

SOPHIE TREADWELL'S MACHINAL AND FEMINISM:  
UNDERSTANDING AN EARLY 20th CENTURY WOMAN'S PLAY

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Machinal, a play by Sophie Treadwell, was produced on Broadway in 1928. At this time, women had had the vote for eight years and the women's movement of the earlier part of the century had died away.

The leading character of Machinal appears to be the antithesis of the ideal of the emancipated woman which emerged with the women's movement. In fact, however, Machinal is feminist in its themes; therefore, it has many connections with the development of women's consciousness in this century. It is a transitional play, building upon the past, and anticipating future ideas of the women's movement.

This report will explore these connections by placing Machinal in a feminist historical context, which in turn will illuminate meanings of the play which usually have been overlooked in theatre criticism.

To explore these meanings it will be necessary to review the history of the women's movement and to describe feminist consciousness as it exists in the present. Also, it will be necessary to look at what work has been accomplished so far in the area of historical feminist criticism of women's drama. There is not much material to examine pertaining to Machinal



in traditional theatre criticism, but what does exist will be examined, as well.

## SECTION I

### An Outline of the Growth of the Women's Movement and Women's History

The women's movement in England and America began and developed during the 19th Century. It was related to the changing status of the family, which had been greatly affected by the changes of the Industrial Revolution. These changes culminated in significant alterations in women's lives. While the Industrial Revolution was certainly not wholly responsible for the problems of women, it exacerbated them, perhaps to an unprecedented degree.

In the earlier agrarian economy upon which rested our social forms prior to the Industrial Revolution, all members of a family contributed to its subsistence. The family was located physically close to a homestead or farm. Divisions of labor were less rigid and women sometimes worked in the fields alongside men, as well as children. However, as industrialization progressed and subsistence solely on the farm became less possible, work for an outside employer became a necessity for most people. In good times it was the men who went out to work. In bad times when wages were low, men, women, and even children all competed for scarce work.<sup>1</sup> Gradually, with the growth of

unions, there developed the expectation of the man being the wage-earner, and an ideal evolved that one man needed to be paid well enough to be able to support not only himself, but a wife and children as well. There were women's unions, too, in the early days, but partly because of increasing competition for jobs with men, partly because of "women's duties" at home, these unions died away.<sup>2</sup>

In the middle and upper classes the women had less and less work to do. Professions and the business world alike were open only to men. There were no women's colleges in the early 19th Century. Women could do little but cultivate social graces and play the piano. A woman at leisure, once the mark of only the wealthy, became an ideal of the middle class.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as more and more of the work of the economy was done outside the home, the women were increasingly confined to the home. Isolated from society, women's only tangible contribution became child-rearing, a job which occupied twenty years, at best, out of the woman's lifetime. Even middle class women had servants during this period. Little useful work remained to be done at home by these leisured middle class women for most of their lives.

At this time there began to develop what historians term "the cult of domesticity." It arose to fulfill a need to rationalize this new state of women in the family. The home itself, as an idealized concept, came into being. From its inception, it was an isolated entity. If a man's home was his

castle, that meant it was his isolated, impregnable haven in which he could be master, as he could not be in the outside world. In The Bonds of Womanhood, Nancy F. Cott writes: "The central convention of domesticity was the contrast between the home and the world."<sup>4</sup> How to justify and promote this condition of domesticity? Cott continues: "Essays, sermons, novels, poems and manuals offering advice and philosophy on family life, child rearing and women's role began to flood the literary market in the 1820s and 1830s, with a tide that has not yet ceased."<sup>5</sup>

Thus began a glorification of women's domestic role. This glorification had other ramifications. Women came to be seen as better able to rear children, kinder than men; then, eventually, more elevated, spiritual, and purer than men. Women were seen as extremely different from men, occupying their own sphere. Isolated in their own sphere, they developed their deepest emotional ties to their sisters and women friends. Men lived in a different sphere of ties and influences. Cott has pointed out the disadvantage of such a system, but also one important advantage.

[Women's sphere] also contained within itself the preconditions for organized feminism, by allotting a "separate" sphere for women and engendering sisterhood within that sphere. . . . Without such consciousness of their definition according to sex, no minority of women could have created the issue of "women's rights."<sup>6</sup>

As with most such rationalizations, the rhetoric of the cult of domesticity probably worked well for some persons. It

did not work well for all, containing inherent contradictions which increased with time. These contradictions played a part in the growth of women's consciousness and the women's political movement.

In Hidden from History, British historian Sheila Rowbotham has detailed some of the efforts made by lower class working women to form their own unions and to make themselves heard in the formation of the early labor unions. These women were gradually and systematically excluded as the development of the union movement progressed.<sup>7</sup>

But it was middle and upper class women who really began the political phenomena of the women's movement. Women who had been active in the cause of abolition of slavery began to take an interest in their own rights. The first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. It was called largely because an anti-slavery convention held in London earlier had voted to exclude the women who had come to attend as delegates. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton decided they would organize a women's rights convention upon their return to the United States. Thus, the women's rights movement in England and America can be dated from the World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 in London.<sup>8</sup>

While being hailed as a person with special, higher abilities by the purveyors of the cult of domesticity, women in fact did not have the rights of full citizens, could not transact business, own property, could not go to college, and

could not vote.

Though organizations of women tended to coalesce around public issues such as women's suffrage, there was always an effort made by some women to look deeper into the whole question of the social forces that had brought about this low status for women. The position of women was too peculiar to be accounted for as easily as was slavery, and too complex to be explained as some simple aberration of voting privileges. William O'Neill, social historian, has written what he calls an inquiry into the failure of feminism. In it, he points out that, after all, "in a free country to deny women the vote solely because of their sex was unjust, undemocratic, and ought properly to have been unconstitutional."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, women's position in the 1920s looked as though feminism had never made an impact. Yet the vote had been won. What, then, were the failures? O'Neill remarks that the feminists' "ability to control events and shape their environment was always very limited." Later he comments that "the greatest weakness of the feminist movement was precisely this inability to appreciate the limits that the organization of society placed on its larger aspirations." Then he remarks that "the feminists' analysis of their position was generally shallow and inadequate."<sup>10</sup>

A typical example of shallow thinking is the conviction held by people vis-a-vis women and a war effort. In such a national emergency, women are required -- thus permitted --

to come out of the home and do nursing and other essential work. O'Neill has remarked on this phenomena during the Civil War. He said the war effort secured a "heroic myth" that women's position was immeasurably improved with the war, in a way which could not have occurred in peace.<sup>11</sup> One can find the same myth circulating again during World War I (nursing and bus-driving) and World War II (Rosie the Riveter). Other blind alleys were the temperance movement and the purity movement.

Blind alleys notwithstanding, some early feminists pressed for deeper analysis of the problem. In an article in Revolution, a magazine edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Laura Bullard wrote:

. . . But woman's chief discontent is not with her political, but with her social, and particularly her marital bondage. The solemn and profound question of marriage . . . is of more vital consequence to woman's welfare, reaches down to a deeper depth in woman's heart and more thoroughly constitutes the core of the woman's movement than any such superficial and fragmentary question as woman's suffrage.<sup>12</sup>

However, this flag was not to be flown by the emerging coalition of women's groups. In America the radical group formed the National Women Suffrage Association. The other group formed was more conservative, the American Woman Suffrage Association, and it concentrated its energies on getting the vote. The radicals supported broad social reforms. This was in the 1870s. By the 1890s, the two groups had merged and the next generation had all but lost their broad social views. They

did not want to jeopardize the suffrage question with unpopular critiques of marriage and society. Finally the suffragists convinced those feminists concerned with child labor and the exploitation of women that the vote was actually necessary to achieve their social aims.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the issue of suffrage co-opted every other woman's issue. When the vote finally was achieved, virtually nothing was left of feminism to carry on. This was true in England as well as the United States.

What remained were a few myths: the myth that the war had emancipated women; the myth that freer sexual mores meant more freedom for women; and the continuing myth of the cult of domesticity. Purity and temperance seemed to fall away, however. The issue of birth control serves as an example of the changed mood. The suffragists opposed birth control and favored abstinence. They felt birth control only played into the hands of men with their impure desires. This attitude was unacceptable to women after the war.<sup>14</sup> The younger women were more open to sexual experience and the attitudes of the older feminists probably alienated them.

Whatever the case, the important contributions made by the radical feminists had been abandoned by the suffragists and the youngsters alike. One suffragist told the radical Charlotte Perkins Gilman that Gilman would do more good than harm "because what you ask is so much worse than what we ask that they will grant our demands in order to escape yours."<sup>15</sup>



Gilman requested the abolition of the home. She thought it uneconomical, a financial burden to society, and a location for human misery. In 1903, she published her views in a book called The Home.

The best proof of man's dissatisfaction with the home is found in his universal absence from it. . . .

How does staying in one's own house all one's life affect the mind? We cannot ask the question of a man, for no man has ever done it except a congenital invalid. . . .

The home, in its very nature is intended to shield from danger; it is in origin a hiding place, a shelter for the defenseless. Staying in it is in no way conducive to the growth of courage. . . .

Justice was born outside the home and a long way from it; and it has never even been adopted there.<sup>16</sup>

. . . . .  
The currents of home-life are so many, so diverse, so contradictory, that they are only maintained by using the woman as a sort of universal solvent; and this position of holding many diverse elements in solution is not compatible with the orderly crystallisation of any of them, or with much peace of mind to the unhappy solvent.<sup>17</sup>

As to the institution of marriage, the radicals viewed it as nothing better than servitude. Susan B. Anthony preached:

There is an old saying that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," and I submit if the deprivation by the law of the ownership of one's own person, wages, property, children, the denial of the right as an individual, to sue and be sued, and to testify in the courts, is not a condition of servitude most bitter and absolute, though under the sacred name of marriage.<sup>18</sup>

And Emma Goldman, the anarchist, in 1911 wrote:

The institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent. It incapacitates her for life's struggle, annihilates her social consciousness,

paralyses her imagination, and then imposes its gracious protection, which is in reality a snare, a travesty on human character.<sup>19</sup>

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the original organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention, in her magazine wrote about women at home: "Concentrating all woman's thoughts and interests on home life intensifies her selfishness and narrows her ideas in every direction, hence she is arbitrary in her views of government, bigoted in religion and exclusive in society."<sup>20</sup>

Even so, by 1911, these radical critiques of marriage and home were not being heeded by women activists, let alone the rank and file.

## SECTION II

### Relationship of the Women's Movement to American Plays of the Early 20th Century

In an article titled "The Rise and Fall of the New Woman in American Drama" which appeared in Educational Theatre Journal, Deborah Kolb has outlined the rise of the "new woman," paralleling the growth of feminism in the late 1890s and the first two decades of this century, relating it to plays of the period in America. Kolb's focus is on the character of the new woman as seen in drama, irrespective of whether the playwright is a man or woman. She discusses a few plays which reflect women's issues in an obvious and didactic manner, written by James A. Herne, Rachel Crothers, Augustus Thomas, Jesse Lynch Williams, and George Kelly. The issues move from the themes of the double standard to economic independence, then return full circle back to domesticity.<sup>21</sup>

Margaret Fleming by James A. Herne dealt with the issue of the double standard in 1890. It viewed the double standard negatively and treated the woman with sympathy. Augustus Thomas took the opposite view. As a proponent of the double standard, one of Augustus Thomas' characters says: "Men work for their children because they believe the children are their own." But

since they cannot know for certain whose children they are, man's "faith" in a woman's virtue is the basis of the "welfare of the world." Thomas' viewpoint that the welfare of the world rests upon fatherhood institutionalized by marriage and the double standard reflects the opposition to the women's movement.<sup>22</sup>

Rachel Crothers is the playwright usually identified with feminism in the early 20th Century. She dealt extensively with the issue of the career woman or the professional woman, probably because she was an upper class successful career woman herself. But like other playwrights of her time, Crothers' treatment of divorce and marriage is mostly in terms of the problems posed by women's increasing economic independence. This is seen as a potential conflict and as a threat to traditional marriage. Family versus career for women becomes an important issue for the first time on stage. Later, with the decline of feminism, romance returns as an ideal. It is only George Kelly's anti-heroine, Mrs. Craig, in Craig's Wife, who disparages romance as an impractical sentimentality.<sup>23</sup> Although Rachel Crothers does not go so far as to return to romance, her plays definitely parallel the fashions of the time. Her earliest plays, He and She and A Man's World, while not as radical as the radical feminists' philosophy, nevertheless are bold and frank affirmations of women's liberation, in their way. Her later plays have been called a "reversion" from feminist thinking.<sup>24</sup>

In her book American Playwrights: 1918-1938, Eleanor Flexner has pilloried both Crothers and her contemporary playwrights, saying that Crothers' social philosophy "amounts to nothing more than a code of breeding and good taste." She adds that Crothers and her contemporaries cannot go further "for it would be flying in the face of values and ideals which they still personally accept."<sup>25</sup> She calls Crothers a playwright whose earliest work was best and whose later work was disappointing. Speaking of one of Crothers' characters in a later play, Flexner laments: "But this futility which she encounters at the end of her battle," that is, the failure of a woman to find fulfillment in emancipation, "is a profoundly significant phenomenon today, and that it should emerge in the plays of Rachel Crothers, only makes it more so."<sup>26</sup>

In writing about plays of the decade of 1927-1936 -- Crothers' late period -- in his A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day, Arthur Hobson Quinn expresses a different opinion on the same phenomena. He praises her for her "mellower" philosophy in Let Us be Gay (1929), as opposed to her 1909 play A Man's World. Also, he apparently missed entirely the subversive point of view in He and She, her early play, when he writes: "Miss Crothers reveals so sympathetically the man's point of view -- that he must be the breadwinner and the head of the family, that the play on stage secures the sympathy for Tom rather than Ann."<sup>27</sup> Rachel Crothers, then, seems to reflect the women's movement,

as seen in its heyday before World War I; and she also reflects feminism's decline in her own philosophical abandonment of women's advocacy in the 1920s and 1930s.

The play examined in this report, Machinal, was produced in 1928, at the time when feminism was nearly at its lowest ebb. Sophie Treadwell, as a playwright, stands outside the tradition of plays about "the woman question" and her play is not about "the new woman" discussed by Kolb. Although her play was a success and received good reviews, Treadwell has been neglected by theatre historians. Eleanor Flexner's book on American playwrights covers the period from 1918 to 1938, yet she apparently does not consider Treadwell significant. Arthur Hobson Quinn's chapter on the decade which includes Machinal discusses some forty playwrights of the decade, yet Treadwell and Machinal are never mentioned once. She appears to have been ignored entirely by traditional criticism; and, to some extent, by feminist criticism, as well.

Recently, Machinal has been anthologized by Judith E. Barlow in Plays by American Women: The Early Years, published in 1981. This is the first time this has happened since John Gassner anthologized it in Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre, Early Series, in 1949. The editor of the new anthology comments: "Yet despite its initial success, numerous European performances, revivals and a television production, both the play and its author are largely unknown today." Barlow adds: "One looks long and hard in histories of American drama

for more than passing references to them."<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps only now, with the growth of the current women's liberation movement, can Treadwell's Machinal truly be understood. Machinal had no direct relationship with the early women's movement, and was produced during the movement's decline. Because of this, the play expresses themes the early women's movement passed over, anticipating ideas of the current day.

### SECTION III

#### Definitions of Feminism and Descriptions of Feminist Issues and Consciousness Today

Feminism is both a consciousness and a political stance. The feminist state of consciousness lies on a continuum, which ranges from a "feminine" way of looking at the world to a feminist view of existence. This variable range of consciousness is extended historically backwards in time as well as across the contemporary world. The political stance, too, has a variable range, although once the continuum of consciousness progresses to the point called "feminism" there is an implicit political stance, if the term "political" is used in its broadest meaning. The claim is made that the consciousness of feminism inevitably will become a political issue because it inevitably will come into conflict with society as it is now organized. It is a radical consciousness.

Contributions to developing feminist consciousness come from many quarters -- the women's movement, theology, history, the social sciences, and literature. As is usual with any vital social movement, controversies abound.

Margaret Lamb, in an article titled "Feminist Criticism," which appeared in The Drama Review, listed three areas in which



she indicated she thought feminist criticism should focus attention.<sup>29</sup> One of these is assessing how feminist plays measure up to the avowed aims of feminism. I think this should be applied as well to older plays written by women, or to any plays which are primarily concerned with women's issues. Therefore, it becomes important to define feminist consciousness and its avowed aims.

One theorist, Bat-Ami Bar-On, a philosopher and current active participant in the women's movement, has attempted to describe a minimal set of beliefs to which feminists subscribe or "ought to subscribe." She pinpoints four primary beliefs: 1) there is a sexual differentiation of persons and social activity prevalent in all known societies of human beings; 2) typically, biological sex and sexual differentiation coincide, with being woman and/or partaking in woman-type social activity valued less than being man and/or partaking in man-type social activity; 3) these differentiations and their valuations are not naturally inevitable; and 4) these differentiations and their valuations are unjust and ought to be eliminated.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to these minimal beliefs, probably most feminists are in agreement over certain issues today. These are the issues espoused by what might be termed the liberal feminists -- women's legal rights, equal pay, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion rights, sexism in advertising, child-care organization, the problem of unpaid housework, and sometimes the issue of rape.

Other issues, and here it is more correct to speak of consciousness, because these are not necessarily things susceptible to the usual political action, are the province of only the radical feminists. These concerns are: 1) rape and violence against women; 2) lesbianism; 3) the need for the woman-identified woman; 4) the radical critique of religion; 5) the critique of marriage as an institution; 6) the new history and research on women; and 7) the demand for control over one's own body as a corollary to autonomy.

It is these radical issues which will be found to be most relevant to understanding the play Machinal, just as they are relevant to understanding contemporary feminist theatre. This being so, a further explication of certain aspects of this radical consciousness is needed as background for this play.

First, feminists see rape as the model for all forms of domination by males. "...all men have their power enhanced by rape since this instills in women a need for protection."<sup>31</sup> Secondly, some radical feminists regard lesbianism as the logical pathway out of a male-defined culture. It is seen as the ultimate ideal of a woman-centered world. Thirdly, the term "woman-identified woman"<sup>32</sup> has been coined to describe what feminists see as a need to affirm selfhood by woman. Woman must not identify with men, as they unconsciously do in a male-defined society, but must instead identify themselves with women.

He confirms his image of us -- of what we have to be in order to be acceptable by him -- but not our

real selves; he confirms our womanhood -- as he defines it, in relation to him -- but cannot confirm our personhood, our own selves as absolutes. As long as we are dependent on the male culture for this definition, for this approval, we cannot be free.<sup>33</sup>

Some feminists find the radical critique of religion to be central to feminist consciousness, going to the very root of society's ills. Mary Daly, in Beyond God the Father, is the best exponent of this view. She speaks of a sisterhood which is a new "cosmic covenant." Those who discover this covenant find themselves in what she calls the new space.<sup>34</sup> This new space is on the border of patriarchal institutions. It has "a kind of invisibility to those who have not entered it. It is therefore inviolable. At the same time it communicates power which . . . is not political power in the usual sense but rather a flow of healing energy which is participation in the power of being."<sup>35</sup> She speaks of new time, also. "To be caught up in these institutions," she is referring to patriarchal institutions, "is to be living in time past. This is strikingly evident in the liturgies and rituals that legitimate them."<sup>36</sup>

Important to Daly's thesis is that women have been denied the power of naming. "To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God." Daly exposes a need to abolish what she terms a phallogentric value system, based upon the great "God-Father" and imbued with the politics of rape, competitiveness, and oppression.<sup>37</sup> According to Daly, radical feminists

know that:

. . . 50/50 equality within patriarchal space is an absurd notion, neither possible nor desirable. The values perpetuated within such space are seen as questionable. When the myth of the eternal feminine is seen through, then the brutalization implied in the eternal masculine also becomes evident. . . .

. . . . .  
Intrinsic to the recreative potential of the women's movement then, is a new naming of values as these have been incarnated in society's laws, customs, and arrangements.<sup>38</sup>

The critique of marriage as an institution was made even by the earliest feminists, and although reforms have been made in marriage since their day, marriage is still viewed by radicals as an oppressive institution for women. One reason is that, given the differential valuations placed by society upon women's activities, getting married for women amounts to signing on for a lifetime of unpaid servanthood. In addition to this, legal injustices still remain. For example:

Furthermore, slavery implies a lack of freedom of movement, a condition which also exists in marriage. The husband has the right to decide where the couple will live. If he decides to move, his wife is obligated to go with him. If she refuses, he can charge her with desertion. . . . In states where desertion is grounds for divorce (forty-seven states plus the District of Columbia), the wife would be the "guilty party" and would therefore be entitled to no monetary settlement.<sup>39</sup>

Thus marriage is viewed as slavery and as the model for other forms of discrimination against women.

The new history and research on women has shed much light on marriage and other social arrangements. Gerda Lerner, historian who has pioneered in women's history, has written

that all of history for women is merely pre-history. She has challenged the historian's claim to universality. In The Majority Finds its Past, she writes:

If historical studies, as we traditionally know them, were actually focused on men and women alike, then there would be no need for a separate subject. Men and women built civilization and culture and one would assume that any historical account written about any given period would recognize that basic fact. But traditional history has been written and interpreted by men in an androcentric frame of reference; it might quite properly be described as the history of men.<sup>40</sup>

An example of new research on women, one which is particularly germane to this report, is the work of Ann Jones on women who kill. In an Associated Press release, datelined February 15, 1981, written by a reporter who interviewed Jones in connection with a new book she has written called Women Who Kill, she said that the rate of homicides committed by women in the United States has remained steady at 15% of all homicides for as long as records have been kept. Jones became interested in the exceptional woman who does take the alternative of murder rather than suicide. She found that these women who kill are ordinary women. Also, she found that women who kill almost exclusively kill people they are close to -- husbands, lovers, or children. This is different from men. "Men kill for financial gain, for revenge, for jealousy," she is quoted as saying. "Men kill strangers. Men go berserk and become snipers or shoot down their whole family or lots of innocent people in the street."<sup>41</sup> Jones indicts

the criminal justice system which, contrary to popular myth, does not treat women more leniently than men. Most women serve longer sentences than men for equivalent crimes. Her conclusion to the study is that women kill when put into desperate circumstances by individual men and/or the male-dominated institutions of our society.<sup>42</sup>

The final concern of radical feminists which is relevant to this study of a woman's play is the issue of control over one's body. A claim is made by feminists that not only abortion laws and marriage rights, but also medical practices, particularly by the gynecological establishment, are conceived by men with little or no regard to women's needs. Some go so far as to claim that these practices are deliberately designed to harm women and keep them subservient. The practice of clitorectomies by physicians in the 19th Century, and hysterectomies even to the present day lend credence to this claim. Also cited by feminists is the historical usurpation of obstetrics from midwives by male doctors. Much research has been documented concerning the medical establishment which indicts male practitioners as a class, insisting that they have enjoyed the right to dictate to subservient women the uses of their bodies.<sup>43</sup> It has been argued that 19th Century medicine was dangerous to men and women both, considering the state of medical science; however, that argument does not adequately cover the charge that women, with their special needs, have stood to suffer the most from medical ignorance.

SECTION IV  
Traditional Theatre Criticism

Margaret Lamb, in an article about feminist criticism which appeared in The Drama Review, wrote: "Women working as artists in the theatre do not need and should not get any special treatment; just a careful descriptive presentation of the work, with the critic as a thoughtful witness."<sup>44</sup>

Although feminist criticism was not yet possible at the time when Machinal opened in 1928, this treatment -- with the critic as a thoughtful witness -- was precisely what the play received. It was later that the play was ignored, or hastily dismissed.

Machinal opened September 7, 1928, receiving very favorable reviews. It was compared favorably to Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy and to Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine. Brooks Atkinson praised it as "illuminating, measured drama such as we are not likely to see again."<sup>45</sup> Theatre Arts Monthly reviewed it at length and gave it high praise. It was called "an oasis" in the drama of the period -- "a fine and interesting play."<sup>46</sup> The reviewer was especially sensitive to the use of expressionistic devices found in the play. He liked the way Treadwell used these devices as a tool, not a toy, and the way

she did not let the stylistic devices run away with the play, as other expressionists did.

As has been previously noted, John Gassner considered it an important expressionist play and included it in his anthology of plays of the 1920s.

Otherwise, the play has been neglected, although many other plays no better, and some far worse, have continued to be taken seriously.

The real difficulty with such a play is that it occupies the "new space" described by Mary Daly, by virtue of depicting a woman at her extreme limits in the old space. That is to say, it harbors special themes which were not perceived by the critics of the day and cannot be perceived by traditional criticism, however favorable or unfavorable the critic.

Special themes, especially if they are in advance of their time, do require special treatment, Margaret Lamb to the contrary, or else the play will be misunderstood. The consciousness that arises from viewing the world and society through the lenses of feminist beliefs is necessarily quite different from the consciousness that has informed traditional theatre criticism. From this different consciousness, all other critical approaches appear to have been male-oriented. The male-oriented criticism has not been able to interpret the problems arising from sexism. Plays dealing with issues and characters which were created by the phenomena of sexual differentiation and its "differential valuations," to use



Bat-Ami Bar-On's term, have been viewed with a blind spot in the critical eye.

Sometimes it is not merely a blind spot, but an obvious bias one can observe in a theatre historian. Arthur Hobson Quinn, for example, writing about a play by a man, Craig's Wife (the play about a calculating female), said it was a "dramatization of the logical result of the feminine urge for domination, of whose opening wave The Doll's House was one of the heralds."<sup>47</sup>

Even more revealing is Robert Brustein's discussion of a revival of Treadwell's Machinal in the late 1950s. He praised highly the director's expertise, but only wished "that he would apply it to works more worthy of his talents."<sup>48</sup> As to the play itself, Brustein's description goes as follows:

Let us dispense briefly with Sophie Treadwell's 1928 play, which is one of those banal tabloid stories, out of Georg Kaiser by Elmer Rice, about how a sensitive dish of cream is curdled in the age of the machine. The heroine, who can't seem to perform her duties with the robot efficiency of her office mates, marries her boss, a good-natured business type, with the unfortunate habit of conversing in industrial maxims ("Haste Makes Waste"). Since he is rather gross and sensual, and prefers the blinds down when she likes them up, she becomes allergic to him, but, nevertheless, bears him a child. This traumatizes her even more, so after she meets a smooth Lothario with a romantic past (he kills bandits in Mexico), she conks her husband with a bottle filled with pebbles. She is tried, convicted, and executed by a rigid and unsympathetic society which demands the submission of the individual. Out of this airy nothing [the director and company create a compelling theatrical experience].<sup>49</sup>

Brustein's review is not "a careful, descriptive presentation of the work, with the critic as a thoughtful witness." Neither is it special treatment. This type of "criticism" underscores the need for women's plays to be given special treatment, at least at this period in history.

## SECTION V

### Theatre Criticism: Women's

Feminist criticism in the field of literature is far ahead of that in the field of drama. This seems to be true of both English and American, as well as French literature. Images of women, forms and styles, themes, and historical precedents are all well discussed. Not only are the works of women discussed, as in Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own,<sup>50</sup> but also critical and subversive reading of male writers are undertaken. Judith Fetterly has analyzed Washington Irving, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Sherwood Anderson from the point of view of a person (a woman) who must resist everything these writers are expressing.<sup>51</sup> Kate Millett's Sexual Politics does similar work on the writing of Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence, among others.<sup>52</sup> The criticism in the field of literature is multi-faceted, but all of it is characterized by well-defined points of view, sophisticated insights, and often a political stance as well.

This is not the case with the work done so far in drama. Feminist criticism in drama, while making a few beginnings, is still too new to offer a precise critical vantage point. Much of the work can be characterized as amorphous, lacking any

political stance, or even a specific point of view. Sometimes there seems to be a lack of historical awareness. Possibly the field of drama itself, far more male-oriented than literature, is the cause for this. Although there have been a good many women playwrights, there have been far more women novelists, story writers, and poets. Playwriting is part of a public world, as other writing need not be, and the public world has not been traditionally open to women.<sup>53</sup> Another cause must be the relative newness of women's history. Those interested in drama have not yet acquainted themselves with the work done in the last ten years in women's history.

There is a moderate amount of critical work being done concerning recent women's plays of the past fifteen years, but not much concerning early plays. A search of the Educational Theatre Journal from the beginning of 1975 through 1980 -- a period where one would expect to find this new scholarship -- produced only one article, one by Deborah S. Kolb titled "The Rise and Fall of the New Woman in American Drama," that could be categorized as being in this field and germane to this study. The Drama Review yielded only one article, by Margaret Lamb, on "Feminist Criticism," which asserted that women in theatre should not get any special treatment. It also complained about a feminist critic's approach to Hedda, asserting that in good plays the characters are too complex "to be caught in social science nets."<sup>54</sup> However, this article suggested three areas

in which critical work might be valuable. One would be research on women in theatre history. A second area would be examination of significant work done by women now and its relation to announced feminist attitudes and goals. The third area would be a study of various critical approaches now taken to work by, for, or about women.<sup>55</sup>

It is these last two areas to which this report will now address itself.

There are a few anthologies and/or critical works now available which deal with women in theatre.

The lengthiest one is an unpublished thesis by Judith Olauson.<sup>56</sup> Self-confessedly arbitrary, Olauson discusses plays by women only, from 1930 to 1970, and limits herself only to those plays which ran for at least thirty performances on Broadway or off-Broadway in New York City. She further limits herself to drama -- no comedies or musicals. As a result, her selection is based on commercial success. Her point of view is suggested by the questions she poses. She inquires whether there is a body of literature unique because it is written by women, whether women's playwriting is specifically different from men's, whether women are writing about women's problems, and whether women characters are honestly explored by the dominant male playwright's point of view.<sup>57</sup> Since she does not explore the work of male playwrights, this last question remains unanswered in her study. But she concludes that women playwrights are unique and either deal

with women's problems, or with general problems from the women's viewpoint. She characterizes this viewpoint as "the search for escape from existing conventions," the "motif of women attempting to adjust to their circumstances,"<sup>58</sup> and "the predicament of women who were caught between the dictates of impersonal social forces and their own personal needs."<sup>59</sup> Then she relates each playwriting decade studied to the social and political forces in America at that period, although somewhat cursorily and from the traditional male historical viewpoint. She does point out that female social problems in the 1930s remained what they were before women obtained the vote. She attempts to generalize the 1940s and the 1960s as a time when women playwrights spoke to the concerns of society at large, and the 1930s and the 1950s as a time in which they dealt with women's personal issues.

According to Olauson, in the 1930s women in women's plays tried to resolve their conflicts by being non-conformists, while in the 1950s women in plays began to question their position as social dependents.<sup>60</sup> She sees a transition from the earliest plays about "passive women who were subjugated by the demands of their society" to the later plays where the women attempt, if not always successfully, to act on their own. She concludes her study with a summary concerning "the underlying anger held by some women playwrights toward the traditional views of women in conventional supportive roles; their denunciation of any social institutions which encouraged women

to seek identification solely through sex, including marriage."<sup>61</sup>

Of the works surveyed, Janet Brown's Feminist Drama is the only one explicitly searching for precise definitions of what is and what is not a feminist drama. Brown's book is a critical work and not an anthology of plays.

She starts from the feeling that some plays might qualify as feminist even though their authors were not politically active feminists. She then turns to the concept of the "rhetorical motive" as developed by Kenneth Burke as a useful method of defining feminist drama. If, as Burke thinks, the rhetorical or persuasive motive inspires all literature, and an author can never be completely conscious of all the elements of his creation, one ought to be able to analyze women's literature by its rhetorical motive. Janet Brown posits the concept of the "feminist impulse" as the specific rhetorical motive to be used as the yardstick for judging dramas. She says, "When woman's struggle for autonomy is a play's central rhetorical motive, that play can be considered a feminist drama."<sup>62</sup> Further, there is another important element to her definition: this struggle is "against an oppressive, sexist society."

Brown chooses to study only contemporary plays from feminist theatre groups or from avant-garde theatre. There is no reason why her definitions could not be applied to earlier plays.

The plays she analyzes are The Bed Was Full by Rosalyn Drexler, In the Boom Boom Room by David Rabe, Wine in the Wilderness by Alice Childress, Birth and After Birth by Tina Howe, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf by Ntozake Shange, and several skits from feminist theatre groups.

Another useful tool which Brown has employed to discuss her plays is historian Gerda Lerner's model of the four phases of women's liberation. The first phase is when women, becoming aware of a distortion reflected in art or religion, begin to perceive man as the "other." Next comes a questioning of tradition. Third is a "reaching out toward other women, the slow, painstaking search for sisterhood." The fourth phase is the emergence, out of sisterhood, of a consciousness which challenges patriarchal values, trying to replace them with feminist values.<sup>63</sup> This could be summarized as follows:

- 1) realizing oppression; 2) rejecting tradition; 3) reaching out to sisters; and 4) achieving autonomy.

Brown has concluded that most of the plays she studied deal only with the first two steps, but that none of the plays show the woman going very far toward the third step. This is obviously a deficiency, at least in terms of reflection of political goals. She thinks that the plays written by individuals are more sophisticated and artistically better than those written by feminist theatre groups. The plays of the groups "often fail to encompass the complexities of the



situation they address."<sup>64</sup> She points out that there is an advantage the feminist groups have, namely their close touch with feminist ideology and their understanding of the significance of women's "bonding." On the other hand, their disadvantage is that they have trouble expressing ironies and ambivalences, especially when dealing with their opponents.

Another anthology of plays dealing with women and drama is Harriet Kriegel's Women in Drama. Of the books in the field, this is the only anthology which contains plays by men as well as women. Kriegel's critical selections appear to be based upon the depiction of women heroines in terms of their strengths or their limitations. The plays are Euripides' Medea, Aristophanes' Lysistrata, Thomas Middleton's Women Beware Women, Henrik Ibsen's The Lady From the Sea, August Strindberg's Miss Julie, George Bernard Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession, Susan Glaspell's Trifles, and Megan Terry's Approaching Simone.

The basis of Kriegel's critique must be derived from her statement in the introduction that periods in which women "can find room for development in their lives," are ones in which "they are self-sufficient, reasonable, sometimes courageous, often inspiring."<sup>65</sup> She adds that, on the other hand, in "periods in which they are constricted within the confines provided by social pressures, they can be demonic or they can be caricature. What they can rarely be is human."<sup>66</sup> Kriegel thinks in terms of archetypes. This

approach is similar to that of certain literary critiques, notably Pat Rotter's Bitches and Sad Ladies.<sup>67</sup>

The archetypes in modern drama, for Kriegel, are Hedda and Nora. Nora represents a rational desire to determine her destiny and Hedda represents the woman who "cannot make her escape once the door is open."<sup>68</sup> Strindberg is even more influential than Ibsen, for Kriegel, however, and Miss Julie is the true archetypal heroine, both victim and destroyer. The rational woman, the Nora type, disappears from the stage after George Bernard Shaw.<sup>69</sup>

She considers Megan Terry's contemporary heroine, Simone Weil, to be a throwback to the Greek heroines. This is because Weil displays courage and because she is involved with public political struggles as well as internal ones. "She is an adult female being. Her battles are not sexually determined; they do not arise because of her relationships with men. . . . Her pervasive sense of guilt, however, makes her ultimately a passive hero [sic], not the model militant women are seeking today."<sup>70</sup> Kriegel's method is to select significant women from dramatic literature and describe them carefully without inquiring too closely into what unites them or why they are anomalous. She has perhaps just entered Gerda Lerner's first stage of realizing oppression.

She makes some valuable contributions concerning contemporary male playwrights, also. She carefully notes usually unnoticed misogynist tendencies in the work of Tennessee Williams and

Edward Albee. This is exemplified in the tortured and pathetic victims that Williams portrays and the vulgar Martha of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?<sup>71</sup>

These assessments are one of the few examples in dramatic criticism by women of the type of "resistance" exemplified by Judith Fetterly in the field of literature. Speaking of Eugene O'Neill's women, Kriegel notes:

...they are unacceptable, dangerous creatures, tormented by unconscious drives and conflicts. They have "strange, devious intuitions that trap the hidden currents of life," and can trap a man, urge him to act against his own best interests, and prevent him from fulfilling his destiny.<sup>72</sup>

Kriegel's feminist critique, however, appears to be confined to modern drama. She is not as incisive and alert to feminist complaints when she assesses classical drama, especially Greek drama, in which she particularly lauds Aristophanes. Of course, it might justifiably be argued that modern drama is more anti-feminist than classic drama, hence she perhaps sees more need to critique it.

Perhaps the best anthology on women playwrights is Rachel France's A Century of Plays by American Women. Her stated purpose in the introduction is to bring women authors into the critical mainstream of American drama. She says, "I refuse to accept the notion that women, as a group, have a unique point of view, or special sensibilities." She then adds about women playwrights, "I cannot even say that their observations of other women are more cogent because they too

are women." Why, then, did she assemble this large body of plays only by women, and why does she have another major work in progress devoted to the same subject? Presumably she is engaged in Gerda Lerner's compensatory history -- the first area explored by people beginning women's studies in any field. Despite her protestations (and protestations sometimes become tiresome, sounding almost like apologies), what emerges as a result of her work is a new vision of the place of women playwrights in American theatre, one which should be welcomed by feminists and theatre historians alike.

Unlike Judith Olauson, France makes no selection depend upon commercial success. Quoting Anita Block in The Changing World in Plays and Theatres, France differentiates play-consciousness, derived from the script, from theatre-consciousness, which "only makes hits out of theatrical claptrap."<sup>73</sup> France also quotes Eugene O'Neill, who once said he hardly ever went to the theatre, but read all the plays he could get. Accordingly, many of France's selections were not hits, but she expects they have value and they "reveal aspects of our cultural identity beyond the theatre itself."<sup>74</sup>

Twenty-five playwrights are represented. Of the better known ones, she chooses a play that is usually not anthologized. For example, rather than Trifles by Susan Glaspell, she selects The Outside. For Clare Boothe Luce, she selects Slam the Door Softly -- Boothe's modern parody of A Doll's House. For Rachel

Crothers, she chooses Criss-Cross. Unexpected playwrights also appear: Hallie Flanagan, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein. One British play is included, an early suffragette piece.

A good collection of plays, with a short introduction, is edited by Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch -- Plays By and About Women. It is not a lengthy study, but all the plays are by women. Three of the plays are from before 1940, the others are contemporary. Plays included are Overtones by Alice Gerstenberg, The Children's Hour by Lillian Hellman, The Women by Clare Boothe Luce, Play With a Tiger by Doris Lessing, Calm Down Mother by Megan Terry, The Advertisement by Natalia Ginzburg, Rites by Maureen Duffy, and Wine in the Wilderness by Alice Childress. In the introduction it is said that the anthology is not strictly feminist, but that each play has a female point of view and deals with the nature of women in Western society.<sup>75</sup>

More explicitly feminist and also more conscious of theatrical history is Honor Moore's anthology The New Women's Theatre. Although unconcerned with a formal method of evaluating whether or not plays are feminist, as is Janet Brown, Moore nonetheless establishes an informal evaluation which is convincingly feminist. "The theatre," she says, "has never been taken away from the young male god to whom it has been dedicated since Greek drama evolved from rituals to Dionysus."<sup>76</sup> Moore suggests that women today are trying to "rededicate" the theatre.

One contemporary play, Birth and After Birth by Tina Howe, is thought to be feminist by Moore, although she does not give it a label, as such. This same play was critically analyzed by Janet Brown, and failed to meet Brown's criteria as a feminist drama. Brown said:

Because the play does not depict an agent struggling for autonomy in an unjust socio-sexual hierarchy, it cannot be considered a feminist drama by the conditions employed earlier. While the Apples are oppressed by societal forces, they do not oppose those forces.<sup>77</sup>

Opposition is a necessary ingredient for Brown, but apparently for Moore, oppression alone is a sufficient motif to render a play feminist.

The latest anthology in the field has appeared in 1981, a collection of five plays, edited by Judith E. Barlow.<sup>78</sup> All are by American women and all are early plays: Fashion by Anna Cora Mowatt, A Man's World by Rachel Crothers, Trifles by Susan Glaspell, Miss Lulu Bett by Zona Gale, and, finally, Machinal by Treadwell. The introduction shows a sensitivity to the need for exploring women's plays, as well as a solid understanding of theatrical scholarship.

## SECTION VI

### The Story of Machinal

The plot of Machinal is structured into nine episodes. It is written to be performed in the expressionist style. Some of the speech is non-realistic, mechanical chatter, or stream-of-consciousness.

In the first episode -- "To Business" -- the young woman who is the central character is working as a secretary in the George H. Jones Company. The scene is an office. She is bored and nervous with her work. She has felt nervous and ill on the ride to work. The other workers gossip about her and speculate about her prospects of marrying the boss. The boss has singled out the young woman as his favorite. The scene closes with an interior monologue by the woman, in which she reveals her intense need to rest, to be taken care of, and also her distaste for the person of George H. Jones. She speculates about marriage, but does not want to marry him. She particularly hates his fat hands. She wonders if all girls must marry. Her closing words are, "Tell me, ma -- something -- somebody."

Episode #2 is entitled "At Home." The young woman and her mother are eating dinner at home. The mother urges her to eat a potato. The woman insists that she does not want one. The

mother tells her that's no reason and says, "Want it! Take it!" She does so, obediently. The young woman then starts a conversation about marriage. "Ma," she says, "do all women -- " She is interrupted by her mother's nagging about taking out the garbage: "I suppose you're too nice for anything so common . . ." Garbage and marriage are clearly juxtaposed. The two women discuss love, as we hear offstage a young couple planning a crass sexual encounter. The women discuss marriage, as we hear another offstage conversation, this one between a husband and wife. The wife is complaining that the husband is always going out. Then he goes out. The young woman then tells her mother she wants to have love in her marriage. The mother scoffs at her and advises her to marry the Boss, if she is so fortunate as to get a proposal. When the mother is then told she already has a proposal, the mother is thrilled. She cannot understand why the young woman is hesitating. The mother points out that they would both be supported and would not have to work at terrible jobs and worry all the time. The daughter tells her mother how miserable she feels. The mother is callous. At the end of the scene the young woman resignedly says she supposes she will go ahead and marry him.

The third episode is called "Honeymoon." It is enacted in a dreary little hotel room. The woman is frightened and disgusted. When she discovers there is no view of the ocean as she had been promised, it is as if her last hope has



dissolved. The husband tries to cheer her up by telling her dirty jokes. Eventually he persuades her to go into the bathroom and get undressed. She returns wearing a nightgown, and saying that she wants her mother: "I want her now -- I want somebody." The husband replies, "You got me, haven't you?" The scene ends with her crying, "Somebody -- somebody," as he tells her there is nothing to cry about.

Episode #4 is "Maternal." It takes place in a hospital room. She has just had a baby. The nurse asks her if she's glad it's a girl. She shakes her head "no." The nurse remarks that women ought to want girls, since men want boys. The young woman does not want to see the baby or feed the baby, or see her husband. Whenever the husband visits, she starts gagging. The nurse tries to defend the woman's behavior to the doctor, but soon gives in when the doctor says, "I decide what we better and better not here, Nurse!" He is going to make the woman take her baby and he orders her a change of medicine. The scene ends with a long monologue by the young woman. In it she says she has submitted to enough and wants to be left alone. She threatens to crawl off in the dark, and mumbles incoherently about death and being tired. She talks about God: " -- everybody loves God -- they've got to . . . God is love . . . even if he's bad they got to love him -- even if he's got fat hands." Then, confused, she thinks, " -- no no -- he wouldn't be God -- His

hands make you well -- He lays on his hands." She closes by exclaiming that God is on a high throne, too far away, and that she'll not submit any more.

Episode #5 is called "Prohibited." This is a short scene in a bar. The young woman has come there with a girlfriend, obviously for the first time. She meets an attractive man who is well spoken and treats her kindly. He tells her romantic stories of his adventures in Mexico, where he was kidnapped by some bandits up in the hills and held by them. He escaped by cleverly devising a way to kill them with an empty bottle he found, filling it with stones and hitting them over the head. The young woman likes him and at the end of the scene the couple decide to leave together for his place.

Episode #6 is "Intimate." The scene is the romantic young man's room. The couple is in bed. She is in love at last and she is very happy. The man loves her, too, but honestly tells her that he never stays in one place for very long. Nevertheless, she is still happy to be there. He has a potted plant in his bedroom, a lily, which he has bought. She likes it so much that he gives it to her.

The seventh episode is called "Domestic." This is a scene at home in the evening between the woman and her husband, Jones. They read the paper and engage in desultory chatter. The husband reads to her from an editorial in the paper, "All men are born free and entitled to the pursuit of

happiness." The wife says she cannot sleep and wants to go away, alone. The husband promises her they will go to Europe together. Then he reads about a revolution in Mexico. She asks him if anyone was hurt, if there were any prisoners taken, and if they all got free. "All free," he says. At the close of the scene, music is heard playing "Cielito Lindo" against a background of different voices, growing to a crescendo, shouting, "Just a bottle with small stones," "Had to get free, didn't I?" " . . . stones . . . small stones . . . millstones . . . headstones." The wife jumps up from her chair as the scene blacks out.

Episode #8 is "The Law." In this scene the wife, whose name we hear for the first time, Helen Jones, is on trial for murder of her husband. The weapon was a bottle filled with small stones. She denies her guilt, saying that intruders broke into the house while they were asleep, and they killed him. She saw two men standing by her "husband's bed." Since they shared a bed, the lawyer asks why she called it her husband's bed. She has no answer for this, merely saying she means her husband's side of the bed.

The prosecution produces an affidavit from Helen Jones' former lover, who is once again in Mexico, in which he admits to an affair with her and admits to giving her a potted plant that was in a bowl containing pebbles. It is evident that this affidavit was procured by means of threatening the man with extradition on some trumped-up charge. But when the woman,

Helen, hears this affidavit, she begins to cry and then confesses she killed her husband. She says she did it because she wanted to be free.

The final episode is entitled "The Machine." The scene is in prison. A priest is praying, using familiar and repetitive words. A barber comes in to cut off Helen's hair because it's "regulations." She protests to this: "I will not be submitted -- this indignity! No! I will not be submitted! -- Leave me alone! Oh my God am I never to be let alone! Always to have to submit -- to submit! No more -- not now -- I'm going to die -- I won't submit! Not now!" However, the barber finishes cutting her hair and says, "You'll submit, my lady. Right to the end, you'll submit! There, and a neat job, too." Then follows a short conversation between the woman and the priest. She asks him why she was born, and if she'll be going to hell. The priest replies with some Bible verses that are not particularly relevant: "I shall raise him up at the last day." He tells her that her life was unhappy because she never sought God. She replies that she sought something -- that she was always seeking something. She declares she was free for one moment down on earth -- when she killed her husband.

Her mother comes to bid her goodbye. The young woman mentions her own little girl with regret. There is so much she wishes she could tell her. The young woman's last lines

are, "Somebody, somebod-- " Her voice is cut off as the priest continues to intone, "Christ have mercy."

## SECTION VII

### Feminist Critique of Machinal

The criticism in theatre history of Machinal has been sparse, but where it has existed it has discussed the play in terms of the individual who is crushed by the cruelties of the modern world, and annihilated by the machine age. It is considered an interesting example of the genre of expressionism, with little attention having been given to the specific content of the play.

The play can now be seen as a play with feminist content. Given the specifics of the plot and the language spoken throughout the play, it is difficult to see how the play was ever understood as a drama about "the individual" against the world. It is clearly a play about one particular type or class of individuals, namely women -- against the world.

To begin with, it is a play about a murder committed by a woman, and we know that a woman who commits murder is relatively unusual. If the playwright was interested merely in individuals against mass society, she would have chosen a man as her leading character. Next, the motives for this murder are spelled out entirely in terms of problems that are peculiar specifically to women. In creating a plausible

explanation for this murder, the playwright has had recourse to events in women's lives, not men's lives: marriage, childbirth, and the search for love.

A feminist perspective, then, is the most illuminating way to approach this play. As we have seen, the play appeared in 1928, at a time when women's consciousness was at a low point. Machinal reflects none of the feminist consciousness of the much earlier plays of Rachel Crothers, for example. This decline of feminist values is seen in several ways in Machinal.

There is a negative evaluation made of the independent working woman. Helen's job is tiring and boring and her office mates, including the women, are nothing to idealize. The hard-won freedom to hold a job and make one's own money is seen merely as an oppression. A woman can get ahead -- even at the office -- only by pandering to the male boss. And the jobs available to women, after all, are the lowest and do not pay enough.

Another point that reflects the decline in feminist values is the aspiration of the woman to return to domesticity. Although it is only a fantasy, it seems the woman's only desire is to be taken care of as a wife. She is ambivalent about this, but her image before marriage of an easy life as a wife does reflect this return of domestic values.

Furthermore, she has completely returned to the fantasies

of romance. Romantic love is a great value for Helen. She sees it as the complete justification and fulfillment for her as a person. In fact, her main quarrel with marriage, on a conscious level, is that it contains no romance.

In Machinal, the ability of the woman to vote is a non-issue. Helen can vote. What possible difference could it make in her life?

Helen is the opposite of the "new woman." She lives in a twilight of oppression and fantasies.

At the same time as the play reflects the decline of feminist values, it really asserts the need for their return, and for their return on a far more pervasive basis than they had yet appeared in 1928. Machinal epitomizes the depths to which women can sink in an oppressive male society and, by implication, calls forth a revolutionary response. It anticipates trends in the women's movement of the 1970s. It is a subversive play.

It is subversive because it is shown that all of the suffering Helen undergoes is caused by men and by male institutions. In this respect, the play fits Janet Brown's strict criteria for a feminist play -- that there be a search for autonomy and the search be set against an oppressive male hierarchy. Helen does search for autonomy, however misguided and confused. She remarks at the end that she killed in order to get free. Her victim is hardly even a person in the play,



merely a representative of the oppressive male patriarchy -- the only one she could get her hands on.

All the oppressive actions taken against Helen are taken by men or by women rendered powerless by men. Treadwell has created a world which exemplifies the patriarchy which feminists claim exists. The boss who is Helen's destiny as a husband, the weak mother who is in such need of protection she begs Helen to prostitute herself as a wife, the male doctor who masterminds her childbirth, the nurse who does his bidding, the lover who betrays her to the police, the judge who sentences her, the priest who condemns her, the barber who forces her to submit to a haircut before she is executed -- all are personifications of the patriarchy.

And all of these oppressions are depicted, not as deliberate personal attacks on Helen specifically, but as inevitable destinies which are hers simply by virtue of the fact that she is female. There is no way Helen could have avoided these destinies, given the power of the patriarchal institutions.

The institutions which govern Helen's life negatively and which, if abolished, would set Helen and woman free are specifically outlined in this play as the institutions of marriage, of the law, of the church, of the medical establishment, and the economic arrangements of society (as reflected in the world of work).

To these institutions, Helen repeatedly cries, "I will not submit." But she is defeated by each of them in turn, despite her protests. In implying a need for the return of feminist values -- that is, of a woman-centered world -- the depiction of Helen's motherhood experience is perhaps the most ahead of its time.

At a time when motherhood was revered as holy, Machinal portrays motherhood and childbirth as oppressive, debilitating, and meaningless. This bad experience is explicitly connected to the male gynecological establishment, and to the low self-esteem of women about their own sex. Thus the play is not indicting motherhood, as such; but motherhood under patriarchy, exactly as contemporary feminists do.<sup>79</sup> At the end, Helen reaches out to her daughter and wants to tell her what she has learned.

Helen is almost the personification of the man-identified woman in all of her values and aspirations -- in her need to be protected and in her romantic love for one man in her life. She has certainly not attained the level of being woman-identified, so necessary for her freedom. Yet she has attained something in her very perversity and violence. She knows she does not belong and she knows she is not free. She has no idea why this is the case. Or, if she knows why, which is possible, she knows of no way out.

Helen really has no name in the play until the scene where she is caught and condemned; even then, we do not learn her

maiden name, only the surname of her husband together with her given name. If, as Mary Daly thinks, to exist as a human being one must name the self, then Helen is not a full human being.

Helen also does not exist in any type of women's sphere. Therefore, women's consciousness is not a possibility for her. The closest she can come to that is when she repeatedly asks for her mother, the only person she is close to. Helen revolves on a man-identified wheel, going from husband to male lover and then getting caught in the male system of justice.

Likewise, the male religious establishment impinges upon her. The priest's answers to Helen are from ancient liturgies -- from the "old time" of patriarchy.

What would it take for Helen's liberation and happiness? The question makes no sense in the context of this play. There is no future for Helen or any woman in this play. The play's meaning can only imply the necessity of the establishment of the "new space" of feminism.

By taking a woman to the extreme corners in which patriarchy can allow a woman to be, the playwright has devised a plot with no exit. While Rachel Crothers was writing about the failures of women to find happiness in liberation, Treadwell was writing about a woman's failure to find happiness in traditional pathways. The playwright in 1928 probably was unaware of any solutions, or of any new

space. But she was aware of the absolute nothingness of all of the old space and time for women. In thus setting the stage, she anticipates a philosophy which did not become articulated until about forty years later.

It is because she stood so completely outside the trends of her time that her play was misunderstood.

## CONCLUSION

Machinal dramatized the oppression of a 20th Century woman. The leading character, Helen Jones, was the antithesis of the "new woman" ideal expressed in other plays of the early part of the century. Helen's efforts to rid herself of oppression and become free were destructive and inimical to her purposes. Yet Helen Jones' personality remained as it was -- whole, though flawed. She suffered, but she retained her sanity. Furthermore, she never exhibited doubt or faltering concerning the basic quest of her life. She knew that she deserved freedom and her oppressors did not make her waver in that certainty. Thus, Helen is not absolutely victimized by society, though society destroys her.

Helen Jones cannot be considered a heroine by feminists, although the play itself is a feminist play. This is because she identifies partially with her oppressors in her idealization of romantic love and, also, because she is, after all, destructive.

The women's movement of the 19th Century, which culminated in extension of suffrage to women, contained the radical critiques of society which are implied in the themes of Machinal. The expression of anger in Machinal is an expression of much

that had been suppressed during the long course of the struggle for women's rights. These suppressed elements find a partial expression in Machinal, which can now be seen as anticipating the fuller expression of anger and criticism which surfaced in the new women's movement of the 1970s.

Machinal is not typical of either the women's plays of its time or of the traditional canon. In its treatment of romantic values, as well as its destructive impotence, the play reflects its own time. But in its radical treatment of religion, marriage, motherhood, and patriarchy it belongs thematically with the radical feminist plays of the contemporary women's theatre.

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SOPHIE TREADWELL'S MACHINAL AND FEMINISM:  
UNDERSTANDING AN EARLY 20th CENTURY WOMAN'S PLAY

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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requirements for the degree

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## ABSTRACT

The play Machinal by the American playwright Sophie Treadwell is examined in the context of the growth of feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The women's movement was related to the changing status of the family resulting from the Industrial Revolution. Segregated into a women's sphere by the cult of domesticity in the early 19th Century, women organized an equal rights movement and eventually articulated sweeping criticisms of marriage and the arrangements and customs of society responsible for women's oppression.

In the early decades of this century, the plays of Rachel Crothers, in particular, reflected the current women's movement in their strong advocacy of economic and professional equality. The drive for women's suffrage, culminating in 1920, pre-empted all other women's issues, however, leaving the feminist movement in disarray in the 1920s. Even Crothers' plays reflected this, becoming conventional and seeming to abandon the feminist viewpoint.

A summary of feminist issues, those forgotten by the suffrage movement, as well as newer issues developed by the present women's movement is given. Among these issues are rape, sisterhood, lesbianism, health, women's history, and critiques of religion and marriage. These issues are seen in the context of the feminist claim that women's universal secondary status is not naturally inevitable and is therefore



unjust and should be eliminated.

Also examined are the several anthologies current which constitute the beginnings of feminist drama criticism in the United States. Traditional drama criticism relating to Machinal is usually concerned with understanding the play only as an example of expressionism. The feminist criticism is still largely in the process of collecting forgotten plays and engaging in compensatory history, although there is some attempt being made to make explicit the criteria that should be used in feminist criticism.

Sophie Treadwell's play Machinal is the story of an oppressed woman who, striking out blindly against her oppression, kills her husband. Produced in 1928, when the women's movement was in abeyance, it was neither typical of women's plays of its time nor of other plays of the period, although its structure is expressionistic. Helen Jones, the leading character, expresses the anger of oppression which had been suppressed by the suffrage movement during the long course of the struggle for the right to vote. This suppressed anger and implied radical criticism of society finds a partial expression in Machinal.

A feminist critique of Machinal is the only critique which can explain all the play's meanings. This critique shows that Machinal in its radical denigration of marriage, motherhood, religion, and patriarchy belongs thematically with the full expression of anger given voice in the

contemporary women's movement and in contemporary feminist plays. Thus Machinal is perhaps the earliest play of the contemporary feminist movement.