable to continue his protest because his responsibility to provide for his sick wife means that he cannot afford to lose his job at the college. She even tells her Aunt Isabel “I hope I never have a family” (128), thereby demonstrating her full commitment to the fight for justice over personal or familial gain.

Madeline is consistently patronized by the male authority figures around her, who claim she does not understand what she is doing, but in the final act she says, “I did realize what I was saying, and . . . I meant what I said. I said if this is what our country has come to, then I’m not for our country . . . I do know what it means, but it means not being a coward . . . once in a while you have to say what you think—or hate yourself” (123). Her understanding of the situation is dramatically illustrated when she uses chalk to draw the dimensions of a prison cell where one of her childhood friends is now being held for protesting World War I, and then she steps inside. Madeleine gains further inspiration to make the sacrifice when she finally learns from her father Ira how her mother died:

Then *she* came—that ignorant Swede . . . running through the fields like a crazy woman—‘Miss Morton! Miss Morton! Come help me! My children are choking!’ Diphtheria they had—the whole of ‘em—but out of this house she ran—my Madeleine, leaving you—her own baby—running as fast as she could through the cornfield after that immigrant woman . . . That was the last I saw of her. She choked to death in that Swede’s house. They lived (134).

Ira intends this story as a way to dissuade Madeleine against a pointless sacrifice, but Madeleine, once again demonstrating her empathy for “the other,” has the opposite reaction and replies, “But how lovely of her” (134). She understands that her mother’s sacrifice was not pointless, but selfless and beautiful, and probably saved the lives of others. The final sentiment she expresses to her aunt before leaving to face the judge is “What you are—that doesn’t stay with you. Then (*not with assurance, but feeling her way*) be the most you can be, so life will be more because you were. (*freed by the truth she has found*) Oh—do that!” (136). Her final choice of self-sacrifice to the ideals freedom of speech and liberty for all is a testament to the legacy she has inherited from her mother, her grandfather Silas, and her great-grandmother Morton.

Through Madeline, “Glaspell depicts the inextricability of the personal and the political for the individual dedicated to the nation as it was originally conceived. Her use of a strong and independent woman to drive home these commitments adds a feminist dimension to her rich, multivalent narrative” (Gainor 115). The extent to which Glaspell intended *Inheritors* as a feminist protest, however, is questionable. Hernando-Real argues that “Madeline . . . takes her stance by opposing True Women’s ideals, traditional male characters, and uncommitted female characters” (109), by contrasting Madeline with the male characters who sacrifice American values for financial reasons and the other silly female students at the college whose “actions are simply worthless for women’s struggle in America” (110). Gainor, on the other hand, believes that “Glaspell’s politics embraced but

exceeded sexual politics. Rather, it is the *connection* between feminist beliefs and other social and moral convictions that make *Inheritors* a complex and important political drama” (131). *Inheritors* is clearly successful piece of theatre from both a feminist and political standpoint; though the political message could also be achieved with a male protagonist, Glaspell’s choice to use a young woman provides a model of female capability and courage that represents the many real female activists who struggled for various political movements throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and beyond. As Gainor and Dickey point out, “Madeleine emerges as a role model for activists, as she refuses to compromise her beliefs or resort to feminine equivocation to evade the serious legal repercussions of her actions” (39). Madeleine is a rare example of a young single woman who is concerned with much more than romantic relationships, and her actions demonstrate the power of any person, male or female, willing to stand up for his or her beliefs regardless of consequence.

Women at Four O’Clock: Questioning moral values in a commercial society

Powell’s first play, *Women at Four O’Clock*, was adapted from one of her short stories around 1928, but was never produced during her lifetime. The play is set in 1926 New York City, and is a fascinating example of American Expressionism, featuring episodic structure and several surreal and dream sequences that present the subjective view of not one, but two opposite types of “everywoman” protagonists.

The principal protagonist is Jessie Burr, a plain, modest, and sexually repressed secretary in her mid-twenties who comes to the realization that she wants more out of life, but is unsure of how to get it. Jessie first realizes that she is unhappy with her life after an argument with her roommate, Fan, a flapper type who wants to be an actress and whose moral values are the complete opposite of Jessie’s. Jessie is offended by Fan’s lack of

“decency” as she drinks, dances in her underwear, and flaunts her affair with Chris, a songwriter next door, but Fan reasons “It’s all in the profession . . . That Sutton man has pull. He could get me in someplace” (242). Jessie’s annoyance appears in reality to stem from jealousy, as her professed hatred of Chris has clearly turned into a kind of obsession with him:

I meet him in the morning when I bring in the milk and it spoils my whole day. I think of him when I’m taking dictation and lose a whole sentence. We come up in the elevator together and I shiver with hate . . . With that thin partition it’s just as if I lived with him. There isn’t a minute I can forget him being there. I even hear him shaving. I hate men . . . And afternoons when I hear his women come in—then I hate women . . . Even doing letters for Mr. Heath I know they’re there . . . I sit at my desk downtown but I can hear their high heels clacking up the steps. I know the hall’s full of their perfume . . . Bah, it’s not him, it’s any man” (248).

Though Jessie has romantic fantasies about several men over the course of the play, her thoughts continually return to Chris, and he is the man with whom she appears to have to most realistic chance for any kind of relationship. More than a realization of her attraction to Chris, Jessie’s true questioning of her lifestyle comes when Fan implies that the real reason for her virginity is that no man has ever been interested in her: “Reason you’re so damned pure is nobody ever wanted you to be anything else” (250). It is clear that this has shaken loose Jessie’s constructions of contentment and self-worth when she exclaims, “What did you upset everything for? I knew—and now I don’t know, anymore. . . . You said something—I don’t remember what it was—but now everything’s changed. In my head things are all turned around . . . I’m good—but . . .” (252). Jessie is forced to question the moral constructs which she has been taught and always accepted as truth because all around her she sees only corrupt values of commercialism, where beauty is the most important trait in a woman and sex used as a tool for moving up in one’s profession. She is torn between a

desire for what she sees other woman have that she doesn't and a desire to be different from other women and strive for something deeper and more meaningful.

The next two scenes use an Expressionist style that intertwines Jessie's fantasies with reality. Jessie is bombarded by advertisements for beauty products as she rides the bus; women chant phrases like "Macy Gimbel Lord and Taylor Wanamaker Bonwit Teller" to an increasing crescendo and merchants advertise their products with a variety of clever marketing techniques. (The funniest example: "How many women are really beautiful when they sneeze? . . . Be irresistible when sneezing with a Morris Brothers Morkerchief" [255-256]). Throughout the scene Jessie repeats "I want . . ." until finally she bursts out, "If I had the things the other women had, if I had yellow hair, if I were like other women . . . If I were like them, this man sitting beside me would have looked at me, he would have turned to me and said, 'My dear I have hunted all over the world for someone like you'" (258). Her thoughts progress into a wild fantasy of the man on the bus falling in love with her because she is different from all the other women, but interspersed with Jessie's inner monologue the audience hears the man's real thoughts, which are focused on business and his mistress. This scene is followed by another surreal one in a five-and-ten-cent store in which the Floorwalker, who serves as a kind of master-of-ceremonies, prevents Jessie from hearing her fortune and demands that she fall in line with the other women as she protests "I don't belong here with these women, anyway. Can't you tell I'm different. Look at me. I'm different from the others" (268).

In Act Two, Jessie does "fall in line" in a way, succumbing to the pressure of the society around her as her dissatisfaction with her job and desire to be noticed (the way other women are noticed) leads her to offer herself up to her boss Heath to help entertain Gattle, an

important client. Heath, surprised and confused by Jessie's sudden change in behavior, turns her down in favor of a "little blonde" and one of her "blonde friends" (278-279) to accompany him and Gattle to the Blue Sky club. Blonde or yellow hair is referred to throughout the play (Fan is blonde, as are many of the feminine ideals of beauty mentioned by the Madonna in the beauty parlor scene, such as Melisande, Isolde, and Guinevere), and bloneness represents a societal ideal of beauty that Jessie does not fit. The office scene gives way to yet another surrealistic fantasy in which Jessie pictures herself at the Blue Sky Club, being pursued by Heath, Gattle, and the man from the bus, but here she realizes that it is really Chris she wants: "I don't want any of you—I don't want anything but the man next door . . . To hell with you, Roland Heath and your Mr. Gattle and you—you man on the bus. To hell with all of you!" (290). When Jessie awakens from the fantasy, she decides to quit her job, finally realizing how much of life she has missed out on by focusing only on her work: "Eight years I worked hard and I was a good girl and now—now I get to be a good girl the rest of my life . . . It's your fault—you could have told me—you knew . . . Eight years being proud I was dead . . . Eight years . . ." (301).

In the final act as Jessie returns home, the Floorwalker offers her an opportunity to change places with another woman: "A million women today, in this very spot at four o'clock, a million—well, make it a thousand women on their way to paradise exchanged doorbells and in half an hour will be seduced by the wrong partner and what difference does it make?" (310). The Floorwalker represents a world in which love and sex are exchanges as meaningless as the purchase of beauty products—temporarily satisfying but never a permanent source of happiness or fulfillment. Jessie considers his offer, but replies "I wouldn't be any other woman but how could anybody ever want to be *me*? . . . I don't know

what I want anymore” (312). She even considers suicide, but finally decides that Chris is what she wants and declares “I’m going to him because now I’m the girl in the Blue Sky Club and he belongs to me” (320). When Jessie arrives home, a very drunk Chris does flirt with her, but then goes into the next room to make love to Fan. In the final moments of the play, the audience watches Jessie imagining herself in Fan’s place and acting out her own responses to the sounds of Chris and Fan kissing offstage. The final impression is one of intense loneliness, and perhaps is best described as one of “fine and delicate sadness”—a phrase that critic Robert Benchley used to describe Powell’s work (qtd. in Sexton and Page 4). Similar to the Young Woman in *Machinal*, Jessie is isolated from a society depicted as faceless and uninterested in her plight, but unlike the Young Woman, whose beauty causes her to be used and exploited by the men in the play until she is eventually driven to murder, Jessie’s lack of beauty (or at least society’s ideal of beauty) makes her unwelcome in a world of shallow commercialism, and the antiquated moral values which society has taught her prevent her from understanding how to communicate with the people living in that world. Jessie maintains her uniqueness, but loneliness and isolation is the cost of her unwillingness to conform.

Providing a contrast to Jessie is the secondary protagonist Edith Heath, the wife of Jessie’s boss. While the marriage of the successful businessman and the former model seems perfect from the outside, it is clear from the first scene that the two have little in common and do not communicate well. Heath even says, “I don’t have a minute for my wife and family. If I go to the theater it’s to take some out-of-town client. I read in the papers that my wife’s entertaining some poet or painter—that’s all I know about you” (238). In a later scene, Edith’s subjective experience is depicted as she sits in a beauty salon, surrounded by women

who are all absorbed in their own romantic entanglements and affairs, while a Madonna in the corner chants about beauty products. As the scene progresses, Edith begins to hear whispers and—believing they are about her and her husband—is suddenly struck with the idea that her husband is having an affair with his secretary. She goes to Heath’s office where she meets Jessie, and based on Jessie’s appearance Edith at first believes it can’t be true, but Jessie, in an extremely petty act, claims that she and Heath are having an affair and that they are in love. The rest of the scene bears a striking resemblance to *Big Night*, as Gattle arrives at the office and, mistaking Edith for the woman who was supposed to be entertaining him that evening, proceeds to seduce her and convinces her to go with him to a speakeasy. The mistaken identity leads Edith to think the worst:

GATTLE: Heath’s a great little fixer. He said you might be in here and to go ahead and start the party.
EDITH: Mr. Heath said that?
GATTLE: Sure. Heath’s a prince. He said Gattle, though she belongs to somebody else, today she belongs to you . . . That’s Heath.
EDITH: . . . How could he have said that . . . Oh I know it’s business and I know that with Roland it’s always come before everything else . . . Maybe he does want to get rid of me . . . Maybe that girl knew what she was about . . . (296-297).

With illusions about her husband and his fidelity shattered, Edith, like Jessie, has to question her lifestyle and choices. She explains,

I lead a very simple life, Mr. Gattle. My days are all the same. A little shopping, a little resting, a matinee or concert, people in to tea, a little rest before dinner, people in, a little music, a little poetry . . . That’s all I ask. But how can I do any of those things with *this* on my mind? I say is it true, or isn’t it, well if it is, do I care or don’t I, and if I don’t care, what do I want or don’t I? (304).

Edith has always been satisfied with her relationship with her husband, despite its shallowness, perhaps because her lifestyle is admired and envied by others, but if her husband is unfaithful then her picture-perfect life is marred. Gattle sees Edith’s confusion as

an opportunity to take full advantage of her, and it is clear by the end of the speakeasy scene that he will succeed.

In addition to containing fascinating expressionistic sequences and dealing with the themes of commercialism, feminine sexuality, and female identity, *Women at Four O'Clock* offers a diverse portrait of 1920s New York, with settings that include a boarding house, a city street scene, a classy night club, and a speakeasy, along with a great sampling of jazzy music. While it is probably Powell's most complex play to produce (having the most characters and widest array of locations), *Women at Four O'Clock* is also a remarkable period piece, both in style and content, from one of America's most exciting decades. Furthermore, both Jessie and Edith demonstrate that when self-delusions about one's moral constructs and lifestyle are revealed, everything is thrown into chaos, particularly in a society where commercialism is the highest social value. Through Jessie in particular, Powell explores the identity crisis occurring for young single women during this period as they struggle to support themselves financially while also balancing conflicting societal expectations to be both decent and sexually appealing.

Walking Down Broadway: Young love and unplanned pregnancy

Walking Down Broadway, written in 1931, is interesting largely because it is based on Powell's first memories of New York when she moved there in her early twenties. Although it was never produced, Powell sold the script to Hollywood where it became the film *Hello, Sister!*, though by all accounts the movie hardly resembles Powell's original idea. *Walking Down Broadway* is a story of young love between Marge and Chick, who have recently moved from small towns to New York City. When Marge gets pregnant, their relationship is put to the test, but it ultimately survives in spite of Marge having an abortion.

Marge's life is similar in many ways to Jessie's from *Women at Four O' Clock*; both are stenographers, living with a roommate and struggling to support themselves. But unlike Jessie, Marge is not completely isolated from the rest of society because her roommate Elsie is also her best friend who moved with her from their hometown. After eight months living in the city without knowing anyone other than Eva Elman, an actress with whom they share a bathroom, the girls decide to walk up and down Broadway to pick up men. They are noticed by Dewey and Chick and bring the boys back to their apartment. A humorous scene follows in which all four attempt to prove how experienced they are (when it's clear that none of them has any experience dating in the city) while Marge and Chick simultaneously attempt to prevent the other one from thinking that they are indecent:

- CHICK: Say, we don't do this often. Dewey and me, we're particular. Think we're making a collection of pickups? Say, we like *nice* girls.
- MARGE: Elsie, do you hear that? I told you it'd be like that. They think just because we let them catch up with us and make a date that we're bad.
- ELSIE: Well, my goodness, Marge, let 'em think it—can't we have a good time up to the time they find out we're just a couple of good girls?
- CHICK: Look, I didn't mean that the way I said it. I meant— (346).

Miscommunication as a result of both parties attempting to put up a false front occurs repeatedly throughout the play. When the boys appear to be more interested in Eva and follow her next-door, Marge expresses embarrassment at her and Elsie's behavior:

- MARGE: Giggling and dropping things when we passed them. Just to make them notice us . . . it was awful . . . and then they walk out on us just like that . . . the only decent thing we can do is to never speak to them again. We've got show them a *little* pride, Elsie, you understand that.
- ELSIE: Pride, the devil—I tell you I'm lonesome! If we hadn't met somebody or had *something* happen tonight I'd just have gone crazy, now, honest Marge . . . I can't stand being lonesome anywhere I am, and I don't care I'm going in there and have fun if I have to kill that Elman woman! (358).

Only when Marge lets go of her pride and is finally honest with Chick about her experiences are they able to discover how much they have in common. Marge and Chick, in spite of their naïveté, represent the only couple in Powell's plays (and arguably the only couple in any of the plays in this study) that communicates honestly and on an equal footing. Unfortunately, their innocence and inexperience lead to an unplanned pregnancy, and the bad advice they receive from more cynical characters threatens their happy relationship.

The naïve couple is nicely contrasted with a pair of older and more experienced characters who act as their well-meaning (but not particularly helpful) advisors. In an expertly-crafted scene, Chick's roommate Mac takes a number of tacks to dissuade him from marrying the pregnant Marge. He starts by bragging about how great single life is and about all of the different women he has had, and then explains that women lie about their innocence in order to trap men, stating "I'll bet she's bragging to her girlfriends about the fast one she pulled. Don't tell me about women, baby, they're all built alike" (391). He goes on to say, "Take a man. Say he's had all the women in the world, do you think he'd so much as open his trap about even one of his girls to another man? Not on your life" (391-392). Mac's hypocrisy becomes even more comically apparent when a few pages later one of his girlfriends calls and he has Chick lie to her on the phone, after which Mac laughs, "Ha ha . . . I'd forgot I told her I owned a couple of cars . . . What'd she say—wanted this friend and *his* car then, eh, if I didn't have mine . . . after telling me the other night that she'd be crazy about me if I didn't have a cent—sure, that's what she told me. Women are such goddamn liars" (395). Mac's arguments are followed by an exchange with the maid who is on her fifth husband (with the sixth already picked out), and she explains to Chick how she gets her husbands:

Nobody ever got a man except by stickin' around 'em, ain't that right, Mr Chick? . . . You got to stick around and do for 'em and do for 'em and stand for a lot of meanness till you get 'em down to City Hall. After that you don't have to stand for nothin'! . . . I had twins by my first husband and so finally we got married . . . I'd rather have had the money but whatcha goin' to do when they ain't got it? . . . That ain't all though . . . I used to commit suicide regular for number two with Father John's medicine in an iodine bottle. Right up to the wedding (399-401).

This cynical view of trapping men into marriage using pregnancy or suicide attempts terrifies Chick, and when Marge shows up with her own more experienced advisor, Eva, who begins the conversation by demanding money from Chick for an abortion, poor Chick is completely convinced that Marge has been playing him all along. To cover how hurt he feels, he rails against her, "I wasn't fooled when you said I was the only person you—you ever cared for. And the things I told you about me—the way I felt—they were all lies—I wanted to string you as much as you were stringing me. I knew about that baby racket . . ." (410). Once again, pride prevents Chick from expressing his true feelings and drives a rift between him and Marge.

The scene that follows between Eva and Marge gives a female perspective of the experienced mentor and naïve young girl in trouble, and Marge shows slightly more maturity than Chick (though just as much false pride) as she determines that she will find a way to support herself and the baby without Chick's help: "I don't need him. I don't need anybody. I'm going to this town in Pennsylvania. I've got it all figured out. I'll say I'm a widow. I'll get a wedding ring. I'll work at this job until it's time to—to have the baby—and nobody will know the difference" (421). Eva quickly recognizes how unlikely this plan is to work, and in an extremely melodramatic act of self-sacrifice, gives up the money that she had been saving to get her hair permed so that Marge can have an abortion.

Once again, Powell's witty treatment of serious subject matter reveals several tragicomic truths, and when Marge and Chick are reunited it is with much greater wisdom and understanding. Marge realizes that "people that really love each other have to believe in love—it just isn't anything but believing," and Chick figures out that ". . . it's the wise guys that are the saps—you never find anything real if you're all the time on the lookout for phonies" (451). *Walking Down Broadway* is a charming play about coming of age and finding love in a cynical world, and it deals honestly and directly with the issue of unplanned pregnancy at a time when such issues were rarely mentioned onstage. Marge is a unique single protagonist in her idealism about love, her sense of personal pride, and her strong will to survive. She refuses to regret her relationship with Chick, even though she knows that society will condemn her as an unmarried mother, and her pride prevents her from using dishonest means to coerce Chick into marriage. Marge knows that she has the strength and resourcefulness to survive without a man's help, but in the end is still able to forgive Chick and admit her own mistakes, demonstrating that honest and equal relationships are possible, even in a cynical world of changing rules and complications.

When Ladies Meet: When Ladies Meet: The wife and the mistress grow through mutual understanding

When Ladies Meet, first produced in 1932 (nearing the end of Crothers's theatrical career), was one of Rachel Crothers's most successful works. It ran 173 performances and received almost entirely favorable reviews, which praised both Crothers's playwriting and directing skills. Richard Lockridge of the *New York Sun* even asserted that the play "comes close to being the finest of all that long procession of admirable plays" (qtd. in Lindroth & Lindroth 116) that Crothers had written. The protagonist of *When Ladies Meet* is Mary

Howard, a successful unmarried novelist in her early thirties, who decides to have an affair with a married man. An interesting layer is added to the drama because the book Mary is currently working on is about a similar situation, and discussions of her manuscript with various characters reveal each of their perspectives on relationships between men and women and what it means to be a “good,” “nice,” or “decent” woman. These conversations also highlight the difference between Mary’s ideals of romance and the reality of complicated relationships in a morally ambiguous society.

The first act opens on Mary and her friend Jimmie (who happens to be in love with her) having a discussion on the balcony of Mary’s apartment. Mary explains to Jimmie why she doesn’t want to marry him—she wants a grand, passionate affair, and isn’t sure he’s capable of that kind of love. Mary is fully independent, with her own apartment, plenty of interesting friends, and a successful career, but she still feels unsatisfied: “I haven’t found *anything*. Except to know that I haven’t *got* anything that really *counts*. Nobody *belongs* to me—nobody whose very existence depends on me. I am completely and absolutely alone” (9). Because Mary is rarely alone onstage and has strong friendships with several other characters, her references to loneliness more likely imply a longing for sexual intimacy, and in her novel, she plays out her own fantasies of a relationship with her married publisher Rogers Woodruff. Mary and Jimmie go on to discuss Mary’s manuscript, and Jimmy insists that she hasn’t got the characters right (though his complaints may well be based on his suspicion that Mary is falling in love Rogers), and that a decent woman would never actually sleep with a married man. In response to Mary’s protests that the fictional couple’s idealized love “Changed them both from just *people*—into something *fine*” (12), Jimmy protests “All right—I grant you they might both be hit right in the snoot with it. The woman might think

she had to have him or bust—but when it came right down to going to bed with him—*no*—she wouldn't” (12). This appears to be more what Jimmie wishes were the case, and his jealousy of Rogers becomes increasingly clear over the course of the play. Their argument continues:

MARY: You put them in pigeon holes and tab them—a *man's* idea of woman. There are just as many reasons and conditions for women as there are for men.

JIMMIE: Nope! If a woman's good—she's good—and if she isn't—she *isn't*.

MARY: That's the greatest bunk in the world. It's just what this book is *about*. You don't even *get* it— Damn you! (13).

The idea that any woman who maintains chastity outside of marriage is good, while any woman who doesn't is no longer respectable, regardless of circumstance, is seen by Mary as ridiculous, particularly when the same rules don't apply to men. She protests the double standard of Jimmie's reasoning, and insists that he just doesn't understand true love, but she has unfortunately over-estimated the depth of Rogers's feelings for her and the capacity of most of society to forgive a woman for extra-marital sex. Jimmie also recognizes the hypocrisy in his statements but doesn't apologize for it:

Man is a *very law abiding animal when it comes to decent women*. He wants a decent woman to *stay* decent—and if she *doesn't* he cusses her out for doing the *very* thing he told her was the greatest thing a woman *can* do—*giving him all for love*. If your woman did what you make her do the man would be so damned sick of her after while he'd want to shoot her. God—I've persuaded so many women and hated 'em afterwards! (14).

Jimmie doesn't try to present the rules of society as fair, but still professes that they shouldn't be broken if an unmarried woman wants to maintain her dignity and continue to be considered “decent”. When Rogers arrives and is alone with Mary, his attempts to persuade her to go through with the affair appear to confirm at least part of Jimmie's argument. Rogers insists, “Mary—dearest—I worship you. If you loved me—like that—you'd take

me” (43). Mary is persuaded not so much by this cliché line as her own feelings of loneliness and strong attraction to Rogers: “It’s the *aloneness* that frightens me . . . All my life . . . I was lonely. And into that terrible emptiness *you* came. Oh God! O God!—Oh *God!* How *can* it be wrong!—Anything so *right!*” (43). Mary has the exact opposite problem of Ann Hereford from *He and She*—she has a successful and fulfilling career, but this has made it more difficult to find a partner who is her equal, and like Jessie from *Women at Four O’ Clock*, her determination to remain “good” and “decent” has come at the expense of opportunities for romantic relationships. Now, living in a world of more modern sensibilities when it comes to sex, Mary feels that she has moral justification to pursue what will make her happy, even though the man she is in love with is married.

Mary and Rogers are interrupted by Jimmie before the affair can go any further, but they make plans to spend the weekend in the country with Mary’s friend Bridget. Bridget is a widow whose dead husband was unfaithful during their marriage, but now she is entertaining a younger companion, Walter. She does not want to marry Walter because he is so much younger than her, but also doesn’t want to sacrifice her morals by sleeping with him. Bridget sums up Mary’s situation as well as her own when she explains:

I tell you this is an awfully *hard age* for a *good* woman to live in. I mean one who wants to have any *fun*. If you’ve still got the instincts for right and wrong that were pounded into you when you were a girl—what are you going to *do* with ‘em? Nobody *else* seems to have ‘em. And they just get you mixed up—and they hold you back—so you’re neither one thing nor the other. Neither happy—and *bad*—nor good and *contented*. You’re just *discontentedly decent*—and it doesn’t get you *anywhere* (23-24).

Bridget functions as an interesting accomplice, enabling and even encouraging Mary to go through with the affair while simultaneously expressing embarrassment about it and afraid to do such a thing herself, even though Bridget, unlike Mary, is not a virgin and both Bridget

and Walter are single, which would make a sexual relationship between the them much less morally questionable than an affair between Mary and Rogers. The two attitudes warring within Bridget are especially apparent when she gossips about a friend who she believes is having an affair by commenting that “she looks like the cat who swallowed the canary” (18), and a few pages later expresses her own fear of the shame that an illicit affair would cause: “If women *do* have lovers—nice women I mean—where do they go? . . . I mean it’s all very well to say you can do as you please in your *own house*—but the *servants!* I’d be more embarrassed with my own servants than any—How a nice woman can sneak and lie and run around to queer places . . .” (20-21). Even though it seems to be common knowledge that many women are now having extra-marital affairs, it is still socially unacceptable to do so openly, and this is what Bridget cannot stomach. Crothers herself expressed a similar sentiment in an interview on the play, and she explains that men “made all the rules. When women juggle them and do so for this so-called freedom they still must lie and cheat and deceive. They can’t yet be frank and open and impersonally free as a man” (qtd. in Shafer 29). The extent of Bridget’s intent to stay “decent” is particularly clear when all the characters are threatening to leave her country estate, and she insists that someone must stay to “chaperone” her and Walter. She is determined to maintain her own sense of propriety, even at the cost of her own happiness, and remain “discontentedly decent” because she is certain that “You can always tell when a woman really *has*—and when she *hasn’t*” (18).

By the time they arrive at Bridget’s country house, Mary has overcome the first moral hurdle and has already decided that it is worth sacrificing her “decency” in exchange for an end to her loneliness. But the problem of Rogers’s wife still exists, and Mary, believing that Rogers truly loves her, is determined overcome this issue sensibly. She tells Rogers, “let’s

not fool ourselves. Other people have thought they were sure of their love too—and look at them! You’ve made *one* mistake. I don’t want you to make another. I *will not* let you get a divorce till we know our love *is what we think it is*” (56). This is extremely convenient for Rogers, who has had a number of affairs prior to this (which Mary does not know about), but has never before wished to end his marriage. A wrench is thrown in their plans once again when Jimmie fakes a business call to get Rogers to return to the city, and then Jimmie arrives with Rogers’s wife Claire, whom he introduces as his “cousin” and convinces to flirt with him in order to make Mary jealous. Instead, Mary and Claire become almost instant friends, and Claire expresses admiration for one of Mary’s early novels.

That evening, Claire and Mary are placed in adjacent rooms, and as they discuss the novel which Mary is currently working on, they are actually discussing their own situation without realizing their connection. Claire proves herself much more open to liberal ideas about sex and relationships than Jimmie or Bridget when she says “Men are so proper and conventional about their own “good” women—aren’t they? Much more so than the women themselves . . . don’t you think if a man *knows* in the first place a woman has had other men—if he *loves* her he just doesn’t give a damn—he just *does*?” (106). But when Mary explains that in her new book, a decent, upper-class woman has an affair with a married man, then after a year the woman approaches the wife to explain that they are in love, and the wife agrees to give her husband up, Claire expresses doubt that this could ever happen. Speaking from personal experience, Claire explains, “I’m afraid I’m not a very good judge of this story because I happen to be married to a man who can no more help attracting women than he can help breathing. And of course each one thinks she is the love of his life and that he’s going to divorce me and marry her. But he doesn’t seem to—somehow” (112). Of course, the

brilliant irony is that Claire actually is a perfect judge of the situation because her husband is in fact the man in question, and when Mary unknowingly reveals this, Claire tells her, “You can’t hold him with just yourself. I don’t care how beautiful and clever and wonderful you are. *He* has to have something in *him* that will make him stick to *you*. Nothing else can pull a man and a woman through the ghastly job of living together” (117). Just then, Rogers arrives, assuming he still has the room next to Mary, and is shocked to find Claire with her. He tries to cover by insisting that his relationship with Mary is just business, but Claire has already realized the truth.

Early the next morning, the three awkwardly run into one another as they each try to discreetly leave Bridget’s house. Mary asks Rogers to tell Claire the truth about their relationship, and when Rogers says nothing, Mary realizes that she hasn’t meant any more to him than any of his previous affairs, and she tells Claire: “It *was* right—to *me*—till I saw you. I’m one of the others—*absolutely*. *Nothing* more. You *see* that—don’t you?—I didn’t know what I was doing—to *you*” (132). By meeting Claire and understanding her situation and her feelings, Mary now recognizes both what kind of man Rogers is and that Claire is much more than the “intellectual dub” (24) that she had expected. Claire also comes to a new realization about her own relationship with Rogers, and she says “I’ve always been glad to get you back before—and thankful it was over—always thinking of *you*—never of *her*—but now—I’ve *seen her*—and something has happened *to me*. I’ve seen *all* of her—her whole heart and soul and self. And I know—*so well* how you made her love you like that” (133). Because Mary is not the “vile brazen slut” (114) Claire had always imagined her husband’s mistresses to be, she sees Rogers’s infidelity in a whole new light and is no longer able to love him. Instead of returning to the city with her husband, Claire takes Jimmie’s car

and vows that she is “not going *home—now—or ever*” (137). As Lois Gottlieb explains, “each woman has helped the other to reduce her dependence on the man, rather than increase, through jealousy, the other’s determination to hold on to him” (137).

Once Claire and Rogers have gone (separately), Crothers leaves some hope that there is still a chance for Jimmie and Mary, especially now that Mary’s romanticized ideal of love has been torn apart by the reality of her situation. Jimmie even redeems himself somewhat for his petty and jealous behavior by demonstrating his unselfish concern for Mary’s happiness:

JIMMIE: *Get this. Mary’s in love with him. It’s big and clean with her. Now that it’s come to a showdown—God—if he doesn’t come through—I’ll kill him.*
BRIDGET: That’s *very* noble of you, Jimmie.
JIMMIE: Noble my foot! I love her.
BRIDGET: That’s what I say. Why want *another* man to get her?
JIMMIE: Well—that’s the *way* I love her (140).

Jimmie’s realization that “it’s big and clean with her” shows that his understanding of relationships has matured beyond the sentiments he expressed in the first scene, and he is still able to respect Mary and the reasons for the choices she has made. Once the confrontation is over, Mary forgives Jimmie for bringing it about, but the last thought she expresses in the play is certainty that Claire will never go back to Rogers, and Mary too has made clear that she is no longer interested in him: “I *did* want him—but he didn’t want *me*—in the same way—and it’s over” (141). Both Mary and Claire, through their meeting and mutual understanding, discover that Rogers has lied to them and will never really respect them, and both ladies realize that they want and deserve more from a relationship.

Gottlieb calls *When Ladies Meet* “Crothers’s most effective comic treatment of modern woman’s sexual freedom and her expectations for happiness” (132), and Sally Burke

asserts that the play is “the capstone of Crothers’s career in dealing with the evolution of the modern woman” (49). The play certainly features three mature and intelligent female characters who make important discoveries about the challenges of finding both professional success and forming meaningful egalitarian relationships. Yvonne Shafer comments on the possible connection between the problems of the play and Crothers’s own experiences:

“Speculation would naturally arise that Mary was a representative of Crothers and that her own life was a choice between marriage and career” (31). This idea is supported by Crothers’s own statement that it was impossible to find

a man who was big enough, strong enough, and intellectual enough who did not also have the vices of those great qualities. Such a man has been taught by millenniums of generously providing for his women folks that his woman should depend on him both economically and mentally. The superior man will not have the superior woman—not on the superior woman’s terms (qtd. in Gottlieb, 120).

Although it is impossible to prove how closely the situations of *When Ladies Meet* relate to Crothers’s life (or whether she was even interested in men), she succinctly summarizes here the difficulty in achieving egalitarian relationships while men still maintain Victorian attitudes of male domination in sex and marriage. This forces women into a choice between career/independent achievement and romantic relationships. If they choose independence, they are doomed to loneliness (or at least celibacy), and if they choose a relationship, they must submit to male domination. This dire choice is the conclusion of *He and She*, but *When Ladies Meet* ends more hopefully as Jimmie represents the possibility that men can and are changing their views enough to allow for egalitarian relationships between intelligent and forward-thinking men and women.

CONCLUSION

The plays of Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, and Dawn Powell dramatically demonstrate changing gender roles both within and outside of marriage during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, and provide a female perspective on the issues that these changes brought about. An overall examination of their work reveals a number of patterns and recurring themes. Plays such as *He and She*, *Trifles*, and *Machinal* expose gender inequality in both marriage and the legal realm. Whether or not a woman is financially independent of men is an important factor in nearly every play examined, and the difficulty of balancing achievement in both career and relationships is an issue in *He and She*, *The Verge*, *Women at Four O'Clock*, and *When Ladies Meet*. Sexual exploitation of women in the business world is also a major theme in *Machinal*, *Big Night*, and *Women at Four O'Clock*. Women struggle to redefine their identities or seek independence from unsatisfying relationships through sexual exploration in *Mary the Third*, *The Verge*, *Machinal*, *Let Us Be Gay*, *Ladies Leave*, *Jig Saw*, *Women at Four O'Clock*, *Walking Down Broadway*, and *When Ladies Meet*, and in each of these plays characters attempt to reconcile Victorian attitudes of morality with more progressive ideas of sexual liberation. Differing ideas of morality and gender roles across generations is also explored in several plays, most notably in *Mary the Third*, *Let Us Be Gay*, and *Inheritors*, but *He and She*, *The Verge*, and *Jig Saw* also provide perspectives from more than one generation. Almost every play deals with gender double-standards in some realm, in particular when it comes to chastity before marriage and fidelity during marriage, which is universally expected of women but not of men. *Inheritors* even exposes hypocrisy in the political realm, where Madeleine is the only character willing to stand up for the American ideals which the rest of the characters profess

to protect, and refuses to use her gender to evade the consequences of her actions. Finally, each play examined in this thesis features female characters who drive the action and a female protagonist who determines her own destiny, whether to a happy or a tragic end.

In addition to varying marital statuses, the protagonists of the plays examined represent a variety of ages, social classes, professions, and come from both rural and urban environments. The work of Crothers, Glaspell, Treadwell, and Powell truly offers a multifaceted picture of American female identity across three decades, and these playwrights dramatized the social issues most relevant to women of the period, issues which are often still relevant today.

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VITA

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Stephanie joined Teach For America in 2009, and spent three years teaching Spanish at Central Visual and Performing Arts High School in St. Louis, Missouri. She obtained a Master of Arts in Secondary Education from the University of Missouri-St. Louis in August of 2011. In addition to teaching, she volunteered for various backstage positions in Central's theatre productions, and performed in several community theatre productions with Marble Stage in St. Louis.

In the fall of 2012, Stephanie entered the University of Missouri-Kansas City's Master of Arts in Theatre program, where she studied Theatre History, Dramaturgy, and Playwriting. She also taught Foundations of Theatre and served as the dramaturg for several UMKC productions (*King Lear*, *Drums in the Night*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*) and one production at the Unicorn Theatre in Kansas City (*Clybourne Park*). Upon completion of her degree, Stephanie plans to pursue a career in theatre education.