

SARAH RUHL'S WOMEN:
GENDER, REPRESENTATION AND SUBVERSION IN *THE CLEAN HOUSE*,
EURYDICE AND *IN THE NEXT ROOM, OR THE VIBRATOR PLAY*

A Thesis
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
HEIDI SCHMIDT
Dr. David Crespy, thesis committee chair

MAY 2010

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

SARAH RUHL'S WOMEN:

GENDER, REPRESENTATION AND SUBVERSION IN *THE CLEAN HOUSE*,
EURYDICE AND IN THE NEXT ROOM, OR THE VIBRATOR PLAY

presented by Heidi Schmidt,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Doctor David Crespy

Doctor Cheryl Black

Doctor Elisa Glick

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would be remiss if I didn't thank several people who have been instrumental to the process of writing this thesis, and to my development as a student of the theatre. First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee, Dr. David Crespy, Dr. Cheryl Black, and Dr. Elisa Glick. Dr. Crespy's playwriting course pushed me to develop my ability to analyze the nuts and bolts of a script, and to evaluate the form of a play along with its content. Dr. Black's course on women and dramatic literature provided the germ that eventually grew into this thesis. Her example as a feminist theatre scholar has encouraged me throughout the process of this endeavor. Dr. Glick's feminist theory course provided the theoretical foundations upon which this thesis is built. Without her contributions to my understanding of feminism, this thesis would look very different.

Dr. Judith Sebesta is also deserving of thanks. As my undergraduate academic advisor, and as a graduate school mentor, Dr. Sebesta has been instrumental in my development as a writer and a scholar for over ten years. Her influence as a mentor and her support of my academic career are greatly appreciated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1:	8
Feminism, Domesticity and <i>The Clean House</i>	
CHAPTER 2:	27
<i>Eurydice</i> and the Speaking Subject	
CHAPTER 3:	41
Gender, Representation and <i>In the Next Room, or the vibrator play</i>	
CONCLUSION	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY	59

Introduction

Sarah Ruhl is one of the most promising young playwrights working in the theatre today. While she is still in the early phases of her career, her work has garnered significant critical attention and has been produced by theatres across the nation. Ruhl was awarded the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2004 (for *The Clean House*); a MacArthur “genius” grant (2006); and has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist twice (for *The Clean House* in 2005 and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* in 2010). Her major plays include *The Clean House*; *Eurydice*; *Melancholy Play*; *Passion Play*; *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*; and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*.¹

Much of the attention focused on Ruhl’s work centers on her innovative and poetic sense of visual style and her use of magic theatricality. Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* called her work “weird and wonderful.”² In *Eurydice*, for example, a stage direction reads, “The Father creates a room out of string for Eurydice. He makes four walls and a door out of string...It takes time to

¹ Citation for this thesis will be as set out in Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

² Charles Isherwood, “The Power of Memory to Triumph Over Death,” *New York Times* June 19, 2007. <http://theater.nytimes.com/2007/06/19/theater/reviews/19seco.html>

build a room out of string.”³ Ruhl also exhibits a preoccupation with language as an imperfect method of communication. Ruhl’s language exhibits a fascination with translation. *The Clean House* opens with a long joke told in Portuguese (to a presumably English-speaking audience), and closes with the lines, “I think maybe heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing.”⁴ *Melancholy Play* repeatedly references the existence of problematic translation. “There’s a word for it...But not in English!”⁵ For example: “There’s a word in Japanese for being sad in the springtime – a whole word just for being sad...I can’t remember the word;” “There’s a word in Portuguese – I can’t remember the name – it means melancholy – but not exactly – it means you are full of longing for someone who is far away;” and “There’s a word in Russian – it means melancholy – but not exactly – it means to love someone but also to pity them;”⁶

Music is also an integral element in Ruhl’s plays. In *Eurydice*, music is not only important thematically – Orpheus’ music is powerful enough to open the gates of hell – it plays an important role in the staging of the play. Orpheus and Eurydice sing and dance together at their wedding, “Don’t sit under the apple tree / With anyone else but me...”⁷ In the Nasty Interesting Man’s apartment, Ruhl specifies that he “switches on Brazilian mood music.”⁸ In *Melancholy Play*, an

³ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 367.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 282-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 240, 248, 260.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 347.

onstage cellist named Julian accompanies each scene. In a note on staging, Ruhl directs those producing *Melancholy Play*:

The score is another character in this play, scoring transitions, underscoring dialogue, moving the actors into song, and creating an entire world. The score should be treated with the utmost musical, theatrical, and mathematical sensitivity. The music should be integrated early and often in rehearsal, rather than being the icing on the cake.⁹

Ruhl's dramaturgy, then, creates for the audience an unusual blend of visual, linguistic, and aural experience.

As of this writing, the vast majority of writing available about Sarah Ruhl is journalistic, primarily in the form of interviews and performance reviews, which tend to focus on the elements I have discussed here – her particular blend of aural, visual, and linguistic storytelling and how it translates from the page to the stage. These characteristics of her dramaturgy set her apart as a playwright and are certainly worthy of further study. As an aspiring feminist theatre scholar, however, I am more interested in how Ruhl, as a working female playwright, treats questions of femininity within her plays. This interest leads me to an analysis of Ruhl's women as characters and how they depict women's experience. Ruhl's protagonists tend to be likeable women who exhibit a charming combination of confidence, curiosity and wide-eyed wonder at the world around them. Jean, in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, falls in love with a stranger at the moment of his death, and goes on to romanticize his life to his friends and family. *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* opens with Catherine Givings, the protagonist, fascinated by the newly installed electric lights in her home.

⁸ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 352.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

Eurydice approaches the underworld as if she's taking a new and exciting trip. This is not to say they are unaffected by the world. Eurydice feels the loss of her husband (and later, her father) deeply. The characters' emotional lives are deeply grounded, but they retain a certain brave optimism in the face of difficult emotional circumstances.

On a deeper level, I hope to excavate Ruhl's *staging* of gender through a study of the representational forms she employs within her work and how they interact with strands of feminist theory. In particular, Ruhl's plays (particularly *The Clean House*, *Eurydice*, and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*) lend themselves to a discussion and analysis of embodiment, looking and the gaze, and domesticity. Ruhl's plays often gently parody traditional representations of gender, in both climactic moments and offhand remarks. An offhand example would be Virginia, in *The Clean House*, stating that "I do not have children...My husband is barren."¹⁰ Barren is a word we are accustomed to hearing applied exclusively to women who cannot have children. The gendered application is highlighted when Ruhl reverses the application to a man, instead of a woman. A more significant example comes at the end of *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*. The play ends with Catherine and her husband making love in the winter garden. Popular cinema has trained audiences to expect to see female nudity in situations of heterosexual intimacy, but Ruhl reverses this expectation. In the Broadway production, Dr. Givings disrobed completely, leaving Catherine partially dressed in a camisole and slip. I will investigate this moment in more

¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

detail in Chapter Three. I argue that her reversal of representational gender roles in these moments (and others) draws attention to the constructed nature of these conventions, and offers a path to subvert these norms. My thesis will consist of my analysis of three of Sarah Ruhl's plays – *The Clean House*, *Eurydice*, and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* – in juxtaposition with various permutations of feminist theory. My goal is not to determine whether or not Ruhl is or is not a feminist, or to label her plays “good” feminism or “bad” feminism, but to explore the ways in which she uses gender in both the content and form of her plays, and how those uses reflect, create, and/or subvert cultural constructions of femininity. I chose the three plays primarily for the ways in which they manifest the gender subversion I wish to analyze. However, their positions as three of her most successful plays (in terms of publication, major production, award track record, etc) makes them attractive candidates for scholarly conversation within the fields of theatre and feminism.

The Clean House also seems an appropriate object for feminist study for its use of cleaning as a central metaphor to explore the control and chaos within four women's lives. Ruhl “wanted cleaning to be just plain cleaning in the first act, and in the second act, to make it feel more like cleansing – the spiritual, ritual parts of cleaning.”¹¹ This chapter will provide a political and historical context of the relationship between the feminist movement and cleaning in which to place *The Clean House*. I will also investigate the history of cleaning as invisible labor, primarily through the lens of Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, in which the

¹¹ Sarah Ruhl, quoted in Celia Wren, “The Golden Ruhl,” *American Theatre*, October 2005. <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/Oct05/ruhl.cfm>.

social constructions of race, class, and gender collude to devalue the labor of cleaning. Ruhl refuses to acquiesce to this code of invisibility; by performing the act of cleaning on the public stage, *The Clean House* functions as a feminist subversion of that invisibility.

A retelling of the Orpheus myth, *Eurydice* recasts the story as Eurydice's, making Orpheus the secondary character. While Orpheus pines and plans above ground, Eurydice reconnects with her father in the Underworld. In the crucial moment of the narrative – the moment in which Orpheus turns around, sees Eurydice, sending her back to the Underworld forever – Ruhl's Eurydice chooses to stay behind with her father. She calls out Orpheus's name, causing him to turn and look. It is her choice, not his. I am interested in Eurydice's agency and the ways in which voice and the gaze function in regard to gender within this play, and will pursue the question in context of Hélène Cixous and Monique Wittig's theories of language and writing, as well as Laure Mulvey's theory of the gaze, as outlined in her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," with special attention to the subject/object relationship she posits between the man who watches and the woman who is watched. Ruhl reverses this gendered dichotomy, granting Eurydice control of the look, and challenges the notion that a woman in representation is objectified.

I had originally intended to write about *Melancholy Play: A contemporary farce* for the third spot within the thesis, and to analyze Ruhl's satire of romanticized female melancholy. In November 2009, however, I saw *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* performed on Broadway (Ruhl's first, and at the time

of this writing, only Broadway production) and I found it to be more in line with my intentions for this thesis. *The vibrator play* dramatizes the invention of the vibrator as a medical instrument through the eyes of a late nineteenth century doctor's wife in upstate New York. The play was inspired by Rachel Maines' *The Technology of Orgasm*, and is historically accurate, for the most part. As Ruhl notes, "Things that seem impossibly strange in the play are all true... Things that seem commonplace are all my own invention."¹² I intend to contextualize the play with a discussion of hysteria and the medical pathology of the female body via *The Technology of Orgasm* and Susuan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, which connects contemporary anorexia to hysteria. My primary focus will be on the final moments of the play, in which the central couple make love on the stage. As previously noted, the female body is coded within representation as the appropriate object of display, and Ruhl's choice to reveal the man's body but not the woman's reverses and therefore undermines this gendered convention of representation.

¹² Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, unpublished production script (New York, Lincoln Center, 2009).

Chapter One:

Feminism, Domesticity and *The Clean House*

The Clean House was Sarah Ruhl's first play to garner significant national attention. It was awarded the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2004, was a 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist, and has been produced at major theatres nationwide. Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* called it "one of the finest and funniest new plays you're likely to see in New York this season."¹³ It was also one of the most produced plays of 2007-2008 Season, according to Theatre Communications Group (third to John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* and David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole*).¹⁴ Ruhl's initial inspiration for the play came at a cocktail party:

I was at a party full of doctors. One of them came into the room, and...said that she'd had such a hard month because her cleaning lady from Brazil was depressed and wouldn't clean the house. So she had her medicated, but the woman still wouldn't clean. She said, "I'm sorry, but I didn't go to medical school so I could clean my own house." It was all laid out right there, ready for the page...Here's this woman who thinks she's transcended cleaning because of her education. It's as though liberal-

¹³ Charles Isherwood, "Always Ready With a Joke, if Not a Feather Duster," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2006 (<http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/10/31/theater/reviews/31clea.html?pagewanted=print>).

¹⁴ "Top Ten Most Produced Plays," <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/ATtopten.cfm>

mindful career women are too good to clean their own house. That fascinates me...What does it mean to be alienated from your own dirt?¹⁵

The doctor at the party evolved into the character of Lane, a successful doctor in her fifties, and the story from the party is re-created nearly verbatim in an early monologue. The other women in the play are Matilde, Lane's Brazilian maid; Virginia, Lane's sister; and Ana, Lane's husband's lover. The play opens by introducing us to each character in direct address to the audience. Matilde tells the audience a bawdy joke in Portuguese (the joke remains untranslated); her mission in life is to compose the perfect joke. Lane complains that her maid is too depressed to clean. "I had her medicated and she Still Wouldn't Clean. And – in the meantime – *I've been cleaning my house!* I'm sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house."¹⁶ Next, we meet Virginia, Lane's sister, who offers a defense of cleaning: "People who give up the *privilege* of cleaning their own houses – they're insane people. If you do not clean: how do you know if you've made any progress in life?"¹⁷ Matilde, the maid, avoids cleaning at all costs, and Virginia steps in to clean Lane's house instead, unbeknownst to Lane. The arrangement falls apart when Lane discovers the ruse, shortly after learning that her husband Charles is leaving her for an older woman, one of his patients. Charles wants Lane to be friends with his lover, Ana, and the second act depicts Lane's struggle to come to terms with the loss of her husband and Ana's

¹⁵ Qtd in Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains: Sarah Ruhl, Interviewed by Wendy Weckwerth," *Theatre*, vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer 2004), 31-2.

¹⁶ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 10. Italics in original.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, italics in original.

unavoidable presence in her life. Ana's cancer returns; Charles embarks on an epic journey to bring back a miracle cure for his beloved; and Lane is left to care for Ana in the face of her deteriorating health and impending death.

Within this chapter, I intend to explore various strains of feminism and how they position domesticity and its interactions with gender, class, and race/ethnicity in order to place *The Clean House* and its characters in political and historical context, incorporating both second wave rejections of domesticity and postfeminism's apparent reclamation of it. From there, I will consider how cleaning has been rendered invisible labor historically through Anne McClintock's study of Victorian dirt fetish, and end with a discussion of how Ruhl deliberately makes cleaning culturally visible.

One of the dominant themes of second wave feminism was a rejection of mandatory housework, with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) leading the charge against domestic oppression. She compared the home (and society's relegation of women to that space) to a concentration camp: "I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. In a sense that is not as far-fetched as it sounds, the women who 'adjust' as housewives...are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps."¹⁸ Germaine Greer called the full-time housewife "the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description."¹⁹ Ann Oakley's response is less

¹⁸ Qtd in Stéphanie Genz, "I Am Not a Housewife, but...", *Feminism, Domesticity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Stacy Gillis & Joanne Hollows (New York: Routledge, 2009), 51.

inflammatory, but no less firm: housework is “directly opposed to the possibility of human self-actualization” and “contentment with the housewife role is actually a form of antifeminism, whatever the gender of the person who displays it.

Declared contentment with a subordinate status – which the housewife role undoubtedly is – is a rationalization of inferior status.”²⁰ These views are not universally representative of second wave feminism, but were highly influential and indicate the importance of domestic and family life in the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.

The feminism of the last few decades, however, reveals a more ambivalent attitude toward domesticity. The daughters of second wave feminists came of age reaping the benefits of their mothers’ activism, and for many younger women today, the battle seems far less urgent, possibly even unnecessary. In recent decades, postfeminism (sometimes hyphenated as post-feminism) has inserted itself into the lexicon of gender discourse. This term is problematic for many feminist scholars. The prefix ‘post’ signals the end of the thing named – postfeminism implies the end of feminism. As Janelle Reinelt writes, there is something “performatively defeatist about using the designation ‘postfeminism’ – defeatist in that it seems to give up on the project of feminism, and performative in that it actively constructs the present based on a sense of

¹⁹ Qtd in Stéphanie Genz, “I Am Not a Housewife, but...”, *Feminism, Domesticity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Stacy Gillis & Joanne Hollows (New York: Routledge, 2009), 51. From *The Female Eunuch* (1970).

²⁰ Qtd. In Stacy Gillis & Joanne Hollows, Introduction to *Feminism, Domesticity, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 7. From *The Sociology of Housework* (1974).

feminism as past or over.”²¹ This interpretation is troubling to a self-identified feminist. Is feminism really over? Does this mean it achieved the goal and is no longer necessary, or that it failed and was abandoned?

A 2003 study, conducted by Elaine Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, endeavored to define and consider postfeminism as a media phenomenon.²² Through a detailed analysis of twenty years (1980-1999) of popular media and scholarly sources, they distilled popular understanding and use of the term into four main points. First, postfeminism (in the chronological sense) implies that general support for the women’s movement has waned significantly since the 1970s. The literature also argues that this decrease in support can be traced to a (1) rising anti-feminism among full-time homemakers, younger women and women of color; (2) a perception that feminism has outlived its usefulness; and (3) a general distaste for the term feminism, in which women are “reluctant to define themselves with the feminist label,” even though they “approve of and indeed demand equal pay, economic independence, sexual freedom, and reproductive choice.”²³ Hall and Rodriguez go on to analyze survey data from the same twenty year period to test these claims, concluding that support for the women’s movement has not, in fact, waned or outlived its usefulness. Their research does, however, reveal the importance of terminology; the authors

²¹ Janelle Reinelt, “Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box” in *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*, edited by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 17.

²² Elaine J. Hall & Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, “The Myth of Postfeminism,” *Gender and Society*, v17, no 6 (Dec. 2003), 878-902.

²³ Ibid., 879. The internal quote is from Laurie Ouelette, “Our Turn Now: Reflections of a 26-year-old Feminist,” *Utne Reader* (July/August 1992), 118-20.

acknowledge that “respondents are known to report more support for the movement than for feminism,” with the phrase “women’s liberation” receiving the most support in surveys, “feminism” receiving the least, and “women’s movement” in between.²⁴

The position of feminism and its perceived successes and failures, especially in regard to theatre, is further complicated by the recent release of a study designed to quantify gender bias in playwriting. Princeton economics student Emily Sands conducted extensive research of production history, sales records, and a blinded survey asking artistic directors nationwide to rate a script in detail; some were given a script with a male name attached as author, others the same script with a woman’s name. Among her findings: women represent the minority of playwrights (32%) and of productions (18% of scripts produced in 2008 were by women); women are more likely to write about women (33% of plays by women feature primarily female characters, compared to 19% of plays by men), but plays *about* women are statistically less likely to be produced than plays about men; 11% of shows produced on Broadway in the last ten years (1999-2009) were written by women. She also found that a script with a woman’s name attached is perceived as lower in quality than the exact same script with a male name listed as author. The expectation is that a woman’s script will be less financially successful.²⁵ This is hardly the picture of an industry

²⁴ Elaine J. Hall & Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, “The Myth of Postfeminism,” *Gender and Society*, v17, no 6 (Dec. 2003), 886.

²⁵ Emily Glassberg Sands, “Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theatre” bachelors thesis, Princeton University, 2009. Available online at <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/theater/Openingthecurtain.pdf>. The figures in this

that has overcome old biases based on gender, calling into question the postfeminist implication that the need for feminism is past.

Several feminist scholars, however, have attempted to rehabilitate the term 'postfeminism' and expand its meaning. Despite the hesitations mentioned above, Janelle Reinelt also acknowledges the complexity of the prefix "post-," citing the connections to post-modernism, post-structuralism, etc. In a post-world, any attempt to define a movement, or to create any kind of ideological homogeneity, is fraught with semantic danger. In this context, affixing post- to feminism can be read as an acknowledgement that the term "feminism" and the movement(s) it designates have become too diffuse and disparate for "feminism" to suffice. Stéphanie Genz employs the term postfeminism to reflect "the ambiguities inherent in a post- position."²⁶ This approach seems to appropriately complicate the issue of contemporary feminism, though I approach the term with some residual skepticism. I choose to employ the term, in spite of my skepticism, because it provides a convenient label with which to discuss contemporary positions toward and discussions of women and domesticity.

Postfeminism's relationship to domesticity has been cast by some pop culture critics as a return to domesticity, or a reclamation of domesticity. Contemporary characterizations are not the mandatory housewifery so thoroughly condemned by second wave feminists. Television domestics such as

paragraph were taken from a research summary Ms. Sands presented at an open meeting in New York City on June 22, 2009. Her presentation is also available online via *The New York Times* website: http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/theater/speech_slides2x.pdf.

²⁶ Stéphanie Genz, "I Am Not a Housewife, but..." *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 50.

Martha Stewart, Rachael Ray and Nigella Lawson give contemporary women “permission to be interested in the domestic arena.”²⁷ Beyond allowing for interest in domesticity, postfeminism endorses it. Contemporary domesticity is all about being fabulous, or a “domestic goddess,” as Nigella Lawson’s first cookbook phrased it.²⁸ These glossy representations of glamorous dinner parties, however, are a far cry from day to day domesticity. The image of a perfectly coiffed Martha Stewart presenting her recipes in an immaculate kitchen masks the real labor going on behind the scenes, just as it glosses over the less glamorous drudgery of scrubbing a toilet, removing hard water stains from the shower drain, or shampooing the carpet. On the surface, postfeminist domesticity is a fun and fabulous form of housewifery, focused on living well and showing off for friends rather than the labor required to maintain this image. This glamorization of domesticity contributes to a continuing invisibility of the *labor* of cleaning. Beneath the surface, however, postfeminist domesticity may be the same gendered drudgery repurposed and repackaged for a new generation.

Within *The Clean House*, cleaning remains a woman’s problem. All four women in the play express strong feelings about cleaning, mostly negative. Ana says, “I hate to clean;” Lane tells the audience, “I did not go to medical school to clean my own house;” and Matilde laments, “I don’t like to clean houses. I think it

²⁷ Qtd. In Charlotte Brunson, “The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha and Nigella” *Feminism in Popular Culture* ed. by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (New York: Berg, 2006), 49. From A. Mason and M. Meyers, “Living with Martha Stewart: Chosen Domesticity in the Experience of Fans,” *Journal of Communication* (Dec 2001), 818.

²⁸ Nigella Lawson, *How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking* (New York: Hyperion, 2001).

makes me sad.”²⁹ Only Virginia enjoys cleaning, as she says on multiple occasions in the script; her enthusiasm is also noted in stage directions.³⁰ Cleaning is also represented as part of a male/female relationship. It’s not just something that *women* do, it’s something women do *for men*. When Charles leaves her for another woman, Lane blames it on her lack of domesticity. “He didn’t want a doctor. He wanted a housewife.”³¹ Virginia, the lone cleaning enthusiast, reinforces the relational character of cleaning: “I think that people who are in love – really in love – would like to clean up after each other,” though the cleaning up really only goes one way: “If I were in love with Charles I would enjoy folding his laundry.”³² Ana also names cleaning as her responsibility in her relationship with Charles, even as she’s trying to get out of it by hiring Matilde.³³ “I hate to clean. And Charles likes things to be clean.” She “will not be his washerwoman,” but will take responsibility for hiring one.³⁴ The possibility that Charles can (or should) clean up after himself is entirely absent from the play. I find this troubling. How is it that forty-some years after Friedan and Greer the cleaning responsibilities in this play still so unmistakably and unquestioningly the

²⁹ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 64, 10, 18.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 18, 21, 24, and 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³² *Ibid.*, 66.

³³ The prevalence of delegating “women’s work” reminds me of another recent play, Lisa Loomer’s *Living Out*, in which women hire out the job of raising their children. Most of the nannies are Latina immigrants, who are taking time away from their own children in order to raise someone else’s. Both plays raise questions of changing gender roles, gendered labor, and class.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64, 66.

province of women? This may be primarily a dramaturgical device. The play is not about Charles and his relationship to cleaning, it is about the women.

Cleaning, in this sense, is a relationship metaphor. Ana hiring Matilde away from Lane is adding insult to the injury of having stolen her husband. Later, Lane's washing of Ana's body after her death is an act of tenderness and forgiveness. Charles is notably absent from this moment because it is not about him. The cleaning metaphor serves the same purpose; Charles is absent from the dialogue because it is not about him. Politically, however, my concerns over his absence in that dialogue remain unresolved.

Cleaning is not just gendered within the play; gender colludes with ethnicity and class. Lane, as a well-educated, middle class white woman can escape (to some degree) her domestic obligations by engaging the services of another, namely Matilde, a Latina immigrant. Class is implicated in this economic transaction. Lane, like most white middle class Western women, is not paid to clean her own home. Compensation and economic value, in fact, do not come into play until a woman leaves the home for outside employment. She is not paid for her own domestic labor, but her replacement must be. Domestic labor therefore becomes a class issue. Women whose careers take them outside the home (like Lane as doctor), have transcended the class "woman," but must engage a replacement to perform the classed and gendered tasks still assigned to her. The maid (or nanny) steps into the domestic class to fill the vacancy. The (non-domestic) career woman must, in fact, employ a suitable stand-in *before* she is able to leave the domestic class behind. Of course, the

question becomes one of whether she leaves it behind, or simply gets a temporary reprieve, as she is still generally responsible for supervising and managing her substitute.

In the Victorian ideal, servants carried out most of the labor in the home, including cooking, cleaning and raising children. In the United States, these domestics were often German and Irish immigrants, who dominated the demographic of imported domestic labor until hired domestic labor began to wane in the 1920s.³⁵ Middle-class women through much of the twentieth century took responsibility for keeping their own houses and raising their own children. Recent years have seen a new trend in hiring domestic help. Like the German and Irish who came before, this group is also dominated by immigrant labor, this time from South America. Many of these women (and they are almost exclusively women) have left children behind in Latin America in order to make a living raising American children.³⁶

Suzanne Leonard's article "Ready-Maid Postfeminism?" notes how recent films glamorize both domestic labor and the Latina laborer, in particular the films *Spanglish*, *Love Actually*, and *Maid in Manhattan*. All three films feature Latina women working as maids, and all three feature a romance between the maid in question and a white, middle- or upper-class man. In two of the films, the romantic interest is the maid's employer. In two of the films (*Spanglish* and *Love Actually*), the romance occurs despite (or because of?) a language barrier. The

³⁵ Suzanne Leonard, "Ready-Maid Postfeminism?" *Feminism, Domesticity & Popular Culture* (NY: Routledge, 2009), 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

maids speak no English, and their male employers fall in love with them. Leonard argues that these silenced women play as foils for the white woman, usually loud, shrill, ambitious, unfeminine and undesirable. The maids, through their devotion and their domesticity, provide a shining example of how a woman should behave. They get the guy as reward for their admirable behavior. The shrew, by contrast, either learns her lesson and is rehabilitated, or refuses to change and gets her comeuppance.

With these films in mind, we may expect Ruhl to offer similar treatment in *The Clean House*. Matilde is a South American immigrant (from Brazil), working as a domestic in the home of an ambitious, professionally successful white woman who has (according to the pop culture narrative) lost touch with her domesticity/femininity. While Matilde's English skills are not in question, she does tell the audience jokes in Portuguese, which they presumably do not understand. The jokes, however, are often dirty, and her body language in performance communicates loudly regardless of the language barrier. Matilde subverts our expectations and Lane's. Lane might well prefer the silent and well-behaved pop culture maid, but Matilde rejects the role. Matilde upsets Lane by talking too much, and sharing too much personal information about her family history (Lane: "I understand that you have a life, an emotional life...But life is about context. And I have met you in the context of my house, where I have hired you to clean. And I don't want an interesting person to clean my house. I just want my house – cleaned."³⁷)

Lane, on the other hand, is ambitious. But where the filmic model dictates a shrew whose comeuppance we can cheer, Ruhl gives us Lane's genuine confusion and heartbreak when her husband leaves her for an older woman. Lane does learn a lesson by the end of the play, but it's not the culturally inscribed correction to take better care of her man – instead, she learns how to forgive and to care for the women in her life. It is not her husband she nurtures at the end of the play, it is his lover, Ana. After Ana's death, Lane washes her body in one of the most moving moments of the play. Ruhl's intent with the play was for "cleaning to be just plain cleaning in the first act, and in the second act, to make it feel more like cleansing – the spiritual, ritual parts of cleaning."³⁸ Lane's washing of Ana's body functions as ritual, signaling a spiritual transformation that has occurred through the course of the play.

Lane's transformation also revolves around cleaning as a method of control. By caring for Ana and washing her body after death, Lane demonstrates that she has made peace with her inability to exert strict control over her emotional life. Lane and Virginia both employ cleaning and cleanliness as methods of controlling chaos. Lane insists on having everything in her life clean and ordered, as demonstrated by the prevalence of white in her home's décor and her wardrobe. White necessitates persistent cleaning, though Lane does not apply her own efforts to that task. For Virginia, who prefers to perform her own domestic labor, cleaning is a way of controlling time and its effects. Anne

³⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 13.

³⁸ Sarah Ruhl, quoted in Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl," *American Theatre*, October 2005. <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/Oct05/ruhl.cfm>.

McClintock characterizes cleaning as boundary control: "Cleaning is not inherently meaningful; it creates meaning through the demarcation of boundaries... segregating dirt from hygiene, order from disorder, meaning from confusion."³⁹ This analysis seems appropriate to these two characters, both invested in the preservation of order. Ruhl's particular use of unexpected theatricality breaks through these boundaries. In the second act, the stage includes both Lane's living room and a balcony above it. Creative use of limited space is not unusual in the theatre, and one literal stage space can often represent multiple locations through the course of the play. Ruhl, however, takes this spatial overlap one step further. As Ana and Matilde eat apples on the balcony and throw the cores over the edge, they land in Lane's living room. More importantly, Lane "sees the apples fall into her living room. She looks at them."⁴⁰ The overflow of objects from Charles' new life with his lover into Lane's living room works as both a literary metaphor and an exceptional staging device. It physically embodies Lane's inability to maintain emotional boundaries. She is incapable of fully excluding her husband's joy and infidelity from her emotional life, just as she's incapable in the staging of keeping the object detritus of his life with Ana from her living room. If cleaning is the maintenance of boundaries, Lane's reaction to the breach of those boundaries is understandable. After a sweater belonging to Charles drifts down from the balcony into Lane's living

³⁹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 170.

⁴⁰ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 71.

room, she picks it up and “breathes it in.”⁴¹ Moments later, she demands that Virginia stop cleaning, exclaiming,

I DON'T WANT ANYTHING IN MY HOUSE TO BE CLEAN EVER AGAIN!
I WANT THERE TO BE DIRT AND PIGS IN THE CORNER. MAYBE
SOME COW MANURE SOME BIG DIRTY SHITTY COWS AND SOME
SHITTY COW SHIT LOTS OF IT AND LOTS OF DIRFTY FUCKING
SOCKS – AND NONE OF THEM MATCH – NONE OF THEM –
BECAUSE YOU KNOW WHAT – THAT IS HOW I FEEL.⁴²

Her inability to control her emotional and personal life prompts her to reject the control she had fastidiously exerted over her home. The aftermath of this declaration includes a fight with Virginia, who responds by making a “giant operatic mess” in Lane’s living room. Virginia is surprised to discover she really enjoys it. Having abandoned her fixation on cleaning and control, she declares, “I feel fabulous.”⁴³

By staging the act of cleaning (and its negative, as in the “operatic mess”), Ruhl is representing an act that generally remains invisible. Ruhl has previously expressed her interest in embracing and subverting invisibility within her work: “On some level all my work is asking questions about that invisible stuff,”⁴⁴ and “theatre is a place where you can actually look at the invisible...I’m interested in those more invisible terrains.”⁴⁵ Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* directly addresses invisibility in context of the gendered, classed, and raced nature of

⁴¹ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 81.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 82, caps in original.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁴ Celia Wren, “The Golden Ruhl,” *American Theatre* October 2005.

⁴⁵ Wendy Weckwerth, “More Invisible Terrains: Sarah Ruhl, Interviewed by Wendy Weckwerth” *Theatre*, vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer 2004), 31.

domestic labor.⁴⁶ McClintock connects the Victorian dirt fetish and obsession with cleanliness to early mass production and distribution of “the simple bar of soap,”⁴⁷ British imperialism, the Victorian cult of domesticity, advertising practices, and industrialized capitalism. She positions the fetish on the “border of the social and the psychological” that “embodies a crisis in social meaning.”⁴⁸ The borders in question are those of race, class and gender.

The late nineteenth century marked the first effective uses of image-based advertising, soap being one of its major commodities. McClintock credits the innovations in marketing as contributory to the Victorian fixation on cleanliness and hygiene. This increased the domestic workload, and coincided with a decrease in opportunities for paid work outside the home, both contributing to the formation of “the Victorian doctrine that women should not work for profit.”⁴⁹ These soap advertisements ironically positioned their product as the magic solution to erase the labor of cleaning, having already constructed the social need for the domestic labor it now offers to eliminate. This advertising strategy sold a lot of soap, but it also placed a low social value on cleaning by erasing the perception and awareness of the labor involved. The advertising studiously avoided depicting the *act* of cleaning. The public display of cleanliness in the

⁴⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995). The chapters “Imperial Leather: Race, Cross-dressing and the Cult of Domesticity” and “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising” were particularly relevant to this topic.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 138 and 149.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

advertisements paradoxically buried the labor of cleaning in the private sphere, rendering it virtually invisible. Larger economic forces were also moving jobs traditionally done by women into the manufacturing realm, drastically reducing the kinds of opportunities women had for gainful employment, and creating the illusion of the white, middle class “idle woman,” suited only for ornamentation.⁵⁰

Leisure and cleanliness became competing status symbols. McClintock elaborates:

For most women whose husbands or fathers could not afford enough servants for genuine idleness, domestic work had to be accompanied by the historically unprecedented labor of rendering invisible every sign of that work. For most middling women, the cleaning and management of their large, inefficiently constructed houses took immense amounts of labor and energy. Yet a housewife’s vocation was precisely the concealment of this work.

Housewifery became a career in vanishing acts. A wife’s vocation was not only to create a clean and productive family but also to ensure the skilled erasure of every *sign* of her work. Her life took shape around the contradictory imperative of laboring while rendering her labor invisible. Her success as a wife depended on her skill in the art of both working and appearing not to work. Her parlor game – the ritualized moment of appearing fresh, calm and idle before the scrutiny of husbands, fathers and visitors – was a theatrical performance of leisure, the ceremonial negation of her work. For most women from the still-disorganized middling classes, I suggest, idleness was less the absence of work than a conspicuous labor of leisure.⁵¹

The housewife McClintock discusses here is white, and of the still-forming middle class. In fact, the correlation between the dirt fetish, the cult of (female) domesticity and the construction of the middle class is a large part of McClintock’s argument.

⁵⁰ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 160.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 161-2.

Class is implicated in questions of remuneration for household cleaning. The image of the “idle woman” was an indication of the new middle class, and established a border bound up with social and financial position. At the same time as the middle class was forming, industrial capitalism was on the rise. Capitalism favors work that creates a tangible product (gendered male) that can be sold for profit. What are we to do, then, with a labor that produces no tangible result, no product? The “product” of cleaning labor is negatively defined. A clean house lacks dust, it lacks dirt, it lacks *evidence of labor*. This lack of visual evidence, combined with the lack of economic recognition, renders the gendered labor of cleaning doubly invisible.

Many feminists have endeavored to recuperate women’s place in history and in contemporary society by shining a light on activities that have been labeled feminine and thus been excluded from social, cultural and historical narratives. Others have written about the perception that male stories are universal, and women’s stories are categorized as genre or niche stories. In this context, cleaning is certainly both historically gendered and invisible. Susan Bordo has argued that the “transformation of culture, and not merely greater statistical representation of women, must remain the goal.”⁵² Emily Sands’s study, referenced earlier, points out the disturbing numbers regarding women’s participation in the creation of theatre. Her study, however, also points to the culture of theatre – the reticence to produce plays not just *by* women, but *about* women – that cannot be rectified simply by a numbers game. *The Clean House*,

⁵² Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 240.

in this context, serves as a play both by a woman and about women. To take it a step further, she has made the historically invisible labor of cleaning visible by enacting it as a central action of this play. If transforming culture and demanding visibility are the goals, *The Clean House* and its success must be recognized as positive steps toward achieving those goals.

Chapter Two:

Eurydice and the Speaking Subject

Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* retells the Orpheus myth from the perspective of his wife, Eurydice.⁵³ The basics of most versions of the myth are that Orpheus, a great musician, falls in love with Eurydice, and she with him. They are married, but Eurydice is fatally bitten by a snake on their wedding day. Orpheus, disconsolate at the loss of his beloved, descends to hell to reclaim his wife. His music so affects Hades, lord of the underworld, that he agrees to return Eurydice to the land of the living, on one condition; Eurydice will follow Orpheus as he exits hell, but he is forbidden from looking back at her until they arrive at their destination. At the last moment, Orpheus glances back, and Eurydice dies again, this time for good. This second death is, in part, what first attracted Ruhl to the myth. "I'm interested in her voice, a voice that hasn't been heard before. I'm interested in anyone who dies twice."⁵⁴ Elsewhere, she comments "rarely

⁵³ There are four published versions of the *Eurydice* script. The earliest version was published in *Theatre* in 2004. The second is in Caridad Svich's *Divine Fire* anthology (2005), followed by the Theatre Communications Group anthology (*The Clean House and Other Plays*, 2006), and the Samuel French Acting edition (2008). All four versions differ in ways of varying significance. The 2004 *Theatre* version, for example, contains two characters that were cut from later editions. There are differences between the two most recent publications, but most of them are minor. I am relying primarily on the version published in the TCG anthology, but will note any significant differences in the other versions where appropriate.

does anyone look at Eurydice's experience. I always found that troubling – she's the one who dies and takes a journey before Orpheus, but we don't really see her experience."⁵⁵ Much like she did with cleaning in *The Clean House*, Ruhl is depicting something previously invisible – Eurydice's experience.

Ruhl's adaptation is a loose one. Orpheus is still a musician, Eurydice still dies, and Orpheus still braves the gates of hell to bring her back to life. This Eurydice, however, does not die by snake bite, but by a fall down the stairs of a high rise apartment. And while Orpheus struggles with his grief above ground, Eurydice is reunited with her late father in the Underworld. Combining the "mythic and the quotidian,"⁵⁶ the play navigates between contemporary life above ground (Eurydice and Orpheus play on a beach, she visits an "elegant high-rise apartment," and she and Orpheus go out to restaurants) and the timeless, mythic, and slightly absurd Underworld, where a chorus of stones stubbornly pronounce the rules, amnesia is induced by water dunking, the newly deceased arrive via raining elevator, and the Lord of the Underworld rides a red tricycle.⁵⁷

The most important distinction between traditional tellings of the myth and Ruhl's adaptation is Eurydice's placement as speaking subject with far more agency than the older myths grant her. The terms agency and subject are, of

⁵⁴ Sarah Ruhl, "Eurydice," *Divine Fire* ed. Caridad Svich (New York: Backstage Books, 2005), 279.

⁵⁵ qtd in Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains: Sarah Ruhl, Interviewed by Wendy Weckwerth," in *Theatre* 34.2 (Summer 2004), 30.

⁵⁶ Richard Corley, qtd in Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl," in *American Theatre*, October 2005.

⁵⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 349.

course, complex and relative. This chapter will investigate the extent of Eurydice's subjectivity in terms of language and the gaze, and how they function in two key moments of the play. For the first twelve lines of the opening scene, Orpheus is silent, communicating visually through gesture and pantomime; only Eurydice speaks.⁵⁸ This choice on the part of the playwright clearly establishes Eurydice as protagonist and the subject of the play, with Orpheus as the secondary character. The second moment to be analyzed is the moment in which Orpheus looks at her on their way back from the Underworld and Eurydice dies a second death. In most Orpheus narratives, Orpheus alone bears the responsibility of looking back and sending Eurydice back to hell. Ruhl, however, puts the onus on Eurydice. Eurydice chooses to stay in the Underworld with her father. With full knowledge of the consequences, she calls out Orpheus's name, causing him to turn and look at her. In these two moments, Ruhl seems to draw attention to sense perception, specifically to sight and sound. Seeing and speaking take on exaggerated importance. Sight and sound are also loaded senses in context of gender and representation. I intend to analyze the importance of language, visuality and the gaze in these two moments, and explore how (and to what extent) they constitute Eurydice as a speaking subject.

Feminist theorists have long been interested in the relationship between language and the subject status among women. Hélène Cixous argues:

It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language...It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by

⁵⁸ In the Samuel French version, it is the first ten lines.

the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.⁵⁹

In simple terms, she exhorts women to reject silence by writing, to claim language as a methodology for claiming (or reclaiming) power.⁶⁰ Monique Wittig, in her 1985 essay “The Mark of Gender,” agrees that language is a site of power and a vehicle for attaining subject status:

For when one becomes a locutor, when one says ‘I’ and, in so doing, reappropriates language as a whole, proceeding from oneself alone, with the tremendous power to use all language, it is then and there, according to linguists and philosophers, that the supreme act of subjectivity, the advent of subjectivity into consciousness, occurs. It is when starting to speak that one becomes ‘I.’ This act – the becoming of *the* subject through the exercise of language and through locution – in order to be real, implies that the locutor be an absolute subject.⁶¹

In other words, the speaking subject constitutes itself through use of speech and language. This apparent subjectivity, however, is a smokescreen according to Wittig, as language is comprehensively gendered. In English, this manifests itself primarily in personal pronouns. In other languages (specifically French), however, nouns and verbs carry gender within them. The degree to which gender overtly declares itself within each language differs, but both languages require the female speaker to “make her sex public. For gender is the

⁵⁹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 1975, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 2044.

⁶⁰ I recognize that Derrida et al. may take issue with my synthesis of writing and speech for women. However, in the context of playwriting, Ruhl’s work fulfills both functions; as a woman, she writes the lines that the character Eurydice will then speak. Additionally, my purpose here is to explore female subjectivity via mastery of language (both spoken and written), and not the theoretical complexity of signifier/signified relationships and speaking/writing hierarchies. For these two reasons, I choose to treat references to women speaking and writing as more or less interchangeable within this section.

⁶¹ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 80. Italics in original.

enforcement of sex in language.”⁶² To speak is to claim subjectivity, but the same language that seems to offer subject status and control of language simultaneously marks its user as woman, rendering the female speaking subject a paradox, at least as language is now constituted. Wittig’s solution is to neuter language, to eliminate gender entirely from language. Wittig’s argument is persuasive, but I find it difficult to translate into a workable course of action; Cixous’s call for women to write of and through the body is a more practicable solution for a playwright, whose writing is given voice in performance (“how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public.”⁶³) By giving Eurydice a voice, Ruhl attempts to reclaim Eurydice’s subjectivity within the course of the play.

Visuality and gender are ongoing objects of study in feminist thought. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” has become a focal point for the ways in which the gaze functions in relationship to gender and subjectivity. Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory as “a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.”⁶⁴ Her analysis of classic Hollywood cinema clearly casts the viewing subject as male, the visual object female. Mulvey’s viewing subject is a voyeur, safely hidden by the “conditions of screening and narrative conventions” of film,

⁶² Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 79.

⁶³ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 1975, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 2044.

⁶⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 1975, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14.

invisible in the darkened movie theater.⁶⁵ Her appropriation of psychoanalysis references Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* in order to discuss scopophilia and fetishistic voyeurism, but her primary use of psychoanalysis rests in Lacan's mirror phase and its central role in ego formation. According to Mulvey, the child's misrecognition of the reflected image as superior, which allows him to "projec[t] this body outside itself as an ideal ego," is the moment that ultimately "prepares the way for identification with others in the future."⁶⁶ For Mulvey, this recognition/misrecognition dichotomy lays the foundation for the spectator's later identification with the male protagonist of cinema: "the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist" as "he controls events" vicariously "with the active power of the erotic look...giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence."⁶⁷

This relationship between the male protagonist and the presumably male spectator serves to structure the binary mode of looking that Mulvey describes within her essay. According to Mulvey:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.⁶⁸

The woman on screen is to be looked at by the male characters, and by association the male spectators. Mulvey also discusses a third look, that of the

⁶⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 1975, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 19.

camera, which constructs the image that the audience views. Of these three looks (the characters, the audience, and the camera), only the look of the other characters is overt. There is no effort to hide or disguise the characters looking at one another. The gazes of the audience and the camera, however, are covert—the gaze of the audience is implied, but not overtly acknowledged within the conventions of narrative, illusionistic cinema. Likewise, the look of the camera is intended to be invisible, or natural. It is part of the illusion of narrative film.⁶⁹

It should be noted that Mulvey's essay was written as a critique and analysis of one particular genre of film – Hollywood's classic narrative cinema. Her theory of the gaze within that context was never intended to be applied universally. Within the essay, in fact, Mulvey looked forward to “the decline of the traditional film form” as one possibility for dismantling the patriarchy she critiqued.⁷⁰ It would be problematic to equate *Eurydice* as a stage performance with the film genre Mulvey critiques. Ruhl is not writing within the realist milieu, and her tendency to have characters directly address the audience refuses to fit within Mulvey's characterization of spectatorial voyeurism. The correlation Mulvey draws between vision, gender and the subject/object binary, however, is useful to my discussion of how (and to what degree) *Eurydice*'s subjectivity functions within the representational frame.

⁶⁹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 1975, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 26.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

If the gaze positions sight perception as active and dominating, how do speech and sound figure into the subject/object field? Donald Lowe places the five senses in a hierarchy. He argues that sound dominated historically, but with the advent of the printing press and growing literacy, visual information became more common and more reliable. Vision slowly surpassed sound as the culturally dominant sense for transmitting and receiving information.⁷¹ He characterizes sight as

preeminently a distancing, judgmental act. The data of the other four senses come to us,...But sight is extension in space, presupposing a distance. We see by frontally opening before us a horizontal field, within which we locate the objects of our attention...only sight can analyze and measure. Seeing is a comparative perception of things before our selves, the beginning of objectivity. That is why sight has been closely related to the intellect.⁷²

Along the same lines, the phrase “I see” in common parlance is synonymous with “I understand.”

Hearing, by contrast, is often characterized as passive perception. A person looking directs his or her gaze at an object. Sound, however, comes to the person hearing it. In these terms, both sight and sound are placed in a perceptual binary of active/passive, subject/object. The perceptual relationship between speaker and hearer places the speaker as active and the hearer passive. With sight, however, the relationship is inverted. The person looking (the perceiver) is constructed as active subject, while the object of the gaze is

⁷¹ See Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 6.

passive. Sight and sound, in other words, operate with inverted perceptual relationships.

To return to the opening moments of the play, Eurydice speaks, Orpheus listens as he is watched by both Eurydice and the audience. By making Eurydice both speaker and observer, she is doubly imbued with subject status in the play. Within this opening exchange, Eurydice and Orpheus also pre-enact the central moment of the Orpheus story. Eurydice commands Orpheus, “Now – walk over there.” Without speaking, he turns and walks away from her, as she calls after him, “Don’t look at me.”⁷³ This moment ends quite differently from the later moment it prefigures. Eurydice chases after Orpheus and jumps into his arms as they collapse onto the beach laughing and kissing. However, it is a clear reference to the later command that Orpheus not look back as he leads Eurydice from the Underworld. Those later rules are imposed from an outside source. In this moment, however, Eurydice is writing the rules of the game.

Rules of perception are altered in the Underworld. When Eurydice arrives, she cannot speak. She “opens her mouth, trying to speak. There is a great humming noise. She closes her mouth. The humming noise stops. She opens her mouth for a second time, attempting to tell her story to the audience. There is a great humming noise. She closes her mouth – the humming noise stops.”⁷⁴ Later, when Orpheus arrives to rescue his wife, he “stands at the gates of hell.

⁷³ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 334. This moment is cut from the Samuel French Acting edition.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 359.

He opens his mouth. He looks like he's singing, but he's silent."⁷⁵ Also, the chorus of stones complains that "dead people should be seen and not heard,"⁷⁶ characterizing death as the ultimate loss of agency. To obey the rules of the Underworld, then, is to embrace the status of passive object – a silent image.

The nature of sight and sound and their function within *Eurydice* are especially important in the central moment of the traditional Orpheus story. Orpheus manages to secure Eurydice's release from the Underworld, and the two begin their journey back to the land of the living. The crucial moment in most versions of the story is the moment Orpheus turns back to see his beloved, only to lose her to a second death. It is significant that this crucial moment is dependent on an act of looking. Outside of Ruhl's treatment of it, the function of the gaze in this moment is already complicated. Earlier, I noted that the gaze is often characterized as an act of possession, dominance, and control. The contradiction of Eurydice's second death, however, is that Orpheus's gaze fails to achieve possession and instead instigates loss. Judith Butler comments that "at the moment in which our gaze apprehends her, she is there, there for the instant in which she is there. And the gaze by which she is apprehended is the gaze through which she is banished."⁷⁷ This reversal of the possessive nature of the gaze complicates the active/passive binary associated with looking.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 389.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 401.

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, foreword to *The Matrixial Borderspace: Theory Out of Bounds*, by Bracha L. Ettinger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), vii-viii.

In Ruhl's version, Eurydice does not passively follow her husband back to the living world. While Orpheus has been grieving her loss above ground, Eurydice's father, who died when she was quite young, has found her in the Underworld, and the heart of the play is the relationship these two characters rebuild after years of separation. As Eurydice is following Orpheus out of the Underworld, she *chooses* to stay behind with her father. In her staging of the moment, Ruhl clearly grants Eurydice a level of agency absent in the previous versions. The rules are made quite clear to both Orpheus and Eurydice. When Orpheus enters hell and encounters the Lord of the Underworld (in the character list as "child" for his childish behavior):

CHILD: As you walk, keep your eyes facing front. If you look back at her – poof! She's gone.

ORPHEUS: I can't look at her?

CHILD: No.

ORPHEUS: Why?

CHILD: Because.

ORPHEUS: Because?

CHILD: Because. Do you understand me?

ORPHEUS: I look straight ahead. That's all?

CHILD: Yes.

ORPHEUS: That's easy.⁷⁸

Eurydice is also instructed by her father: "There's one thing you need to know. If he turns around and sees you, you'll die a second death. Those are the rules. So step quietly. And don't cry out."⁷⁹ Eurydice knows the rules of behavior and the consequences for breaking them. She leaves her father behind, and walks toward her husband's back:

Eurydice follows him with precision, one step for every step he takes.

⁷⁸ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 391.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 393.

*She makes a decision. She increases her pace.
She takes two steps for every step that Orpheus takes.
She catches up to him.
EURYDICE: Orpheus?
He turns toward her, startled.
Orpheus looks at Eurydice.
Eurydice looks at Orpheus.
The world falls away.⁸⁰*

The inclusion of the phrase “She makes a decision” in the stage directions is crucial. Knowing what is at stake, Eurydice *decides* to die again. By speaking her husband’s name aloud, in direct violation of her father’s instruction, Eurydice chooses her own fate – a second death – and once again claims the subject position in her own story. I also find it interesting that she does so with her voice. The stage directions specify that she had caught up to him. She could have touched him, but instead chose to claim her voice by speaking his name. Ruhl further complicates the active/passive binary in regard to Orpheus looking at Eurydice. Traditionally, the act of looking would be considered the active choice. However, Orpheus does not deliberately choose – he hears Eurydice (passive) and involuntarily looks back at her. He does not direct his own gaze: Eurydice directs it with her voice. Ruhl essentially renders him doubly passive, just as she made Eurydice doubly subject in the first scene. It is also significant that Eurydice looks back. “Orpheus looks at Eurydice. *Eurydice looks at Orpheus.* The world falls away.” Ruhl could have written the stage direction without the symmetry: “Orpheus looks at Eurydice. The world falls away,” but she chose to make Eurydice look back at her husband. Eurydice acknowledges and answers her husband’s gaze and owns her subjectivity.

⁸⁰ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 396-7.

Eurydice and Orpheus are forcibly separated, and Eurydice returns to her father. In her absence, however, her father has dipped himself in the river of forgetfulness to numb the pain and loneliness of losing his daughter. Death, in this Underworld, is a two part process, involving both the death of the body, at which time the dead leave the world of the living and enter the land of the dead; and the death of identity and memory, accomplished by taking a dip in the river of forgetfulness. Eurydice and her father manage to escape the death of identity by retaining the memory of things forbidden in the Underworld: music (“DEAD PEOPLE CAN’T SING!”); language (“She can’t speak your language anymore. She talks in the language of dead people now”); and their familial relationship (“Fathers are not allowed!”).⁸¹ Most importantly, they retain (or re-acquire) their ability to choose and to reject the rules of the Underworld. They have both suffered the bodily death that brought them to the Underworld, but have escaped the second death that signals their loss of self. When Eurydice arrives in the Underworld the second time, she finds her father sleeping, having died in the second sense; he has dipped himself in the river of forgetfulness, and lost his memory and identity. In this moment, the Lord of the Underworld arrives and pronounces Eurydice to be his bride. “You can’t refuse me, I’ve made my choice.”⁸² His choice trumps her own. Hell then, for Eurydice, is the revocation of her agency. She has become the *object* of exchange she had not been in her life with Orpheus, or in her first death with her father. Her inability to reject the Lord of the Underworld prompts her final act of choice in the play; she chooses

⁸¹ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), 379, 359, 382.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 408.

oblivion, dips herself in the river and lies down to sleep next to her father.

Conventionally, Eurydice's second death happens at the moment Orpheus sees her and she is sent back to the Underworld. In my analysis, however, her second death is this loss of memory, identity, and subjectivity. This is the moment that consummates her arrival in the Underworld and revokes her agency as a speaking subject.

Chapter Three:

Gender, Representation, and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*

While Sarah Ruhl's work has been produced widely throughout the United States, her first (and only, as of this writing) Broadway production was a recent accomplishment. *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* was produced by the Lincoln Center at the Lyceum Theatre November 2009.⁸³ It was a finalist for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for drama, Ruhl's second appearance on the Pulitzer finalist list (her first nomination was for *The Clean House* in 2005). Set in an upstate New York spa town in the 1880s, *the vibrator play* was inspired by Rachel Maines's book *The Technology of Orgasm*, and dramatizes the invention of the vibrator as a medical instrument, used to treat women for hysteria. The protagonist, Catherine Givings, is married to a gynecologist and hysteria specialist, who uses early incarnations of the vibrator to induce "paroxysms" (the word orgasm is never uttered by any character in the play). The doctor, maintains an operating theatre within his home, where his patients receive their

⁸³ References to the play text within this chapter come from the unpublished production script, provided by Lincoln Center. References to staging or performance not explicitly labeled as stage directions come from the Broadway production, which I viewed November 20 and 21, 2009.

treatments. The first patient we meet is Sabrina Daldry. Mrs. Daldry is experiencing sensitivity to cold and light, and her husband finds her “weeping at odd moments during the day, muttering about green curtains or some such nonsense.”⁸⁴ The rest cure has failed to relieve her symptoms, and Dr. Givings recommends “therapeutic electrical massage – weekly – possibly daily” to address the problem.⁸⁵ As she returns to the Givings’ home for regular treatments, she and Mrs. Givings establish a friendship. We also meet Elizabeth, an African-American woman hired by the doctor as a wet nurse, as the Givings’ infant is losing weight due to Catherine’s insufficient breast milk. Elizabeth also works for the Daldrys as a housekeeper. The last two characters in the play are Annie, a midwife and assistant to Dr. Givings, and Leo Irving, an artist and rare male patient of Dr. Givings.

In my analysis of *the vibrator play*, I will discuss the association of the female body with pathology, especially in historical context and as it relates to hysteria, after which I will investigate the bodily relationships within the play. Finally, I will spend the final portion of this chapter looking at the staging of the final scene of the play as a subversion of gendered representational stereotypes.

Susan Bordo credits (blames?) Plato, Augustine and Descartes in particular for creating and reinforcing the conception of “the view that human existence is bifurcated into two realms or substances: the bodily or material, on

⁸⁴ Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, unpublished production script (Lincoln Center, 2009), 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

the one hand; the mental or spiritual, on the other.”⁸⁶ According to the accumulated philosophy of these three, the body is portrayed as a separate entity from the mind or soul, and is perceived as an enemy that holds back the real self – the mind. The body, of course, is also associated with femininity. Women, “besides *having* bodies, are also *associated* with the body, which has always been considered woman’s ‘sphere’ in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical, and religious ideology.”⁸⁷ Bordo’s study of anorexia also traces the association with women, bodies, and hunger, a confluence Ruhl plays on in a monologue delivered by Catherine:

When I gave birth I remember so clearly...she came out and clambered right onto my breast and tried to eat me, she was so hungry, so hungry it terrified me – her hunger. And I thought: is that the first emotion? Hunger? And not hunger for *food* but wanting to eat other *people*? Specifically one’s mother? And then I thought – isn’t it strange, isn’t it strange about Jesus? That is to say, about Jesus being a man? For it is women who are eaten – who turn their bodies into food – I gave up my blood – there was so much blood – and I gave up my body – but I couldn’t feed her, could not turn my body into food, and she was *so hungry*. I suppose that makes me an inferior kind of woman and a very inferior kind of Jesus.⁸⁸

Bordo draws a connection between the hysteria epidemic of the late nineteenth century and the increase in anorexia in the 1980s. Both, she argues, represent a “backlash phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations

⁸⁶ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993, Repr. Los Angeles: University of California, 2003), 144.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁸⁸ Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, unpublished production script (Lincoln Center, 2009), 45.

against any attempts to shift or transform power relations.”⁸⁹ The symptoms of hysteria were “an exaggeration of stereotypically feminine traits” of the period. Hysterics were therefore *too* feminine, and “the term *hysterical* itself became almost interchangeable with the term *feminine* in the literature of the period.”⁹⁰ The historical equation of women with body and the negative connotations that come with that association have been troubling to many feminist; some, however, have attempted to rehabilitate the relationship between women and body. Hélène Cixous is one notable example, advocating an embrace of woman as body. Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa” in particular encourages women to write through and of their bodies (“By writing her self, woman will return to the body”⁹¹).

Ruhl’s approach falls in line with Cixous, as one of the themes running through the play is the bodily manifestation of love, and how physical relationships relate (or don’t) to the emotional connections. The immediate assumption when I say “physical relationship” is sex, but in this case, the lines are not so clearly drawn. When Dr. Givings induces paroxysms in his patients, it establishes a physical relationship, but not necessarily a sexual one. Ruhl is playing with the gray area when category boundaries are unclear, particularly the boundary between sex and medicine. She is also toying with the boundary between the play and its audience, and the boundary between past and present. To us, the vibrator and the paroxysms it induces are inherently sexual. The

⁸⁹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993, Repr. Los Angeles: University of California, 2003), 166.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169. Italics in original. Bordo is quoting Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 129.

⁹¹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 1975, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 2043.

characters, however, would likely be shocked at the suggestion. It is tempting to look back on this history and feel a bit smug at the naïveté involved. To a 2009 audience, the idea that the Victorians could be so blind to the sexual nature of orgasm is laughable, and Ruhl makes full use of this potential for comedy. Without the juxtaposition of the Victorian innocence on the stage and the oversexed twenty-first century audience, the play would lose much of its charm. Make no mistake, however, *the vibrator play* is not simply a farce of changing sexual mores. Ruhl's gift is to balance the humor of perceived sexual anachronism with sympathetic and fully human characters.

Much of the emotional distress within the play comes from misdirection of physical expressions of love. I use the term misdirection advisedly. Misdirection implies the existence of a proper direction. When I use these terms, I use them within the logic of the play, not to assert any moral or societal judgment. Catherine's physical affection belongs with her husband. Not simply because he is her husband, but because the audience intuitively recognizes that their happiness resides with each other, if only they can overcome the obstacles keeping them apart. The emotional distress comes from the characters' inability to align their physical actions with their emotional realities.

Catherine's physical relationship with her daughter provides a case in point. As referenced above, Catherine's breast milk is insufficient, her baby Lotty is losing weight, and her husband hires Elizabeth to nurse the baby. Catherine experiences this as rejection, and feels the same jealousy watching Elizabeth feed her baby that she feels when her husband is locked in his operating theatre

with other women. At one point, she asks her husband to fire Elizabeth, citing the connection between physical and emotional love for her baby. She says of Lotty: “She knows where to get comfort and love, and it is not from me...Milk is comfort, milk is love. How will she learn to love me?”⁹² Elizabeth, for her part, feels her affections are becoming misplaced. She feeds Catherine's child, and resents her for being alive when her own infant son is dead. Later on, however, she grows to love Lotty. She tells Catherine “the more healthy your baby got, the more dead my baby became...But she seemed so grateful for the milk. Sometimes I hated her for it. But she would look at me, she would give me this look – I do not know what to call it if it is not called love.”⁹³ The physical experience of feeding Lotty engenders an emotional connection to her. Catherine desperately wants that physical experience and relationship for herself, and suffers from her inability to physically express her love for her child through breast-feeding.

Sabrina Daldry and Dr. Givings' midwife assistant, Annie, represent another example of a thwarted physical relationship. Catherine and Sabrina break into the operating theatre at one point, and engage in an innocent experiment with the vibrator, using it on each other in order to compare and better understand these strange paroxysms. We as an audience laugh at this scene because we recognize the asexuality of the experience for the characters. For all intents and purposes, they are two children playing doctor, exhibiting a

⁹² Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, unpublished production script (Lincoln Center, 2009), 90.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

pre-sexual curiosity about the mysterious functions of bodies (especially the hidden parts). The paroxysms Dr. Givings' patients experience are not consciously or overtly sexual. Between Annie and Sabrina, however, there is an undercurrent of significance, of something deeper. When the power goes out in the operating theatre during one of Mrs. Daldry's treatments, Annie employs the "manual method" on Mrs. Daldry, inducing her strongest paroxysm yet. During her next treatment, Mrs. Daldry calls out Annie's name at the point of climax. Annie teaches Mrs. Daldry Greek, starting with the philosophers. Modern audiences may see a budding lesbian relationship, but within the confines of Victorian society, the two women remain firmly within the bounds of female friendship and of medical propriety.

This containment, however, does not last. After one of Mrs. Daldry's treatments, she enters the living room and plays the piano, while Annie cleans up the operating theatre. The song she plays is her own composition, described in the script as "full of longing."⁹⁴ Annie enters the living room and sits on the piano bench with Mrs. Daldry. As the last notes fade, the women share a kiss. The kiss shatters the presumed asexuality of their previous interactions; it names their relationship and emotional investment in one another as sexual in nature, bringing it outside the realms of friendship or medicine. In the aftermath of this "outing," Mrs. Daldry cuts off contact with Annie, telling her "I had better not see you ever again."⁹⁵ The same logic that leads us to want Dr. and Mrs. Givings

⁹⁴ Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, Unpublished production playscript (Lincoln Center, New York, 2009), 127.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

together leads us to hope the same thing for Annie and Sabrina. They are clearly happiest in each other's company, and their relationship is based on mutual respect and affection, whereas Sabrina's relationship with her husband is lacking in all these areas. Their world, however, allows no space for sexual love between women. In Mrs. Daldry's conception of sex, her husband is "very considerate" by encouraging her to feign sleep during the act.⁹⁶ In a culture that officially condones sex only within the bonds of marriage, she finds the idea of sexual pleasure between husband and wife shocking. Sexual pleasure and fulfillment with another woman must seem incomprehensible.

The primary case of relational disconnection, however, is between Dr. and Mrs. Givings. Dr. Givings spends his days giving other women a kind of satisfaction that he denies his wife. Catherine experiences jealousy that her husband is giving other women paroxysms, even though she cannot quite identify why that should be. This jealousy (and a healthy dose of curiosity) lead her to talk her husband into giving her a treatment, which he agrees to against his better judgment ("It must not get out in the scientific community that I am treating my own wife").⁹⁷ As her paroxysm is building, she attempts to cross the chasm between medical treatment and marriage relations, to collapse the boundary. As he holds the vibrator under her skirt, she tries to kiss him. "Kiss me and hold the instrument there, just there, at the same time...I have been

⁹⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 90.

longing to kiss someone. Like this.”⁹⁸ The doctor is horrified and repulsed, unable to make the leap with her, and rejects her attempts out of hand. Catherine leaves to walk off her frustration (the treatment was, after all, abandoned pre-paroxysm), and runs into Leo Irving. After being sexually rejected by her husband, Leo provides an opportunity for misplaced affection. Upon Leo and Catherine’s return to the home, Dr. Givings enter the living room to find Catherine alone in the living room with her hand on Leo’s cheek. In the absence of a physical connection with her husband, Catherine decides she is in love with Leo.

The vibrator play also playfully engages with female sexuality in the Victorian period. Sex in the nineteenth century was built upon the androcentric model, which privileges the male experience of sex. Penetration and male orgasm are not just the goal, but the definition of sex. Alfred Kinsey’s and Shere Hite’s respective research indicate that up to 70 percent of women do not regularly reach orgasm via penetration, yet these women, a wide majority, “have traditionally been defined as abnormal or ‘frigid,’ somehow derelict in their duty to reinforce the androcentric model of satisfactory sex.”⁹⁹ Victorian society often took this a step further by denying the possibility of female sexuality. Peter Gay argues that to “deny women native erotic desires was to safeguard man’s sexual adequacy. However he performed, it would be good enough.” If it were not, the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁹ Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 5.

woman in question could simply be declared hysterical and sent for treatment.¹⁰⁰ The belief that women were not naturally sexual beings and the pathologizing of any expression of female sexual desire then served to protect the male ego from threat of sexual inadequacy. In this context, it is no surprise, then, that Dr. Givings is initially appalled by his wife's sexual advances.

Ruhl uses this societal ignorance of female sexuality as a background in which to explore female sexuality. Catherine's curiosity about the treatments provokes her husband to lock his operating theatre, but Catherine and Sabrina pick the lock with a hatpin. Catherine convinces Sabrina to show her what all the fuss is about, and the women proceed to hold the vibrator under each other's skirts. The delight in this scene comes from the contradiction of reading it as simultaneously sexual and not. The women are, in one sense, curious children playing doctor, the doctor's office and instruments being the excuse for experimentation. Catherine experiences her first paroxysm, and she and Sabrina are fascinated by the vast differences in how they each describe the experience. In an attempt to understand what it is they are experiencing in the operating theatre, and why they experience it so differently, they later ask Elizabeth, the wet nurse, if she has ever felt anything like what they describe:

MRS. GIVINGS: Either: you have shivers all over your body, and you feel like running, and your feet get very hot, as though you are dancing on devil's coals –

MRS. DALDY: or you see unaccountable patterns of light, of electricity, under your eye-lids – and your heart races – and your legs feel very weak, as though you cannot walk –

MRS. GIVINGS: Or your face gets suddenly hot, like a strange sudden

¹⁰⁰ Qtd. in Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 47.

sunburn –

MRS. DALDRY: or there are red splotches up one side of your entire body – a strange rash – ...

MRS. GIVINGS: And the feeling of burning, as though you'll get no relief – and your mouth is dry and you have to lick your lips – and you find your face making a very ugly expression, so you cover your face with your hands –

MRS. DALDRY: and sometimes a great outpouring of liquid, and the sheets are wet, but it is not an unpleasant sensation, but a little frightening?¹⁰¹

Elizabeth responds that their descriptions sound like either a horrible fever, or “sensations that women might have when they are having relations with their husband.”¹⁰² I confess some discomfort at Ruhl’s use of the African-American woman as the source of sexual knowledge, though I lack the space and expertise to fully address this discomfort. I look forward to how other scholars might address the hypersexualization of African-American women and how or whether that history informs this moment.

Catherine and Sabrina are astonished at Elizabeth’s suggestion that their paroxysms might be connected to marriage relations. Sabrina responds that “I don’t know what I should do if I felt those things in the presence of my husband – I’d be so embarrassed I would leave the room immediately.”¹⁰³ Elizabeth’s comment resonates on some level with Catherine, however. At the end of the play, after being rejected by her husband, who is horrified at her sexual advances, by Leo, who is in love with Elizabeth, and by her daughter, who is fed by another, Catherine is left alone and devastated in the house. She attempts to

¹⁰¹ Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, Unpublished production playscript (Lincoln Center, New York, 2009), 112.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 114.

give herself a paroxysm in the operating theatre, but she is “too sad for it to work.”¹⁰⁴ Her husband comes home to find her sobbing, and in the face of such naked emotion and vulnerability, his propriety is finally broken down. She asks him to tell her exactly what kind of love he feels for her, and he responds by naming the parts of her face:

I bless thee: temporomandibular joint
I bless thee: buccal artery and nerve
I bless thee: depressor anguli oris
I bless thee: zygomatic arch
I bless thee: temporalis fascia
I bless thee: Catherine¹⁰⁵

He places a kiss on each part in turn. Catherine asks him to open her, undress her in the winter garden, and the walls of the living room and operating theatre that seemed so permanent, fly slowly out of the theatre space, revealing snow-covered trees behind. Here, in the winter garden, the two slowly undress each other, and Catherine sees her husband’s body for the first time. The play concludes with them making love in the falling snow.

Up to this point, I have focused primarily on the content of the play – the plot and characters. Ruhl’s subversion of representational gender, however, resides primarily in the *form* of the play and its presentation. The final moments of *the vibrator play* provide an especially rich opportunity to explore this subversive staging. As Catherine and Dr. Givings undress each other in the winter garden, she undresses to a camisole and underskirt. Dr. Givings, however, is fully naked. Sitting in the audience of the Broadway production, I

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 136.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 139. Line breaks retained from Ruhl’s script.

found this to be somewhat shocking, but not for the presence of a naked man. Laura Mulvey argues in her landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” that in classical cinema, women are constructed by the camera, the male characters and the (presumably) male spectator to be looked at, desired, and possessed by the gaze (see Chapter Two for a more thorough investigation of Mulvey and the gaze). Subsequent scholarship and the changing landscape of representation have complicated her premise, but we are still trained by most representations of heterosexual intimacy to expect the sight of naked women and partially clothed men. Ruhl’s complete reversal of this representational stereotype is what shocked me. But is such a reversal really possible? Feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan has argued that a simple reversal of gender in terms of nudity is impossible:

Because of the gender specific nature of representation, a nude male is still identifiable as the active protagonist of the narrative at hand. Fully displaying the penis in representation, instead of objectifying the male, seems to concretize the realization of the mirror phase. A nude male onstage makes women’s lack – particularly when the nude female shares the representational space – more pronounced...The male body does not signify the history of commodification that the female body represents, and in a representational exchange set up for male visual pleasure, the nude male is not the object of the exchange.¹⁰⁶

Dolan’s comments, however, are based in the assumption that male nudity is simply substituting for female nudity. She focuses on the *fact* of the nudity more than its context. Dolan also states that representation is dependent on the audience for whom it is constructed.

¹⁰⁶ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 1988 (Reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 54-5.

In *the vibrator play*, context shapes how we (as an audience) read the naked male body. In the Broadway production, Dr. Givings disrobed completely, leaving Catherine partially dressed in a camisole and slip. The script for *the vibrator play* indicates that full nudity for Dr. Givings is not necessarily required (“We don’t need to see all of his body, it is dark out”), but it does specify that “he undresses her, *partially*,” that “we do see the moon glowing off his skin;” and that Catherine “has never seen him naked before.”¹⁰⁷ As the last of his clothes are removed, Dr. Givings stands still, feet together, arms at his sides, passive to his wife’s gaze while she is free to move around him. She runs her hands along his arms and torso, exclaiming, “How beautiful you are! Your body!” He responds “I am embarrassed,” revealing the vulnerability he is feeling. Even the language shifts; Catherine’s lines take the form of commands. “Undress me;” “look at me;” “Lie down”¹⁰⁸. She is clothed, he is exposed; she looks, he is looked at; she touches, he is touched; she speaks, he listens and obeys. She is constructed as the active subject, he the object of this encounter.

It is worth noting that the Dolan passage quoted above, from *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, was published in 1988. While many things regarding gender and representation have not changed in the past twenty years (or at least not enough), some things have. There is still work to be done, but progress has been made in how women are represented in film, theatre, television, and other media and in how audiences perceive them. Then again, I seem to be making

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, unpublished production script (New York: Lincoln Center, 2009), 140-1. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

impossible generalizations about audiences. Part of what Mulvey and her successors were fighting against was the monolithic Spectator. It may be disingenuous of me to presume to speak for audiences in 1988, or 2009. But no matter how perfect the construction and reversal of the representation, questions of representation are dependent on how an audience reads them. Absent a methodology to evaluate the plurality of audience perception, I am dependent on my own perception and experience. Perhaps Dolan is right and a nude male body can never be made to stand in for the objectified female form, no matter how perfect the construction and reversal of the representation. We still recognize the male body as male and female as female, with all the cultural baggage that comes with it. This includes the baggage of representational conventions that, I argue, Ruhl is subverting.

Bertolt Brecht's notion of *verfremdungseffekt* suggests an approach that may shed lights on how this moment is constructed by a playwright or director and how it is read by an audience. Feminist theatre practitioners in particular have latched on to his strategies for disrupting dominant ideologies in performance. I return to Dolan: "Brechtian technique in feminist hands can...expose...gender assumptions for critical inspection."¹⁰⁹ Brecht used various techniques to disrupt the identification process for the audience, to remind them that they were in a theatre, and that they were witnessing a representation in order to promote a critical awareness of representation as ideological apparatus. *Verfremdungseffekt* is most often translated as alienation

¹⁰⁹ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 1988 (Reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 111.

or distancing effect. John Rouse, however, chooses to translate the term as “defamiliarization.” “A defamiliarized illustration is one that, while allowing the object to be recognized, at the same time makes it appear unfamiliar.”¹¹⁰ Ruhl’s reversal of gendered expectations in *the vibrator play* is a prime example. Ruhl presents us with a familiar illustration – a scene of sexual intimacy in which one partner is naked. She defamiliarizes it, however, by showing us the unexpected male body, not the female. The *verfremdung* disrupts the narrative, and for a brief moment reminds us that we are watching a play, that it has been constructed for us, that the presence of either male or female nudity is a choice, and that it is always a choice in representation. Ideally, this recognition/defamiliarization forces the audience to confront not just this moment as representation, but the gendered conventions it subverts.

To conclude, I would like to once more return to Dolan:

The pressing issue for feminists becomes how to inscribe a representational space for women that will point out the gender enculturation promoted through the representational frame and that will belie the oppressions of the dominant ideology it perpetuates...to disrupt the narrative of gender ideology, to denaturalize gender as representation.”¹¹¹

By reversing the traditional representation of gender and nudity, Sarah Ruhl reminds us that the representation of gender is constructed, and as such can be subverted and altered.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Rouse, 300. The quote comes from volume 23 of the *Berliner and Frankfurter Ausgabe*, translation by John Rouse.

¹¹¹ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 1988 (Reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 101.

Conclusion

Sarah Ruhl is still in the early stages of her career. Assuming she continues to write at roughly the same rate as the past few years, her body of work will expand exponentially over the course of her lifetime. This expectation positions my study as an early phase assessment, and indicates a need for further study and research as Ms. Ruhl's career progresses. Even among the early plays I discuss here, there is considerable room for expansion and further research. Were I to expand this into a dissertation, for example, possible directions could include a comparative study of the published versions of *Eurydice*, in conversation with each other and with other writers' explorations of the Orpheus myth; a study of the influence on Ruhl's work by her mentor, Paula Vogel; an analysis of race and ethnicity in Ruhl's plays (particularly Elizabeth, the African-American wet nurse of *In the next Room, or the vibrator play* and Matilde and Ana as Latina women in *The Clean House*), to name a few options.

Within this study, there is also room for cross-pollination. Ruhl's use of *verfremdungseffekt* as gender subversion is not limited to *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*. The opening moments of *Eurydice* in which Eurydice is speaker and master of the gaze with a silent Orpheus by her side qualify as this

same kind of reversal, pointing out the constructed nature of these gendered representational conventions. Likewise, illuminating Eurydice's experience in the Underworld comes from the same instinct to make visible the invisible that underscores *The Clean House*.

Emily Sands's aforementioned study of women and playwriting reminds us that women are still underrepresented (as writers and characters) within the field of playwriting. Susan Bordo reminds us that "the transformation of culture, and not merely greater statistical representation of women, must remain the goal of academic feminism."¹¹² Sarah Ruhl's innovative use of dramaturgical strategies to displace the gendered conventions of representation, in both writing and performance, make her an excellent candidate for study as a feminist writer working to transform culture.

¹¹² Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 240.

Bibliography

- Blankenship, Mark. "Women Scribes Boost Play Cache: Writers Seeing Gain This Season." *Variety* October 26, 2007.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 1993. Reprint, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. "The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha and Nigella." In *Feminism in Popular Culture*, edited by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, 41-56. New York: Berg, 2006.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." 1975. In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 2035-56. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.
- Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. 1988. Reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Gillis, Stacy and Joanne Hollows, eds. *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Hall, Elaine J. and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez. "The Myth of Postfeminism." *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (December 2003): 878-902.
- In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*. By Sarah Ruhl. Dir. Les Waters. Lyceum Theatre, New York. 20 Nov. 2009.
- Isherwood, Charles. "Always Ready With a Joke, if Not a Feather Duster." *The New York Times*, October 31, 2006. (<http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/10/31/theater/reviews/31clea.html?page=wanted=print>)
- "The Power of Memory to Triumph Over Death." *New York Times* June 19, 2007. (<http://theater.nytimes.com/2007/06/19/theater/reviews/19seco.html>)
- Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Lawson, Nigella. *How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking*. New York: Hyperion, 2001.
- Lowe, Donald M. *History of Bourgeois Perception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

- Maines, Rachel. *The Technology of Orgasm*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Malos, Ellen. *The Politics of Housework*. Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 1995.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." 1975. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14-28. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Reinelt, Janelle. "Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box." *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*. Edited by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris. New York: Palgrave, 2006.
- Rouse, John. "Brecht and the Contradictory Actor." In *Critical Theory and Performance*, rev. ed., edited by Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, 295-310. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Ruhl, Sarah. *The Clean House and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006.
- . *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008.
- . *Eurydice*. New York: Samuel French, 2008.
- . "Eurydice." In *Divine Fire: Eight Contemporary Plays Inspired by the Greeks*, edited by Caridad Svich, 277-328. New York: Backstage Books, 2005.
- . "Eurydice." *Theatre*. 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 36-67.
- . *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*. Unpublished production playscript. Lincoln Center, New York, 2009.
- Sands, Emily Glassberg. "Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater." BachelorsThesis, Princeton, 2009. (published online via *New York Times* website, <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/theater/Openingthecurtain.pdf>)
- Theatre Communications Group. "Top Ten Most Produced Plays." <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/ATtopten.cfm>
- Weckwerth, Wendy. "More Invisible Terrains: Sarah Ruhl, Interviewed by Wendy Weckwerth." *Theatre* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 28-35.

Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Wren, Celia. "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theatre*, October 2005.