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EDITED BY
ELAINE ASTON AND JANELLE REINELT



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2

MAGGIE B. GALE

Women playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s

The play-going public suddenly . . . picked on a new type of comedy . . . predominantly female. It is completely undramatic . . . ran interminably . . . About? The ditherings of ordinary people seen through the magnifying glass of an observant sentimental humour. It is the vindication of the woman playwright, for it is usually written by a woman . . . the delight of mainly feminine audiences. It is with us still in 1945.¹

In histories of British theatre, the 1920s and 1930s are traditionally presented as being unfruitful for women playwrights. However, the critical framing of their work by their own contemporaries leads us to see them as more prolific and significant than at first assumed – interwar women playwrights were clearly breaking into the male-dominated market. Rare acknowledgements of women writing for the theatre of the time, made by our own contemporaries, are often underpinned by comment on their seeming lack of a feminist perspective or innovative strategy: they were largely middle-class, writing for a commercially oriented theatre and so the assumption is that their work does not warrant serious examination. Women writing for the variety of theatres which produced plays during the 1920s and 1930s have in common their gender and more of a general leaning towards the conservative than modern feminist scholars would perhaps like.

Although for many ‘realism’ and ‘domestic comedy’ as dramatic forms contain serious inherent difficulties in terms of representation, for this lost generation of playwrights they were the perfect vehicle with which to place centre stage the issues directly effecting change in the lives of their female contemporaries. Some critics even saw their work as ‘the dawn of the feminine influx and influence that’s now filling the theatre’,² and it is perhaps this, more than the use of dominant theatrical forms, which should prevail in any investigation of their work. Alison Light’s observation that ‘feminist work must deal with the conservative as well as the radical imagination’ has great relevance here.³

From radical to conservative contexts

Explorations of the work of the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), 1908–13, have established the links between feminism and theatre before the First World War [see 'A century in view', p. 1].⁴ The AFL, rather than just promoting 'new forms' of drama, used performance and the processes of theatre as a means of discoursing the issues which grew out of and gathered support for the suffrage cause. Founded and run by women, the AFL originally advertised for membership amongst theatre professionals (Gardner, *Sketches*, p. 10). Membership was made up of known and little-known actresses, although Claire Hirschfield has suggested that, because 'many of its earliest members enjoyed celebrity status and public esteem, the AFL was perhaps the most successful of all "professional" women's organisations in drawing popular attention and sympathy to the cause of female enfranchisement' ('The Actresses Franchise League', p. 126). The actresses entertained at political meetings and trained non-professionals in the art of public speaking. Plays, not always written by women, were toured to both traditional and non-traditional theatre venues, with production profits donated to relevant political organisations. Most of the productions were largely ignored by the press, with exceptions, such as Cicely Hamilton's 1909 *A Pageant of Famous Women*, later titled *A Pageant of Great Women*, which provided an endless stream of star performers representing positive images of, amongst other things, exceptional women from history. For Winifred Holby, 'one of the great virtues of the militant suffragette movement was its mastery of the art of ritual . . . pageants and processions'.⁵ 'Pageants and processions', which the AFL staged so effectively, served to validate women's identity, history, and culture.

The AFL remains an important project in the history of women and theatre. Modern feminist theatre scholars are drawn to the links and parallels between First and Second Wave feminist theatres, and the AFL has become part of the 'new canon' of women's theatre history with an emphasis on its political basis. It is, however, interesting to note that, although it was not commercially oriented, there are many cross-over points between the legitimate theatre, the commercial theatre, and the AFL. A number of women writing or acting for the AFL, or writing feminist plays for the Edwardian theatre, continued their work during the interwar years in a far less 'political' and often more commercial context; such women would include Lena Ashwell, Cicely Hamilton, Auriol Lee, Elizabeth Baker, and Gertrude Jennings [see 'Chronology']. Although some arguably moved away from overtly propagandist arguments for greater equality, the threads of practical activism – larger female casts, plots centred around female heroines, woman as subject rather than object within the domestic sphere and so on – prevail. Thus the generation of women before the First World War

who worked in an overtly feminist context did not simply stop producing woman-centred work once the vote was won.

Women playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s worked in a theatre system which was largely driven by economic forces: there was no real government subsidy for theatre production until well into the 1940s by which point the commercial theatres were owned by a small cartel of profit-oriented managers. Ironically, West End theatres often relied on the pioneering artistic outlook of the privately funded independent theatres, even though such organisations had been founded to combat commercialised attitudes to artistic production. Plays by women were produced in commercial mainstream, independent experimental and political theatres alike.

There was an explosive increase in the numbers of plays produced on the London stage during the early decades of the twentieth century. Over the 1920s and 1930s as a whole, there is a considerable variation, but the maximum (1930–5) is at least three and a half times the minimum. The average percentage of plays by women or female/male teams over the whole twenty-year period is 16% – figures for the London season of 1989–90 set the average at just over 10%.⁶ Just as with male playwrights of the era, critical reception did not always correlate with box-office success. Critics often alluded to the fact that these women were ‘amateur’ or ‘one hit wonders’, that they were merely dabbling in the world of the professional playwright. If the critics and historians saw the interwar women playwrights as some kind of ‘breed’, it was also assumed that they served the interests of a certain type of audience. John Carey cites Louis MacNeice’s condemnation of interwar female theatre audiences, ‘who use theatre as an uncritical escape from their daily lives . . . the same instinct leads them which makes many hospital nurses spend all their savings on cosmetics, cigarettes and expensive underclothes’.⁷ Even intellectuals and modernists like Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Natalie Barney, however, were writing for an ‘emerging women’s market’.⁸ The woman playwright, and by implication the female spectator, was usually referred to as having a penchant for sentimentality and domestic plots: the woman playwright was ‘renowned’ for the humour with which she treated the machinations of middle-class life, for the wealth of romance in her plays, and for her seeming lack of social critique.

Many of these playwrights began their careers as actresses and continued to perform as well as write and/or direct or manage productions or theatre companies. So we have a new generation of playwrights, trained as actresses, with significant experience of performance in professional theatre, who used playwriting as a vehicle for expression. Thus, in a market economy where her position as actress set her in competition with other out-of-work actresses all looking for employment in productions in which male characters predominated, the move from actress to playwright was, it would seem, a wise one. That many of the

women playwrights had begun their professional lives as actresses may also have been a contributing factor to the predominance of female characters in their plays. Loren Kruger has pointed out that creating “significant *stage* roles” . . . for women . . . neither challenges the traditional roles of women in the theatre . . . nor provides the means for women to run the show themselves’.⁹ Running the show yourself is not always a viable option in the context of a theatre world largely driven by financial concerns. Similarly, for these playwrights the move from enactor of text to creator of text represented a challenge to existing traditional roles for women in the process of making theatre: women playwrights were not a new phenomenon but during the 1920s and 1930s they seem suddenly to have appeared in large numbers.

It was unusual for any playwright to have their plays first reach production under a commercial West End management. A less historically obscured playwright like Dodie Smith, who first wrote plays under the name ‘C. L. Anthony’, provides one of the few exceptions to the general rule in that all her plays saw their first productions under commercial West End managements. Smith had a sequence of West End hits in the 1930s, but had fewer London productions of her plays than a number of other female playwrights of the time, many of whom had their plays produced in independent theatres later transferring into the West End. Taking into consideration the female and female/male to male ratio of productions, women actually fared proportionately rather well in a theatre system where there was an influx of new plays by new playwrights. Over the period 1918–59 for example, three or more of the plays by Bridget Boland, Clemence Dane, Gertrude Jennings, Margaret Kennedy, Esther McCracken, Dodie Smith, Lesley Storm, Aimée Stuart, Joan Temple and Fryn Tennyson-Jesse ran for 51, and in many cases more, performances – and this does not include the many West End stage successes of their American female contemporaries [see ‘Chronology’]. Many of their plays were made into films or, later, television dramas. Plays by women do not dominate the London stage during the 1920s and 1930s but they have a fairly consistent place, and appear on average to have run for longer and thus been ‘safer’ investments for managements. Interestingly, during the Second World War there were fewer productions of plays by women but they were more popular. If one can assume that there were fewer men around in the years leading up to and during the war, perhaps it is possible to assume that the women left behind who went to the theatre were more inclined to go and see plays by women.

Realism as activism?

Many interwar women playwrights were once household names, working as actresses and journalists as well as successful playwrights alongside their male

counterparts such as Somerset Maugham or Noel Coward. In terms of longevity of career some, such as Clemence Dane and Aimée Stuart, had their work produced throughout the interwar years and into the late 1950s. Theatre historians in general have failed to validate their work and feminist theatre historians have fallen into the trap of the ‘censoring impulse’.¹⁰ The ‘censoring impulse’ here is influenced by the fact that, along with the vast majority of playwrights of either sex, these women used realism – albeit often comic-realism – as a dramatic form. Identified by a number of recent theatre historians as a ‘prisonhouse’ form, one which endorses dominant ideology placing man as subject and woman as ‘other’, realism has become problematised.¹¹ That realism is a theatrical form which endorses the dominant ideology is contentious in many respects. As Patricia Schroeder has pointed out, critics of realism often neglect its adaptability as a form, and fail to assess their own tendency to assume passivity and complicity on behalf of the spectator.¹² Sheila Stowell has also been critical of anti-realist polemics in her analyses of feminist plays of the Edwardian period, pointing out that in fact ‘dramatic forms . . . may be inhabited from within a variety of ideologies’.¹³

Most women writing for the theatres of the 1920s and 1930s did so within the boundaries of realism, the dominant form of the day. Their ideas about the female condition filtered through into their work with a frequent and direct correlation between the authors’ choice of subject and theme and their cultural position as women, in a social environment where the women’s movement took on a different shape and form from that of the years immediately preceding the First World War. In many ways realism was used by these women playwrights for what Eric Auerbach has identified as a ‘serious treatment of everyday reality’ – namely *their* reality as women living at a time when the *meaning* of ‘woman’ itself was constantly being negotiated.¹⁴ Thus the ‘woman question’ in all its various mutations sustained a centre-stage position for many of the playwrights. One clear example is G. B. Stern, a significant and long-standing friend of the critic and novelist Rebecca West, who, like West, had originally trained as an actress (Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, p. 225).

Stern’s hit play *The Matriarch*,¹⁵ based on her popular novel *The Tents of Izrael* (1924) and produced in 1929, was attended by such literary figures as Virginia Woolf. *The Matriarch* foregrounds questions of heredity, matrilinearity, femininity, gender, economic power, and the division of labour – thus keying into popular debate around women’s social roles as well as making clear positive statements about the cultural validity of the female line. Stern’s less successful but in many ways far more searching play, *The Man Who Pays The Piper*, first performed in London in 1931 with a cast which included Diana Wynyard and the young Jessica Tandy, is a serious attempt to analyse the relationship between gender and socio-economic power.¹⁶ Daryll, the heroine, is friend to a suffragette

who, her father thinks, has filled her up ‘with all this fudge about votes for women – Suffragette processions and I don’t know what’ (Prologue, p. 9). Daryll, later juxtaposed with her less responsible ‘flapper’ sister, takes over the running of the family when the father and eldest brother are killed in the First World War. Her femininity is questioned by the male members of the family for whom she is a ‘bit too lordly at times’, although they admit that she’s ‘certainly got the best head of the family’ (Act 1, p. 41). Daryll heads the family, refusing to marry her long-time fiancé because she is already a ‘father’ and, even though, as she herself observes, ‘all the men come to me as man to man and thank me rather resentfully for what I’ve done’, she sees her role as duty bound (Act 2, pp. 60–5). When her mother remarries Daryll agrees to give up her work, marry her fiancé and become ‘feminine’. Of course after a few years, however, she is desperately bored and wants her old independent ‘meaningful’ life back: she wants to help her former suffragette friend whose business is faltering without her own business acumen. At the same time, Daryll sees how historical circumstances colour both her position and her ambitions: ‘I’m no good for marriage . . . it’s the war, we had to take over then . . . I expect there’s a whole generation of us . . . we *fathers* of nineteen fourteen . . . we’re all freaks my generation of girls’ (Act 3, pp. 97–9). Her husband, a 1930s version of what we might call a ‘new man’, offers to become a house-husband – an offer she refuses. Finally they reach a compromise and Daryll leaves to save her old friend’s fashion business.

For Bonnie Kime Scott it was Stern’s depiction of relationships which received Rebecca West’s ‘particular admiration’ (*Refiguring Modernism*, pp. 225–7). Certainly the levels of emotional and intellectual interaction between Stern’s characters in this play are of the highest calibre. Her differentiation between the aspirations and needs of three close generations of women in terms of their attitudes to work and their social ambition is fascinating as is the implication that the rule of the patriarch is reliant on the fact that it is he who holds the *economic* power, that gender itself has a mutable social function.

Stern’s sense that the First World War created a ‘freak’ generation of women connects with the notion of both a ‘lost generation’ and at the same time a new generation. The image of a generation of men lost through war is combined with the image of a new generation of women for whom work and career become either a necessity or simply a burning desire. After the First World War, work was seen by many young women as an alternative to the drudgery of married life and motherhood, some form of escape from traditionally prescribed roles for women. Some of the women playwrights of the era took this on board, although a few, like Aimée Stuart, who wrote a number of West End hits with her husband and continued to write successful plays after his death, saw questions of women, work, and career as cultural rather than emotional issues. Produced in 1930, *Nine Till Six*, about the various lives of women working in a fashion business,

carefully integrates women from all classes questioning the relationship between class, gender, work, and power.¹⁷ For one critic the historical significance of the play was obvious from first viewing:

No play in modern times has presented so searching and fair-minded an analysis of women's place in the world of industry. There are those who say that this is a women's counterpart of *Journey's End*; its field of battle is the business world; its privations are the ruthless denials of ease and beauty; its sex problems, as incidental.¹⁸

Much of the talk between the shop girls is based on discussions of work conditions, pay, and prospects. Equally, the problems and dilemmas of the shop owner are discussed. *Nine Till Six* is clearly a play about a *woman's* world of work, which places questions about women's working methods, class interaction, and women's relationship to the economy in the public arena.

Cultural shift: social change and the 'woman question'

The 1920s and 1930s represent an enormous social and cultural shift in British history. The old class system, although not completely collapsed, had been seriously undermined by the First World War. Death crossed all class barriers and traditional sexual divisions of labour were challenged as women moved *en masse* into the labour force during the war. Although many of these women were forced to return into domestic work after the war, middle-class women found themselves able to move into areas of work traditionally given over to men.¹⁹ This caused much concern in the popular press, in particular during the late 1920s and early 1930s when women were thought to be taking 'men's work' at a time of economic depression. The many laws which were supposedly passed in favour of women were often formulated through bias grounded in an assumption of either women's 'natural' inferiority, or their irrationality or passivity. Thus the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 which stated that 'a person should not be disqualified by sex or marriage from . . . entering or assuming or carrying any civil profession or vocation' was no *guarantee* of employment for women.²⁰ In fact it was often used as a law to keep women out of the job market. The Marriage Bars, which meant that women, once married, were easily removed from employment, were regularly enforced until well after the Second World War. By 1935 married women were given the right to obtain, dispose of, and hold property as chosen, but it was not until well into the 1940s that matrimonial property rights were equalised, and, as was often the case, the benefit to middle- and upper-class women was often greater than that to working-class women. The Divorce Laws, which had gradually been changing since the late 1900s, were 'liberalised' by the late 1930s. Although the divorce rate rose continuously from

an average of 832 in 1910–12 to 4,249 in 1930–2,²¹ steadily rising as the law became more equal in its treatment of the sexes, divorced and unmarried women were often perceived as having somehow failed in their ‘proper’ duty as women.

Social and legal changes of the period are not necessarily overtly discoursed in plays by women but they often inform the general dramatic landscape. Thus, in Fryn Tennyson-Jesse’s *The Pelican*, an adaptation of the famous Russell Baby Case of 1921 written with her husband Harold Harwood,²² the question of marital separation is given a highlighted narrative position within a play about the transformation of a woman’s life: society is seen through the eyes of the ex-wife, the rejected woman. Clemence Dane’s *Bill of Divorcement* uses changes in the divorce laws as a narrative hook on which to hang debate on issues of generational differences in perceived levels of social and moral responsibility.²³ The play’s heroine Sydney Fairfield, a feisty, intelligent, and independent young woman, encourages her mother to continue with her plans to remarry when the father returns from the insane asylum where he has been incarcerated since coming back from the First World War. Believing that her father is suffering from a congenital form of madness, Sydney rejects her lover in favour of looking after her own father. Her sense of moral responsibility is framed by a belief in eugenicist philosophy – at the beginning of the play she is very much the flapper girl, out dancing till three in the morning with no desire to work, rather she would like to marry and settle. Her mother is shocked that she should know so much about having children but, as Sydney says of her fiancé: ‘Oh Kit’s as keen as I am on eugenics. He’s doing a paper for his debating society’ (Act 1, p. 142). By the end of the play, fearful that she will have inherited her father’s ‘illness’, she chooses career over marriage and childbearing. As with *The Pelican*, *Bill of Divorcement* has a somewhat traditional ending in that each of the heroines is haunted by the image of the ‘Angel in the House’ – a self-sacrificing, martyred middle-class woman. In the first play, however, the heroine sees her choice as a maternal duty (she gives up her own relationship to remarry her ex-husband as a way of legitimising her son), and, in the second, Sydney sees hers as primarily a duty to her nation – interestingly Dane here subverts the popular image of the flapper as irresponsible and selfish. Billie Melman gives an excellent account of the history of the word ‘flapper’ which moves from a euphemism for young prostitute to a term used to denote a young, independent, self-absorbed, and unattached woman. Such nomenclature became an inherent part of the popular press’s scare-mongering about an impending ‘petticoat government’ after the initial franchise was granted to women in 1918.²⁴

The question of social and moral responsibility is frequently foregrounded in plays by women in the 1920s and 1930s, which at times creates reactionary heroines who appear to care nothing for their own gender. Then again, heroines who seem overwhelmingly concerned with womankind often turn out to be more

reactionary than it is possible to imagine. The most glaring example of this is in Marie Stopes's extraordinary play, *Our Ostriches*, where the young heroine Evadne Carillon, who belongs to the ruling classes, goes, as she puts it to her future husband Lord Simplex, 'slumming it' whilst visiting an old family servant.²⁵ During her visit she discovers to her horror that, as they have no access to methods of contraception, women already living below the poverty line are bearing one child after another, ruining their health and often producing still-born babies or children who are unhealthy. Her concern is very genuine in that she tries to expose the moral hypocrisy of the doctors and religious 'do-gooders' who proclaim to be helping these working-class women. During her discussions with the Health Commission, she even suggests sterilising women who have learning disabilities. Yet in her own words, 'woman must help woman – those poor women – . . . my heart is full of grief for poor women' (Act III, pp. 69–85). Stopes's play seems to the modern eye so bizarre in its moral logic that this totally undermines the fact that in its day it would have been shocking not for its lack of egalitarian politics, but for the fact that it foregrounds issues of birth control and, effectively, sex. For Stopes, birth control signified creating certain freedoms for women as well as providing a form of genetic engineering. It should be pointed out that the Eugenics Movement, founded on the notion that in order to prosper a nation must produce healthy babies of so-called 'good' stock, was initially applauded by *both* extremes of the political spectrum. Integral to the Eugenics Movement was a desire for population control, more than environmental improvement.²⁶ It is ultimately this desire for population control, as opposed to any real desire to improve life for the poor, which concerns the heroine of Stopes's play.

Cultural imperatives: for the good of the nation

Just as the promotion of votes for women was presented by the suffrage playwrights as ultimately beneficial to the whole of society, so too, in many of the plays by women during the interwar period, were gender-specific issues allied to an overriding concern with nationhood. This becomes stronger as the period progresses, but we can trace the integration of gender and nationalistic discourse back to Edwardian plays by women.

The playwriting of Gertrude Jennings, for example, reaches back to the Edwardian feminist theatre (her play *A Woman's Influence* was very popular with the AFL). Jennings saw domestic comedy as a way of looking at women's cultural and social positioning. Although historically positioned as writing predominantly for the amateur market, Jennings later achieved success in the West End with plays like *The Young Person in Pink* (1920), *Family Affairs* (1934), and *Our Own Lives* (1935). She foregrounded domestic issues and women's lives and

always had an eye on current trends of thought, as evidenced, for example, in *Husbands For All* (1920), a farce in which the government decrees that, due to shortages of marriageable men, all men under forty must have two wives by 1925.

Originally directed by Auriol Lee and starring Lilian Braithwaite, *Family Affairs*²⁷ was one of her most successful West End plays. Here generational and gender differences are used as a way of looking at the family and its cultural significance. The official head of the family, Lady Madehurst, is fierce and determined, but she is also tolerant and forgiving, thus enabling the family to be adaptable. Again, as with many of Jennings's plays, the women are presented as more responsible, wiser, and stronger than the men who are often pompous or frivolous – in *Family Affairs* the mother risks breaking the law to protect the family, her charge. Although Jennings's comic angle on the family has to be acknowledged, she does present the family as women's power base – somewhere from which they can contribute to the well-being of the nation.

In 1926 Clemence Dane wrote of her great disappointment over those women who, having been given the vote, did not use it.²⁸ For Dane these women were evading the responsibilities of citizenship. She pointed out that: 'if they will not take their share of national housekeeping they run the risk of having their private housekeeping threatened by forces – laws, wars, strikes and revolutions – outside their control'.²⁹ Dane's concern that women should take social and moral responsibility was shared by many, and this is reflected in the issues discussed on the 'women's pages' in the national press during the 1920s. The fear of a 'petticoat government', however, meant that articles which suggested that women might be becoming politically powerful were juxtaposed in the popular press with articles on childrearing, home management, what to do without a servant, and so on. The interwar years represent a period in history where the whole experience of womanhood was changing. For Carl Jung, woman was clearly 'in the same process of transition as man . . . faced with a tremendous cultural task'.³⁰ Some of the women playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s took this 'cultural task' on board even though, just as there never was a 'petticoat government', they had no real power in what was a theatre system in transition but largely owned and run by men.

The overriding atmosphere in the commercial and mainstream theatre during the 1920s and 1930s was one of conservatism. Theatres had been largely taken over by investment managements during the First World War, and although women playwrights did relatively well under this system, Richard Findlater's observation in *The Unholy Trade*, that theatre was for most 'a holiday treat', implies that the theatre was largely middle-class.³¹ Equally, middle-class women felt a renewed sense of social and moral responsibility in all its peculiarities, and

a renewed sense of duty to the nation. It was this sense of national duty which was accentuated in many of the popular plays by women of the day, often through female characters whose desire to work was inspired by a need to 'serve the nation' outside, as well as inside, the home. The ways in which women's desire to work and still be considered as feminine were framed as culturally specific and historically significant have already been discussed. By the late 1930s the working woman as a dramatic character is no longer singled out for investigation in such a specific way. In Dodie Smith's *Dear Octopus* (1938)³² working women are simply an expected part of the family set-up though still not always approved of. The play provides an extremely idealised picture of upper-middle-class family life and of Englishness, and as such contains innate statements about the necessity of the family unit and its indestructibility. The 'dear octopus' of the title symbolises the family, a treasured and feared institution which is, 'like nearly every British institution, adaptable' (Act III, pp. 378–9) – this at a time when the nation approached the Second World War, having not yet recovered from the First World War which tore its families apart so proficiently. The family, still viewed as the domain of women, is 'that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape' and signifies the nation and national well-being itself (pp. 378–9). Many women playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s, through an investigation of gender and power relationships within the family, locate the private sphere as having great *public* significance. If this meant writing for a particularly female market it also meant writing for an audience who had a renewed sense of their own social and cultural potential as contributors to the greater good of the nation. For Alison Light, 'something happened to middle-class femininity after the Great War which sees it taking on what had formerly been regarded as distinctly masculine qualities'. It is these qualities which are reflected in the seeming conservatism of much women's playwriting of the era suggesting a feeling of 'a new level of State recognition and of national inclusion' (*Forever England*, pp. 210–11).

Thus this 'lost generation' of women playwrights were often as concerned with the 'woman question' in its many different guises as their more radical forebears, even though they mostly worked within a commercial and conservative theatre system using popular as opposed to the more experimental forms of their day. Similarly, there are strong echoes of their concerns in much of the work of women playwrights of our own time.

For Rebecca West, to be a feminist was to express sentiments that differentiated a woman 'from a doormat or prostitute'.³³ Such plainly stated and trans-historically pluralistic notions of feminisms make it possible to see feminist concerns reflected in the majority of plays written by women during the inter-war years. Woman as a signifier is frequently problematised as is the experience of being a woman: questions of whether a woman should work or be financially

dependent on her spouse, whether she should expect equal education and pay, or the same legal rights as men and so on, abound. The issues raised by the so-called 'woman question' are remarkably similar to those which face women today, and woman's role within society was consistently a point of public and private debate – it is the elements of this debate which dominate plays by women of the period.

FIRST PRODUCTIONS OF MAJOR PLAYS

Venues are in London's West End unless stated

Clemence Dane

Bill of Divorcement, St Martin's Theatre (1921)
Granite, The Ambassadors Theatre (1926)
Wild Decembers, The Apollo Theatre (1933)

Gertrude Jennings

Husbands For All, The Little Theatre (1920)
Family Affairs, The Ambassadors Theatre (1934)
Our Own Lives, The Ambassadors Theatre (1935)

Dodie Smith

Autumn Crocus, The Lyric Theatre (1931)
Service, Wyndham's Theatre (1932)
Call it A Day, The Globe Theatre (1935)
Dear Octopus, The Queen's Theatre (1938)

G. B. Stern

The Matriarch, The Royalty Theatre (1929)
The Man Who Pays The Piper, St. Martin's Theatre (1931)

Aimée and Phillip Stuart

Her Shop, The Criterion Theatre (1929)
Nine Till Six, The Arts Theatre (1930)
Sixteen, The Criterion Theatre (1934)

Fryn Tennyson-Jesse and Harold Harwood

Billeted, The Royalty Theatre (1918)
The Pelican, The Ambassadors Theatre (1924)
How To Be Healthy Though Married, Strand (1930)

NOTES

- 1 L. Hudson, *The Twentieth Century Drama* (London: Harrap and Co. Ltd, 1946), p. 59.
- 2 *Era*, 11 December 1935.
- 3 Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 13.
- 4 See also Viv Gardner, *Sketches From The Actresses Franchise League* (Nottingham: Nottingham Drama Texts, 1985); Claire Hirschfield, 'The Actresses Franchise League and The Campaign for Women's Suffrage', in *Theatre Research International*, 10:2, 1985, pp. 129–53; and Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers* (London: Virago, 1981).
- 5 Winifred Holtby, *Women in A Changing Civilisation* (London: Lane and The Bodley Head, 1945), p. 96.
- 6 Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 188. For full details of interwar production runs, see Maggie B. Gale, *West End Women: Women and the London stage 1918–1962* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 12.
- 7 John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 87.
- 8 Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, vol. 1: *The Women of 1928* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 232.
- 9 Loren Kruger, 'The Dis-Play's the Thing: Gender and Public Sphere in Contemporary British Theatre', in *Theatre Journal*, 42, 1990, pp. 27–47, pp. 28–9.
- 10 Tracy C. Davis, 'Questions for A Feminist Methodology in Theatre History', in Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie (eds.) *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), pp. 55–81, pp. 66–9.
- 11 Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 124.
- 12 Patricia R. Schroeder, *Feminist Possibilities of Realism* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), pp. 27–8.
- 13 Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 100–1.
- 14 Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 491.
- 15 G. B. Stern, *The Matriarch* (London: Samuel French, 1931).
- 16 G. B. Stern, *The Man Who Pays The Piper* (London: Samuel French, 1931).
- 17 Aimée and Philip Stuart, *Nine Till Six* (London: French, 1930).
- 18 Letter from Constance Smedley to the editor of *The Times*, 2 March 1930.
- 19 Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home And Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 51.
- 20 Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870–1950* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984), p. 199.
- 21 C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 213–16.
- 22 J. Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn: A Biography of Fryn Tennyson-Jesse* (London: Deutsch Ltd, 1984), p. 139.
- 23 Clemence Dane, *Bill of Divorcement* in *The Collected Plays of Clemence Dane* (London: Heinemann, 1961).
- 24 Billie Melman, *Women and The Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 15–37.
- 25 Marie Stopes, *Our Ostriches* (London: Putnam, 1923).
- 26 Jeffrey Weeks and Sheila Rowbotham, *Socialism and The New Life* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp. 170–9.

- 27 Gertrude Jennings, *Family Affairs in Famous Plays of 1934* (London: Gollancz, 1934).
 28 Melman has pointed out that when the vote was given to men over twenty-one and to qualifying women over thirty in 1918, 5.5 million females remained without the vote until 1928 (*Women and the Popular Imagination*, p. 1).
 29 Clemence Dane, *The Women's Side* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1926), p. 9.
 30 C. G. Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine* (London: Ark, 1989), pp. 57–75.
 31 Richard Findlater, *The Unholy Trade* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1952), p. 194.
 32 Published in *Plays of the Thirties*, vol. 1 (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1966).
 33 Jane Marcus (ed.) *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911–1917* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 219.

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