

feminism as theme in twentieth-century american women's drama

sharon friedman

A critic of contemporary women's drama maintains that "as long as there is theatre, as long as there are women, as long as there is an imperfect society, there will be women's theatre."¹ Indeed, even the comedies of Hrotsvitha, a tenth-century Saxon nun, have been said to express feminist concerns. According to playwright Honor Moore, Hrotsvitha is "a dramatist obsessed with rape as a metaphor for male sin and the oppression of women." And despite Moore's claim that the exclusion of women from the camaraderie of the theatre resulted in the absence of a female tradition in playwriting similar to that which exists in both poetry and fiction, she looks to her female predecessors to place current plays by women in what she calls "proper historical context," to seek "shared concerns and subjects."² No doubt this playwright also seeks the confidence that Ellen Moers identifies as a vital resource for women writers who draw from the knowledge of their predecessors the self-assuredness to write.³

Prior to the twentieth century, unless a woman had friends or family in the theatre, or connections to secure financial backing, she had little hope of having her play produced. The theatre, after all, is part of the public domain. Until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women had been virtually excluded. Prior to the eighteenth century women playwrights rarely had been recorded.⁴

Because women playwrights have chosen to work in a form which is intrinsically public and therefore restrictive to women, it is not surprising that the experience of woman as outsider, devalued, objectified and often

subservient is a recurrent theme in women's drama. Indeed, it may be a response to exclusion, a protest to an imposed silence, an expression of the need to create new lives, public lives that underlie the playwrights' depiction of women's experience. These concerns constitute feminist themes in that they portray the social and psychological restrictions placed upon women in a male dominant society, as well as the attitudes and values of women who confront these restrictions.

During periods when women's equality has been a powerful social issue, feminist concerns are often central to plays by women. Deborah Kolb has observed a close relationship in America between the rise and fall of the professional feminist movement in the early twentieth century and the "rise and fall of the New Woman in drama."⁵ This characterization, often attributed to the influence of Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll House*, was developed by American dramatists of both sexes who were inspired by the impact on the public of the early Women's Movement. However, a critic of this period, Florence Kiper, looks to the women playwrights for a more honest portrayal of this character, devoid of stereotypic overtones:

The literature that will be written by woman as a revealer of that so-called mystery, herself, will probably not sentimentalize femininity. . . . It is hoped that they [future women playwrights] will feel impelled . . . to set forth sincerely and honestly, yet with vital passion, those problems in the development and freedom of women that our modern age has termed the problems of feminism.⁶

With the feminist resurgence of the last two decades, women dramatists have fulfilled Kiper's prophecy. Ruth Wolff, author of *The Abdication*, echoes Kiper when she declares that "only when women can see themselves through other women's eyes will we know who we are."⁷ Given the emergence of feminist theatre groups which have sought new forms as well as new themes, it is clear that the contemporary feminist movement has created an audience for women playwrights who write from their experiences as women.⁸

However, feminism as theme should not be understood as simply a call for women's rights on the part of the playwright or her characters. Rather, it may be a statement about feminine consciousness, the feelings and perceptions associated with a female character's identity as a woman. As Sydney Kaplan asserts, the feminism of a writer may be reflected in "a consideration of the effect upon women's psyches of the external events around them."⁹

Thus, even during periods when feminism is taboo, and women's issues are less salient in the drama, the critic with a feminist eye may often discern themes that are in effect statements about women's lives, embedded in the major issues of a work and often ignored in interpretation. Feminist criticism underscores the need to listen to women recreate their own experiences through art, and to discern areas of commonality which grow out of their designation as a group, and which affect creative vision. As Elaine Showalter makes clear in her study of the female tradition in the

English novel, this kind of investigation looks “not at an innate sexual attitude, but at the ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time span, how this self-awareness has changed and developed, and where it might lead.”¹⁰

It is against the background of twentieth-century American drama—a developing native theatre that, in conjunction with the early women’s movement, prompted more women to write for the stage, and encouraged new playwrights to pursue a certain freedom of expression—that one can see very clearly the ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has expressed itself in the drama. By 1916, with the establishment of New York’s avant-garde little theatre groups, the actor-manager’s theatre was giving way to the playwright’s theatre. One development in this burgeoning American drama was the proliferation of women playwrights who, in the words of one, strove to “create a national drama that shall ring with life and truth.”¹¹ This national drama, however, in no way reflected a uniform sensibility. Turning away from conventional plots and theatrical devices, “its life and truth” sprung from the dramatists’ commitment to portray life authentically, to dramatize the social questions of the day. For women playwrights this often meant exploring the condition of women as a social and psychological phenomenon at the base of a movement for social change.

This paper examines the plays of four American women dramatists whose work spans the century from 1916-1960, and reflects the currents of the developing American theatre as well as an evolving consciousness about women. Susan Glaspell, Rachel Crothers, Lillian Hellman and Lorraine Hansberry have all contributed significant works to American dramaturgy, whether innovative or representative of a period or genre, that have made a statement about women’s role and status in contemporary society.

The plays selected for discussion, in both theme and characterization, suggest the playwrights’ awareness of the subordination of women in public and private life as well as their impulse toward resistance. The strategies of resistance, constructs of the literary imagination, range from murder, madness and deceit to a deliberate, ideological pronouncement of autonomy for one woman, sometimes in behalf of many. Whatever the vision, all four playwrights consider the “effect upon women’s psyches of the external events around them,” and locate these events in the context of the numerous, progressive ideologies surrounding the circumstances of twentieth-century America—primarily a belief in women’s rights, in freedom from the economic exploitation of modern industrialism, and a commitment to racial equality.

Susan Glaspell was a founder of the Provincetown Players (1915), one of New York’s little theatre groups which, according to John Gassner, was in great part responsible for the “modernizing trend” in American theatre.¹² Although playwrights of the little theatre movement did not always receive the attention that was reserved for dramatists of the

commercial theatre, a critic once remarked that of the relatively small number of women playwrights in America Glaspell was "still the most distinguished though others have eclipsed her in box office popularity and in the number of productions they can count to their credit."¹³ Characterized as a dramatist with a distinctly "American" quality,¹⁴ she wished to bring the independent spirit that she associated with America's past to the struggles for individual freedom which she believed were possible in the present. One such struggle was the early women's movement.

There can be no doubt that the early women's movement influenced playwrights—both men and women—to dramatize feminist issues. However, it was a woman playwright, Rachel Crothers, who wrote the largest number of plays for the conventional theatre, dealing with the role of women. Called "America's first lady dramatist,"¹⁵ her canon, which includes twenty-three full-length plays and a number of one-act plays written over a period of forty years (1899-1937), stands in sharp contrast to Glaspell's brief, but intense, decade with the avant-garde theatre.

Though the plays of Glaspell and Crothers differ in theme and technique, issues of feminist concern often constitute the central conflict. Feminist themes are manifest in a woman's struggle toward self-actualization, in debates about the double moral standard, and in tensions surrounding women's increased economic independence within the traditional patriarchal family. Almost without exception, the plays of both Glaspell and Crothers take a woman as protagonist, which itself suggests a concern with the exploration of women's lives.

These themes clearly evolved during the years of suffrage activity, and should be read, as one critic asserts, against the background of World War I, the entry of women into the work force, the disintegration of traditional roles and the consequent stress in family relationships.¹⁶ Indeed, critics see a disillusionment in Crothers' later plays which they believe reflects the decline of feminist activity.¹⁷ However, rather than signaling a retreat, this "disillusionment" may actually represent a woman's response to a new set of conflicts created by feminist gains (e.g., career opportunities, economic independence, sexual freedom). These "inner" conflicts may be interpreted as a response to external forces: a social order which deems that women are solely responsible for the domestic sphere, limiting their chances of success should they try to balance family and career; and men who are threatened by women who achieve success outside of home and family. An historian of American feminism, William O'Neill, quotes from the Blanchard survey of young women (1937), which stated that "the modern girl, who has seen the loneliness of older, unmarried friends, is beginning to discount the rewards from a material success that must be accomplished at the expense of love."¹⁸

Paradoxically, the winning of the vote in 1920 signaled the decline of feminism. The failure to incorporate certain feminist gains into personal life gradually distanced the career woman from the family woman, and the feminist became an object of ridicule, if not pity. According to Betty Friedan, ". . . in the 1930s and '40s, the sort of woman who fought for

woman's rights was still concerned with human rights and freedom—for Negroes, for oppressed workers, for victims of Franco's Spain and Hitler's Germany. The rights of women were thought to have been won."¹⁹ And yet, even with that assumption, feminist issues often surfaced when women were engaged in other political conflicts.

Lillian Hellman exemplifies this trend. Though Hellman has referred to herself as a "moral writer," these morals are often played out in a political arena. Her book *Scoundrel Time* is a subjective response, nevertheless moral, to the McCarthy era, when she herself had been blacklisted. Although Hellman did not write a play that treated the issues raised by McCarthyism, her earlier plays have been considered controversial, politically charged drama. As Alan Lewis notes, "her plays of the 30's and 40's were, in some ways, a response to the Depression and World War II."²⁰ Certainly the greed of the Hubbard family in *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest*, and their exploitation of the poor, though portrayed at the turn of the century, reflect her concern with poverty and the rising industrial classes.

In 1941, Freedley and Reeves in their volume *A History of the Theatre* proclaimed that: "Lillian Hellman has demonstrated greater power than any woman now writing for the stage,"²¹ an assessment that still prevails. Although this power has been stereotypically described as the product of a "masculine mind," one that treats issues directly and without sentimentality, her recent memoirs, *Unfinished Woman* (1969) and *Pentimento* (1973), have prompted critics to consider how her life as a woman may have sparked feminist views. Indeed, in her portrayal of women characters, one may ascertain underlying issues and attitudes of feminist concern that are linked to the central issues presented in the plays.

Lorraine Hansberry is another playwright whose awareness of a feminist perspective, particularly as it illuminates the experience of black women, is demonstrated in relation to other social issues. Hansberry was passionately concerned with the problems of blacks, and she portrayed these problems within the context of American society as a whole. She also dealt with issues related to race and nationhood within the international community. Moreover, in all of her plays, she presented her vision of humanity, the affirmation of the human spirit.

Lorraine Hansberry was the first black woman to have a play staged on Broadway. With *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), she became the fifth woman and the only black writer ever to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the Best Play of the Year. This success was followed by a second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964). After her untimely death in 1965 at the age of thirty-four, her husband Robert Nemiroff edited three other works. These five plays make her canon a small but memorable contribution to the American theatre.

Indeed, all four playwrights—Glaspell, Crothers, Hellman and Hansberry—have contributed significant works to American drama that, explicitly or implicitly, helped to establish a female tradition in the American

theatre. An analysis of the selected plays should illuminate some of the feminist concerns embedded in this tradition.

In the early part of the century, the insistence upon the truth, the goal of verisimilitude, the "desire to get closer to the fact" was the dominant chord in American drama, and women playwrights did not hesitate to portray issues that drew upon the "facts" of their lives as women. In addition to Glaspell and Crothers, playwrights such as Zoe Akins, Zona Gale, Clare Kummer and Lulu Vollmer, who gained access to the theatre during a time of intense feminist activity, often portrayed women's issues from the point of view of the "New Woman." This prototypical woman, as Deborah Kolb notes, was "unafraid to challenge male decisions and male dominance,"²² as she sought her identity. Indeed, the wife's revolt within marriage, which Arthur Hobson Quinn observed in the plays of the early '20s, and related to the feminist movement,²³ was only one manifestation of this quest for an identity apart from men.

Susan Glaspell portrays the various aspects of feminine consciousness and the specifically female experience out of which that consciousness evolves. Free of the constraints of the conventional theatre, Glaspell explored forms such as realism and expressionism, which were conducive to portraying the psychology of women. And as a dramatist of ideas, her characterizations embody a statement about women's condition. In her social history of the period, June Sochen categorizes Glaspell as a literary feminist whose women protagonists were desperate figures bent on destruction or self-destruction. For Sochen, these "victims of a male-centered culture" symbolized the "frustrated woman in American culture . . . who could find no legitimate means of self-expression."²⁴

A woman's frustration is at the heart of Glaspell's one-act play, *Trifles* (1916), set in the kitchen of a desolate prairie farmhouse after the arrest of a woman suspected of murdering her husband. Glaspell depicts the psychological motives for a woman's murder of her tyrannical husband as revealed through the dialogue of other women who comprehend her act of rage. Given the significance of home and family in women's lives, and the female network through which women formed close and supportive relationships in the sparsely populated prairie, the women in *Trifles* understand the stillness of Minnie Wright's childless existence, and the psychological repercussions of her enforced isolation from other women. Moreover, their subordination to men and the indignities which they must endure in the men's condescension and patronizing postures, as they comb the house for clues, lead these women to recognize the voice within Minnie which has been silenced by her husband, and to comprehend the force of repression which led to her brutal revenge. Indeed, these women identify with her to the extent that they are willing to conceal the evidence which reveals a motive and, thus, to conceal Minnie's guilt.

The critic Isaac Goldberg alludes to *Trifles* when he writes that Glaspell is "largely the playwright of woman's selfhood," and that "this acute consciousness of self . . . begins with a mere sense of sexual differentia-

tion.”²⁵ This “sense of sexual differentiation,” a recognition of experience that may cause women to view themselves and the world differently from the way that men do, is explored further by Glaspell in *Bernice* (1917). In this three-act play, she portrays a woman who is conscious of her errant husband’s need to possess her, despite his unfaithfulness, and manages to alter appearances so that she retains her autonomy while providing her husband with the illusion that he has “had” her.

As in *Trifles*, Glaspell gradually brings the audience into the mind of a woman character who never appears on stage. Bernice has recently died when the drama begins, but the way in which she has orchestrated the events surrounding her death makes her central to the play. Although she died of natural causes, she enjoined her servant to tell her husband Craig that she had taken her own life.

Through the character of Bernice, Glaspell has again portrayed a woman’s “acute consciousness of self” and a rudimentary feminism in her understanding of a relationship based upon power. Bernice is a woman who is aware of the social and psychological role that her husband requires her to act out and of the effect of that role for their relationship. She is conscious of Craig’s need to possess her as a woman, to seek his image in the reflection of her devotion, and she is conscious of the strength that he derives from this illusion. Bernice, remote in life, becomes truly unattainable in death, and even more desirable. At the same time, Craig’s belief that his wife has sacrificed her life for his love ensures the myth that he has had this desirable woman. Her death seals this myth, for she can never revoke it. Through Bernice, Craig has achieved immortality. His life has new meaning, and he resolves to become worthy of it.

In speaking of Bernice’s “spiritual radiance,” Ludwig Lewisohn maintains that she “sought, even as she died, to lend him [Craig] that power” which he lacked.²⁶ Lewisohn’s reading, however, ignores the power which Bernice, in creating this deception, sought for herself: the power to manipulate Craig’s affections and the power to create an autonomous existence (even if imaginary) which her husband’s needs denied her. Glaspell has created a woman who is conscious of being the Other, and who uses her imagination to create substitutes for the reality of her circumstance. Bernice actually has not killed herself for her husband, but in creating this illusion, she stages a reality that will accommodate them both.

In *The Verge* (1921), however, the female protagonist struggles to break free of deceptions. She refuses to accommodate herself to stagnant norms that confine her, and struggles to create new forms, new meaning, new reality. Her goals are boundless, and it is only this boundlessness that she seeks to preserve.

Claire Archer is seen by one critic to be Glaspell’s “most extreme rendition of the individual’s reaction against convention to seek her own meaning from life.” He refers to her more specifically as “the most radical woman ever presented on the American stage . . . [who] delighted

feminists who saw her as the personification of their own desire for an independent life.’’²⁷

Unlike Bernice, Claire is very much alive, though somewhat detached from those around her. In fact, she is completely absorbed in growing new plant forms. Most of the play takes place in a greenhouse, removed from hearth and home. Indeed, she has turned off the heat in the home to preserve warmth for her plants. Though the greenhouse has, in a sense, become her home, it has the aura of a laboratory, its temperatures carefully controlled, its atmosphere refined. Through her plants, Claire experiments with life. As the scientist-artist, she attempts to create new plant forms that will spawn new life. The play develops around the flowering of her latest creation, *Breath of Life*, symbol of Claire’s own quest. When the plant breaks through its old form into new life, Claire tries to follow it over the verge of the familiar, and ascends into the madness of the unknown.

Glaspell’s choice of a biological (botanical) metaphor, the creation of a new plant species, for the transformation of a human soul, also expresses Claire’s sexual identity and the transcendence of that identity which leads her to the verge. Claire defiles the “feminine” role of wife, mother, nurturer and assumes the “masculine” role of creator and destroyer. The repercussions of moving against the current may impinge on her sense of well being; or conversely, madness may serve as an escape from her failure to fulfill an assigned role.²⁸ In the end, Claire is exhorted by friends and family to relinquish her quest (her husband brings in a “neurologist” to set her right). Nevertheless, her madness allows her to create vistas beyond the imagination of those who would restrain her.

Glaspell has created an expressionist setting which not only reflects but also extends Claire’s psychological state. When not in the greenhouse, she lives in a tower which . . .

. . . is thought to be round but does not complete the circle. The back is curved, then jagged lines break from that; and the front is a clear bulging window in a curve that leans. The whole structure is as if given a twist by some terrific force—like something wrung . . . Claire is seen through the huge ominous window as if shut into the tower.²⁹

Claire has been moved by a powerful force which finally wrenches her apart. She seeks transcendence in the tower, but the tower—above and beyond—underscores her isolation and alienation.

Critics have regarded Claire as an “extreme feminist,”³⁰ but it is not her rejection of husband, lover and child that constitutes a feminist stance. Nor does her madness necessarily reflect the consequences of her aspirations. Rather, this portrayal renders the impulses of a woman who painfully feels her bounds. It is the awareness of her immanence and her desire for transcendence that make this characterization feminist.³¹

The dramatization of woman’s experience and the restrictions placed

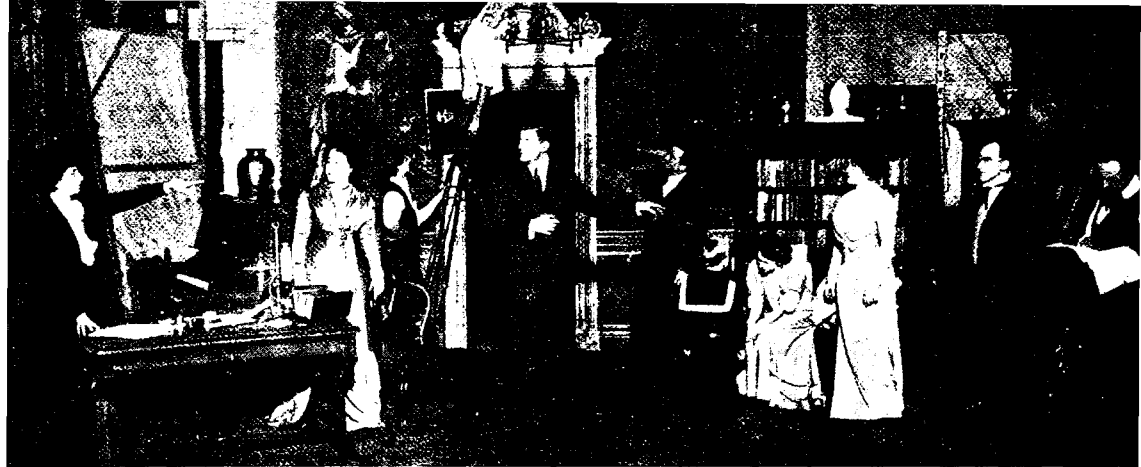


FIGURE ONE: Photo from *Harpers' Weekly*, May 26, 1910, showing Rachel Crothers (far left) directing a rehearsal of *A Man's World*. Courtesy Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

upon women in a patriarchal society were, of course, not limited to experimental theatre. Feminist issues were dramatized by several playwrights of the conventional stage, chief among them Rachel Crothers. Perhaps because of her keen sense of what was theatrically effective for Broadway audiences, Crothers dramatizes her feminist concerns around concrete issues, familiar to many who attended her plays. For example, her characters express conflicts about the double standard, and raise questions regarding the effects of woman's economic independence upon traditional sex roles, as well as upon her own identity and aspirations. In some instances, this search for identity is expressed through a character's writing or art, a device which gives the character an additional platform from which to expound.

Unlike Glaspell's characters, the women in Crothers' plays do not commit murder, nor do they strain the limits of their reason. But they do live through the intense conflicts which accompanied the development of new sex roles. Lois Gottlieb traces the theme of women's evolution in Crothers' early plays (1899-1914), as well as the obstacles to "feminist practice" and the consequent ambivalence of women forced to choose between "feminist" and traditional "feminine" goals. The New Woman, usually a professional, is characterized by the critic as "strong, smart, economically independent." The foil, however, is her love for a man who may understand her need to transform her traditional role, but who cannot make the necessary changes in his own life which her goals necessitate. Gottlieb observes that one resolution was for the New Woman to "deny or thwart her need for romantic love," and in later plays, as she acquires greater awareness of the limits of her position, to reconcile the conflict by modifying her behavior and not the man's.³²

In *A Man's World* (1910), a production which received serious attention by the critics, Crothers portrays a woman who does not compromise her principles. The female protagonist with a man's name, Frank Ware, writes successful novels of the muckraking genre. These novels expose the poverty and destitute conditions of poor women on New York's Lower East

Side who suffer the burdens of unwanted pregnancies and the trap of prostitution as an alternative to the pitiful wages of the sweatshop.

Frank, an engaging woman with high ideals, brings the convictions of her work to her private life. Raised by her father, also a writer, who brought her on his travels because he wanted her “to see—to know—to touch all kinds of life,”³³ she was made aware of social injustice. While living in Paris, Frank and her father befriended a young American girl impregnated by a man who had only fleeting interest in her. She eventually died in childbirth. When Frank’s father died, she adopted her friend’s child Kiddie, and brought him to America.

This, of course, is history (told in confidence to a character in the play), and serves to fill out Frank’s characterization, as well as to provide material for the central conflicts of the drama: the dispute between Frank and the man she loves over the equity of the double standard; and Frank’s inner conflict about the implications of her feminist views for her own life.

In dramatizing Frank’s conflict, Crothers reflects the social forces that shaped women’s activities, aspirations and values at the time that she writes. Frank’s attack, for example, on the double standard has overtones of the social purity ideal of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to William O’Neill, the campaigns against prostitution and “vice,” the Victorian woman’s “anti-eroticism,” heightened by the dangers of childbirth (Kiddie’s mother had died in childbirth), and the risks of primitive birth control measures all contributed to a morality that sought to limit men’s sexual license rather than to free women.³⁴ Frank Ware, a progressive woman in the early 1900s, berates Gaskell, her suitor, for his disregard of the consequences of his “sexual relations” and his defense of a system in which women suffer the consequences alone.

Through her social welfare activity and her writing, Frank makes these private grievances a matter of public concern, and in the process gives herself a platform. As social housekeeper, mother to destitute girls, Frank makes maternity her career outside the home, and it is this maternal function that allows her to enter the public sphere.³⁵ Even within these narrow channels, however, Crothers portrays a woman who challenges sexual politics—the power relationship based on sex—and sacrifices her union with a man who resists her challenge, thereby affirming her sense that it is indeed a man’s world.

In *He and She* (1920), Crothers dramatizes the conflicts of a New Woman who has already made her commitments as wife and mother, but who is still in the process of defining her role and ordering her priorities.

Ann Herford is an artist who has been awarded a commission for a frieze. Her husband Tom, also an artist who had entered the competition, feels overshadowed by his wife’s success. His resentment, however, is only gradually recognized and acknowledged, for he has always regarded his wife as an equal and respected her as an artist. In the course of their entanglement, Tom reveals the ways in which his general values concerning women impinge on his personal relationship to his wife. He believes that Ann (Woman) should work because she *wants* to and that he (Man)

should work because he *has* to. This distinction is revealed to be self-serving when the monetary compensation for his wife's efforts—symbol of the utilitarian aspect of her work—triggers his fear that Ann's ambition will carry her away from him, their daughter and their home.

The issues involved in Ann's decision to forfeit her commission to Tom are not simply her commitment to being a mother versus her commitment to being an artist, but the conflict between the ways in which she will seek her identity and measure her worth. Ann is not the social housekeeper that Frank Ware is in her settlement house work and writing, and therefore must justify her work as an artist without abandoning traditional maternal duties, that is, total responsibility for their sixteen-year-old daughter. It is the dramatization of Ann's dilemma, even more than her choice, which documents women's changing attitudes toward themselves vis-a-vis their husbands and children, and explores the implications of these changes for all their lives.

For Ann, as for other of Crothers' women, art becomes a way of expressing her female identity. The following dialogue between husband and wife reveals Ann's consciousness about feminism and art:

Tom: You're cut up now—but if you should give this thing up—there'll be times when you'd eat your heart out to be at work on it—when the artist in you will *yell* to be let out.

Ann: I know. I know. And I'll hate you because you're doing it—and I'll hate myself because I gave it up—and I'll almost—hate her. I-I know. I know. You needn't tell me. Why I've seen my men and women up there—their strong limbs stretched—their hair blown back. I've seen the crowd looking up—I've heard people say—"A woman did that" and my heart has almost burst with pride—not so much that I had done it—but for all women. . . .³⁶

Tom, torn by his own needs to be the creator, the breadwinner, the head of family, is still the artist sympathetic to Ann's plight.³⁷ However, upon closer examination, we see that he considers only the artist crying to be let out, not the woman. She is incidental.

Ann's response, on the other hand, is very much rooted in her identity as a woman—not only as a mother, but also as an artist—since she regards her art as an affirmation of women's potential. It is not that Ann is an artist despite her womanhood. Rather her art is allied with her feminine identity. In this exchange with Tom, art creates an occasion for Ann to celebrate her sex.

In a later play, *When Ladies Meet* (1932), Crothers makes the relationship between a woman's art and her life explicit. For Mary Howard, the novelist-heroine, art is her life as she imagines and wills it.

The novel within the play is about a woman who has an affair with a married man, and after a year goes to his wife to discuss the matter openly. The author (Mary) believes that if two women love the same man, and if this man is profoundly altered by his new love, then the women can acknowledge this fact together and "decide how they can keep it from

destroying either of them.”³⁸ Mary wants to recreate a common experience with an eye toward transforming it, believing that women might bring a new point of view to the relations between the sexes.

This young author is motivated, in part, to say something “new and honest” by the circumstances of her own life that mirror her novel. Mary, age thirty-two, is an attractive and independent woman who after years of not finding a man whom she could love has finally found that man in Rogers Woodruff, her publisher, who happens to be married. Through contrivances within the plot, Mary and Woodruff’s wife Claire are brought together for a painful and yet inspired meeting. Claire, in coming together with Mary, recognizes that her husband does not have that “something in *him*,” the commitment that might enable a relationship to endure other forces. Indeed, Claire stops loving Rogers when she sees what he has done to Mary, and resolves to leave him.

Similarly, Mary’s knowledge of Claire, and the living through of her fictional situation, alters her feelings for Rogers, as well as her scheme for working through the classic triangle.

Mary: She doesn’t want him now. That’s what I’ve done to her. I’ll never forget her eyes—what she saw.³⁹

Mary has shared Claire’s vision, and the play ends on Mary’s thoughts of Claire which have become paramount in the triangle.

Although the play does not bear out Mary’s idea for the resolution of a triangle between one man and two women, the focus remains on the women whose meeting ultimately transforms them. Crothers’ women perceive a shared experience which makes their relationship to one another significant in that it affects their view of themselves, each other, and the man. Her title “When Ladies Meet” is the dependent clause that awaits completion. Mary’s fictional scenario is just one possible outcome. Crothers supplies another version which no less than Mary’s points up the women’s strength and self-determination.

In *The Female Imagination*, Patricia Meyer Spacks claims that “women dominate their own experience by imagining it, giving it form, writing about it. . . . They define, for themselves and for their readers, woman as she is and as she dreams.”⁴⁰ The life of the imagination, expressed in writing, can be one way of reordering the experiences of one’s life, especially when the reality presents formidable obstacles to self-determination. Mary Howard—in confronting the difficulties involved in man-woman relationships for women who value their independence, their work, as well as a long-term relationship with a man—attempts to re-define relations between men and women by imagining women who play more active roles. And her writing becomes the vehicle for redefining her own life, her own position from that of “other” woman. The women do become the most active participants in Mary’s novel and in Crother’s play. “Women’s evolution” is the key element to Crother’s feminism, and writing by women, indeed art by women, is instrumental in this process of self-development.

With the decline of feminist activity after the first quarter of the century, the "New Woman" character and the related themes were no longer a conspicuous element in plays written by women. Though there were a number of successful women playwrights in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s—for example, Rose Franken, Clare Boothe and most notably, Lillian Hellman and Lorraine Hansberry, feminist themes are not explicitly central concerns in their plays. Indeed, Clare Boothe's *The Women* has often been cited as a woman-hating drama.

Nevertheless, upon close examination of several plays of this period (which Kate Millett has termed "the counterrevolution"), the critic with a feminist lens may ascertain underlying issues of feminist concern that are linked to central themes.⁴¹

For example, in Lillian Hellman's portrayal of Regina, the most wicked of *The Little Foxes*, the playwright demonstrates the ways in which the powerlessness of women may give rise to the most demoniac behavior. Although this play is essentially about the moral turpitude of a rapacious family in the post-Civil War South, the characterization of Regina illustrates one way in which a woman might respond to her economic powerlessness when confronted with a situation in which power is all that matters.

Unlike Glaspell and Crothers, Hellman does not present what have been termed women's issues as the central focus of any of her plays. However, in characteristic style, she does emphasize economics. Her women characters are often portrayed against the socio-economic structures that create and perpetuate their roles. Hellman's characters, though personally and morally responsible for their actions, are almost always portrayed within a social framework, their motives rooted in social forces. Indeed, because Hellman does not stereotype women, but rather portrays them as fully defined individuals shaped by complex political, social and psychological forces, it is not anti-feminist that this playwright has created one of the most destructive women characters in the history of the theatre.

Regina Hubbard Giddens is an extreme, yet plausible response to the position of Southern womanhood at the turn of the century, a position dramatized by Hellman through plot as well as characterization. Regina and her two brothers, Ben and Oscar, are aspiring Southern bourgeoisie whose negotiations with a Chicago businessman about the construction of a cotton mill in the South lay the groundwork for the devious machinations which ensue. Bent on surpassing even the Southern aristocracy (whose land and cotton they had appropriated) in living off the poor, they are the "little foxes" who are always around "to eat the earth."

The brothers are despicable, but Regina is worse. She wants more than her equal share of the profits, and when she fails to persuade her husband Horace, a banker, to provide her with money to invest, she resorts to what is tantamount to murder. Horace, weak from heart failure, is left to die when Regina refuses to give him his life-sustaining pills in the course of their last argument.

The plot, however, has complications which lead to Regina's merciless



FIGURE TWO: Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*: Regina on the periphery of the male domain. Courtesy the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

act, and which spur her on to more devious scheming. With each new underhanded plan, Regina is excluded from the investment. Indeed, though Horace claims social responsibility as his reason for denying his wife her investment, his morality does not prevent him from aiding Ben and Oscar in order to spite Regina. That Regina finally gains a controlling interest is only proof that she has learned to beat the men at their own game.

Regina is a demon, but her behavior is largely a response to the limited options of a woman's life, particularly the obstacles that leave her economically dependent. Though some critics have suggested that Regina is more than equal to the men in her family,⁴² the text gives evidence that she has always been at the mercy of her father, brothers and finally her husband. Although Hellman has portrayed Regina in the home where she appears to reign, the dramatist also has shown her to be consistently dethroned by virtue of being a woman. Precisely because home in this play is the setting for business negotiations, Regina is portrayed in relation to the decision-making process where she, in contrast to her husband and brothers, is without capital. She is doubly limited in that she must rely on her husband in order to have any access to money, and because of this dependence, she is not free to leave. Thus, Regina is as much the victim as cause of her unhappy situation.⁴³

In a dialogue with Horace, Regina displays a contempt rooted in dispossession and disesteem:

Regina: I don't hate you either. I have only contempt for you. I've always had.

Horace: Why did you marry me?

Regina: I was lonely when I was young. Not the way people usually mean. Lonely for all that I wasn't going to get. Everybody in this house was so busy and there was so little place for what I wanted. I wanted the world. Then, and then—Papa died and left the money to Ben and Oscar.⁴⁴

Regina has a history of being excluded, and she is excluded because she is a woman. Having no money of her own in a family whose lives revolve around money keeps her in a state of perpetual grasping.

Another Part of the Forest (1946) traces this history as it depicts the Hubbards twenty years earlier. This second play reveals not only the ways in which the Hubbards accumulated their wealth, but also the ways in which women functioned as commodities in the process.

The three central women of this play—Lavinia (Regina's mother), Birdie (Oscar's future wife) and the young Regina—live more or less according to the dictates of men. Lavinia, consumed with guilt for not speaking out about her husband's lies and wrong-doings, gradually retreats to a world of fantasy. Governed first by her husband, and then by her son, she is restrained by periodic threats of being institutionalized. Birdie, a passive and vulnerable member of the dying aristocracy, must first go to Ben for financial assistance and legal maneuvers, and then must marry Oscar to remain solvent. (The Hubbards acquire her family's property through marriage.) Even Regina, the most formidable woman, must please her father and then Ben whose plan to marry her off to the wealthy Horace Giddens of Mobile has come to pass in *The Little Foxes*. Whatever "wholesale wickedness"⁴⁵ is contrived among the Hubbards, the social and economic powerlessness of women puts them at a disadvantage.

Though Regina is as powerless as her mother and Birdie, she does not acquiesce. Instead, she uses the methods that she has seen the men employ. She plays her father and Ben off against each other, informing Ben about Marcus and Marcus about Ben so that she may gain the confidence of both. However, when the family fortune is transferred from father to son, Regina, despite her father's devotion to her and despite her plotting, is excluded from this transaction. Thus, her coup in *The Little Foxes* may be seen as the culmination of many years of having had to claw her way to the inner circle. She is a woman, albeit a vicious one, in a seething microcosm of a man's world—the dynasty of Marcus Hubbard.

Though at times Hellman's characterizations of women may appear harsh, she affords her audience the opportunity to explore the conditions of a woman's life which may lead to manipulating, possessive and "emasculating" behavior.

In portraying equally formidable though not demonic women, Lorraine Hansberry clearly shows that the perception of women's emasculating behavior is itself rooted in patriarchal values. One of the least recognized aspects of Hansberry's plays are the feminist concerns woven into her exploration of racial and economic oppression, and the struggle against political and human alienation. Writing on the eve of the recent feminist resurgence, Hansberry anticipates in her characterizations of strong and admirable black women the black feminists of the '60s and '70s who have repudiated attacks upon black women, particularly mothers, as castrating and conservative—a restraining force upon rebellion. Hansberry's mothers are at times difficult, but they are also supportive and often revolutionary.

In an article titled "This Complex of Womanhood," Hansberry's most direct feminist statement, she brings attention to the realities underlying stereotypical images of black women:

. . . On the one hand . . . she is saluted as a monument of endurance and fortitude, and in whose bosom all comforts reside . . . and, at the same time, another legend of the Negro woman describes the most . . . deprecating creature ever placed on earth to plague . . . the male. She is seen as an over-practical, unreasonable source of the destruction of all vision and totally lacking a sense of the proper "place" of womanhood.

Either image taken alone is romance; put together they embrace some truths and present the complex of womanhood which . . . now awakens to find itself inextricably . . . bound to the world's most insurgent elements. . . . [i]n the United States, a seamstress refuses one day, simply refuses, to move from her chosen place on a bus while an equally remarkable sister of hers ushers children past bayonets in Little Rock. It is indeed a single march, a unified destiny, and the prize is the future. . . . In behalf of an ailing world which surely needs our defiance, may we, as Negroes or *women* never accept the notion of "our place."⁴⁶

In *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Hansberry's drama about a family anxious to leave their roach-infested apartment on Chicago's Southside, she portrays such a traditional and at the same time forward looking woman in the character of Lena Younger. Lena or Mama, as she is called, comes into conflict with her son Walter about the means for attaining a better life for their family—his sister, wife and child. The play employs a device, a \$10,000 insurance policy that comes to Lena after her husband's death. Lena as well as the other women want to buy a house and move the family out of the ghetto. She also plans to set money aside for her daughter's medical education. But Walter, pained by his life as a chauffeur and by his inability to provide for his family, wants to invest in a liquor store, and ultimately loses a large sum in pursuit of quick money.

Walter eventually attains a sense of self-realization, not by forfeiting his dreams and acquiescing to the women's demands, nor by moving into a white neighborhood, but rather by resisting the attempts of the white

community to exclude him by buying him off. Moreover, Walter's self-awareness is achieved through transferring the target of his resentment from black women to those who have the power to control his fate.

Early in the play, Walter castigates black women (his wife Ruth in particular) for not "building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something. . . ." Because black women exert a profound influence on family decisions, they are seen to be a further assault on his manhood. Walter perceives their strength as a source of his weakness.

Hansberry rejects the idea that black women "emasculate" black men, as well as the notion that emasculation is the cause of black social and economic inferiority. *A Raisin in the Sun* debunks these myths by portraying the real causes of frustration and self-hatred: the race prejudice and economic exploitation which oppress black men and women alike, and which strain their personal relations.

Hansberry's feminism is implicit in her dramatization of these personal relations within the domestic sphere. The condition of women forced to work at subsistence wages and relegated to domestic labor is epitomized by Hansberry in her portrayal of the black domestic who must clean the kitchens of white women as well as her own. At the same time, she is expected to bolster the male ego which has been deflated by racism and poverty. Because it is women who are charged with the responsibility of raising children and maintaining the home even under the most adverse conditions, it is not surprising that Hansberry portrays the women in this play as particularly anxious to acquire a better home. Yet because of their urgency to move the family out of the ghetto, they are vulnerable to Walter's accusations (shared by some critics) of "not thinking big enough" and of frustrating men's ambitions. Hansberry's answer is that the ghetto kills, not only the dreams to which Mama clings, but the bodies of the children Ruth must feed or abort.

It is perhaps easy to misperceive Lena Younger as an example of the courageous but inhibiting black mother image, which at least one critic has observed in contemporary black drama.⁴⁷ However, Rissa, in *The Drinking Gourd* (1960), a jolting variation of the prototypical black Mammy in the Slave South, shatters this image for good. Rissa turns her back on the dying master, Hiram Sweet, who had for years given her a privileged position among the slaves, when she realizes that he is responsible, even though indirectly, for blinding her son—his punishment for learning to read. In the last scene of the play, Rissa is shown giving Hiram's gun to the blind Hannibal whom she helps to escape. Thus, she aids insurgency while toppling the myth of the forgiving Mammy. In Robert Nemiroff's words, Rissa "literally reverses the image."⁴⁸

At first glance, Rissa appears to restrain her son by making him as comfortable as possible in his slave role. She connives to secure him a position in the main house, and reminds him that, as a slave owner, Hiram Sweet is better than most. However, it is important to note the details which Hansberry has carefully worked into her drama to signify that

Hannibal has inherited his spirit of rebellion from his mother, and that she is more an accomplice than an obstacle. When he informs his mother that he has learned to read, she is overcome with a wonder and joy that are rapidly “transformed to stark fear” for his life. Hannibal expects her joy, even when he is disappointed by her fear, for he knows that Rissa possesses the spirit of resistance which eventually leads her to steal Hiram’s gun. Indeed, he has heard the songs of insurgency late at night in his mother’s cabin, a center of domestic life for the slave community. It is not a mere coincidence that Rissa has “birthed” two sons determined to follow the Drinking Gourd (an old slave metaphor for the Big Dipper which points to the North Star, the symbol and beacon of freedom for runaway slaves), for in subtle ways she had woven this spirit into the fabric of their daily lives.

Hansberry’s mothers, Lena and Rissa, repudiate the negative images of black women as passive and/or destructive. Indeed, the playwright has created women who contribute not only to the survival of their families and communities, but also to the active resistance often necessary to that survival.

When reading literature by women it is often illuminating to consider the meaning of a work in terms of what it can teach us about women’s lives. And when we read these works as a group, this meaning takes on new proportions. As Showalter has written, many critics “are beginning to agree that when we look at women writers collectively, we see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation.”⁴⁹ Although each of the four playwrights considered in this paper brings different concerns to her plays, it is possible to discuss recurrent issues and characterizations of women that comprise feminist statements.

For example, one overarching theme involves the murder of a male antagonist as a response to female victimization. It is significant, if only for understanding the playwright’s imagination, that in plays by three of the four dramatists, women are implicated in murder. Minnie Wright in Glaspell’s *Trifles*, Regina Giddens in Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* and Rissa of Hansberry’s *The Drinking Gourd* resort to murder when, in some way, they feel the current of their lives shut off by men who control their fates.

Claire Archer in Glaspell’s *The Verge* and, in a more benign manner, Lavinia Hubbard in Hellman’s *Another Part of the Forest* escape their confinement through fantasies which, to a limited extent, act as substitutes for a reality that they experience as unbearable.

The fantasy life of women, seen as a substitute for a harsh reality, also operates in Glaspell’s *Bernice* and Crothers’ *When Ladies Meet*. Bernice creates an illusion for her husband which ultimately frees her from submitting to his psychological tyranny; Mary Howard creates a novel in which she attempts to transform relations between men and women and between women themselves.

Indeed, the women in several of the plays examined balk at subordina-

tion and articulate their resistance to assigned roles. Frank Ware of Crothers' *A Man's World* acts on principle as well as impulse when she separates from a man who in defense of the double standard refuses to treat her as an equal; Rissa of Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd* negates the authority of the master by openly questioning his right to rule over some people's lives and not others'. She will not play the forgiving Mammy.

Although these themes of subordination are recurrent, they take their particular form in terms of the playwright's concern with other social or cultural issues. Women, after all, are an integral part of society, and the components of a woman's life interact with, rather than stand apart from, whatever issues and values are salient. Richard Burton, an early twentieth-century American critic, locates the themes that reflect women's concerns at the center of the broader preoccupation of the drama with the economic, political and social freedom of the individual. Writing in 1913, Burton foreshadows the developments of the early women's movement as well as the feminist resurgence of the '60s when he notes:

Within our generation she [woman] has been and is undergoing a triple revolution in these [the economic, political, and social] particular aspects of life . . . and although at present her political enfranchisement would seem the burning question, when it is settled . . . the political phases of her new life will be seen as one facet of that general evolution of the sex into social freedom in the broadest sense.⁵⁰

All of the plays discussed above reflect this pursuit of social freedom, while illuminating the paths that might signify women's search for equality, liberation, transcendence. Indeed, the playwrights participate in women's evolution by portraying the ways in which they see women respond to their condition: to rebel against exclusion; to forge an independent existence; to enter the public sphere, and to voice previously unspoken conflicts. The theatre, a public event in itself, proves to be an appropriate genre for the woman playwright to give testament to the lives of women with the audience as her witness.

New York University

notes

1. Joanne Temple, "Women's Theatre Finds a Stage of Its Own," *The Village Voice*, October 27, 1975; 84.

2. Honor Moore, ed., *The New Women's Theatre* (New York, 1977), "Introduction," xiii, xiv, xv.

3. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, New York, 1977), 64.

4. Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch, eds., *Plays By and About Women* (New York, 1974), "Introduction," vii. In her historical introduction to *The New Women's Theatre*, Honor Moore refers to Vittoria Piisimi and Isabella Andreini of the commedia dell'arte in Italy during the late 16th century, as well as to the English playwrights Aphra Behn, Elizabeth Inchbald, Hannah More and Joanna Bailie. Among the early American women playwrights were Mercy Otis Warren, Anna Cora Mowatt, Mrs. Batement, Julia Ward Howe and Martha Morton.

5. Deborah S. Kolb, "The Rise and Fall of the New Woman in American Drama," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 27 (May, 1975), 149.

6. Florence Kiper, "Some American Plays From the Feminist Viewpoint," *Forum*, 51 (June, 1914), 930-931.

7. Ruth Wolff, as quoted by Honor Moore, 341.

8. For example, Corinne Jacker, *Bits and Pieces* (1974); Tina Howe, *The Nest* (1970); *Birth and After Birth* (1973); Myrna Lamb, *Mod Donna* (1970); *Apple Pie* (1975); Eve Merriam with Paula Wagner and Jack Hoffsis, *Out of Our Father's House* (1975). See also, Charlotte Rea, "Women for Women," *The Drama Review*, 18 (December, 1974), 78.
9. Sydney Kaplan, "'Featureless Freedom' or Ironic Submission: Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair," *College English*, 32 (May, 1971), 914.
10. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1977), 12.
11. Martha Morton, cited by Virginia Frame, "Women Who Have Written Successful Plays," *The Theatre Magazine*, 6 (October, 1906), 266.
12. John Gassner, ed., *Best Plays of the Early American Theatre*, "Preface: 1714-1916," ix.
13. Eugene Solow, "America's Great Woman Dramatist: Susan Glaspell," *The World*, February 9, 1930, *Susan Glaspell*, Clipping File, New York Public Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.
14. Arthur Waterman, "Susan Glaspell and the Provincetown," *Modern Drama*, 7 (September, 1964), 184.
15. Kolb, 150; Burns Mantle, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York, 1938), 105.
16. Merrell Williams, Jr., "The Changing Role of the Woman as Presented in Selected Plays by Rachel Crothers: 1899-1937," unpublished dissertation for the Ph.D., University of Denver, 1971.
17. Williams, 169, 2; Kolb, 150.
18. Phyllis Blanchard and Carolyn Manasses, *New Girls for Old* (New York, 1937), 237-238, cited by William L. O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago, 1969), 307.
19. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), 93.
20. Allan Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre*, Revised Edition (New York, 1970), 101, 106.
21. George Freedley and John A. Reeves, *A History of the Theatre* (New York, 1941), 598.
22. Kolb, 149.
23. Arthur Hobson Quinn, "The Significance of Recent American Drama," in Arthur Hobson Quinn, ed., *Contemporary American Plays* (New York, 1923), xxi, xxii.
24. June Sochen, *The New Woman: Feminism in Greenwich Village 1910-1920* (New York, 1972), 42, 43.
25. Isaac Goldberg, *The Drama of Transition* (Cincinnati, 1922), 474.
26. Ludwig Lewisohn, *Drama and the Stage* (Freeport, New York, 1922, reprinted 1969), 105.
27. Arthur Waterman, *Susan Glaspell* (New York, 1966), 79-80.
28. See Phyllis Chesler's discussion of the "madness" of Zelda Fitzgerald, Ellen West and Sylvia Plath, three women at odds with the female role, in *Women and Madness* (New York, 1972), 15. Also note Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of the female artist's attempt at escape from the "prison of the male text" by exploding the mythic perceptions of woman as either angel or monster. As "monster-women" they are "tempted to destroy themselves by doing fiery and suicidal tarantellas out of the looking glass." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, 1979), 3-44.
29. Susan Glaspell, *The Verge* (Boston, 1922), II, 58.
30. Waterman, *Susan Glaspell*, 81.
31. Immanence and transcendence are terms that Simone de Beauvoir has used to analyze woman's condition and the relationship between the sexes. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley, ed. and translator (New York, 1953).
32. Lois C. Gottlieb, "Obstacles to Feminism in the Early Plays of Rachel Crothers," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies* 1 (June, 1975), 72-73.
33. Rachel Crothers, *A Man's World*, 1910, Typescript, New York Public Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, I, 29.
34. William L. O'Neill, 31-32.
35. *Ibid.*, 33-34.
36. Rachel Crothers, *He and She*, in Arthur Hobson Quinn, ed., *Representative American Plays from 1767 to the Present Day*, Seventh Edition (New York, 1953), III, 928.
37. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *The History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day*, II (New York, 1927), 55.
38. Rachel Crothers, *When Ladies Meet* (New York, 1932), II:i, 58.
39. *Ibid.*, III, 129-130.
40. Spacks, 413-414.
41. See Annis Pratt's discussion of fiction "which includes a brilliant exploration of woman's existential situation within a carefully orchestrated treatment of other and broader human conflicts and relationships . . ."; Annis Pratt, "The New Feminist Criticism," *College English*, 32 (May, 1971), 875.
42. Barrett Clark refers to Regina as one of the conspirators counting on Horace to furnish the money in order that they may keep control of the stocks. Barrett Clark, "Lillian Hellman," *College English*, 6 (December, 1944), 130; Frank O'Hara describes Regina as "handsome, self-assured, shrewd, able to hold her own with her brothers," in Frank O'Hara, *Today in American Drama* (Chicago, 1939), 85.

43. See Dolores Barracano Schmidt's discussion of the bitch as literary archetype in "The Great American Bitch," *College English*, 32 (May, 1971), 904.
44. Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes*, in Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes and Another Part of the Forest* (New York, 1974), III, 123-124.
45. John Mason Brown, "And Cauldron Bubble," *Saturday Review* (December 14, 1946), 22.
46. Lorraine Hansberry, "This Complex of Womanhood," *Ebony* (August, 1960), 15, 40.
47. Vilma R. Potter, "New Politics, New Mothers," *CLA Journal*, 16 (December, 1972), 248-249.
48. Robert Nemiroff, "The Drinking Gourd: A Critical Introduction," in Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry* (New York, 1972), 209-210.
49. Showalter, 11.
50. Richard Burton, *The New American Drama* (New York, 1913), 146.