BRITISH WOMEN DRAMATISTS AND THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT, 1914-1939

by

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Abstract

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Modern British drama has been widely acknowledged for its attention to feminism, yet the era is frequently represented by male playwrights alone. This dissertation explores feminism in British drama written by women between 1914 and 1939. It focuses on the inter-war years since women's drama of this period merits more serious critical consideration than it has thus far received. Each chapter considers two plays within the context of inter-war feminist debates concerning woman's potential for artistic genius, her place in history, her role in marriage, and her position with respect to war. While the plays were selected for their diverse feminist perspectives, their feminism is not always overt, but often tentative and sometimes even critical. The first chapter discusses women's relationship to artistic genius in Clemence Dane's Will Shakespeare (1921) and Gordon Daviot's The Laughing Woman (1934). Both playwrights challenge the prevalent view that women were inherently less capable of genius than men by showing how historical conditions have favored male genius. The plays treated in the second chapter, Gordon Daviot's Queen of Scots (1934) and Joan Temple's Charles and Mary (1930), use their feminist perspectives to resist conventional historical accounts of their female subjects. The third chapter examines the psychological and economic limitations of women's position in marriage in Githa Sowerby's Sheila (1917) and
Elizabeth Baker’s *Penelope Forgives* (1930). Two war dramas, Cicely Hamilton’s *The Old Adam* (1924) and Winifred Holtby’s *Take Back Your Freedom* (1935), form the basis of the fourth chapter, which analyzes the connections between militarism and masculinity in these plays. In all of these plays, the realist form offers women playwrights intriguing possibilities for bringing women’s private experiences to a public forum. Through their women characters in particular, these writers are able to integrate political feminism with women’s personal experience more convincingly than many male dramatists of their time. The subtle and intricate ways in which inter-war women playwrights address the feminist issues of their day warrant their inclusion in further critical studies of modern British drama.
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Introduction

——JOAN: I am a soldier: I do not want to be thought of as a woman. I will not dress as a woman. I do not care for the things women care for. They dream of lovers, and of money. I dream of leading a charge, and of placing the big guns. (83)

Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*, 1923

——EVA: Why should I be sacrificed all the time? Why should I be at everybody’s beck and call? Why should I have to do everything? I’m sick of being put upon. I’m sick of you, I’m sick of Sydney, I’m sick of Lois. I’m sick of you all.

*(During this speech SYDNEY has risen. EVA’s agitation has become quite uncontrolled. The table by her is covered with ornaments, and now with a violent gesture she throws it over so that everything is scattered on the floor... Shrieking she throws herself down and hysterically beats upon the floor with her fists)* (52)

Somerset Maugham, *For Services Rendered*, 1932

Throughout the twentieth century, feminism has held a certain fascination for British dramatists. Many of the best-known playwrights of early-twentieth-century Britain take on feminist issues in their plays, including Granville-Barker, Galsworthy, Maugham, and especially Shaw. Ibsen’s profound impact on the English stage was not just as a realist, but as a feminist. From the first unskilful translation of *A Doll’s House* by Henrietta Frances Lord, England greeted Ibsen as a feminist playwright. Lord’s introduction emphasizes Ibsen’s progressive views on women, though her speculations about Nora’s return to Helmer the following Christmas and her reading of the play through the doctrine of Karma considerably weaken her credibility. Lord was not alone, however, in proclaiming Ibsen’s feminism. Shaw’s *Quintessence of Ibsenism* attributed feminist ideas to Ibsen, and suffragists praised him for what they saw as overt support for their cause. Beatrice Hale, for instance, declares: “to the cause of women [Ibsen] gave
one of its greatest inspirations. He has preached many lessons to women on many themes, but in ‘A Doll’s House’ he chanced to sum up what was perhaps in his day the very essence of Feminism” (98). Such interpretations were so prevalent that they provoked William Archer to complain about “the facile hero-worship of those who saw in A Doll’s House a sort of Woman’s-Rights manifesto, and hailed Ibsen as the preacher of a social, one might almost say a social-democratic, gospel” (Ibsen 56). Though Ibsen may not have been the feminist that the English took him to be, his reception forged a strong link between modern drama and feminist consciousness in England, which carried on in the plays of Shaw and the New Dramatists. The influence of feminism on the drama was so strong that the First Annual Report of the Pioneer Players, a feminist theatre group founded by Edy Craig in 1911, could state: “It is obviously quite impossible nowadays [1911-12] to produce thoughtful plays written by thoughtful people which do not bear some traces of the influence of the feminist movement.”

After the First World War, certain lighter forms of feminism had become so common in the drama that they were almost cliché. Inter-war theatre critic Ernest Short comments that the increasing numbers of women in the post-World War I audiences created a “psychological climate in which feminine interests were dominant, instead of secondary” (17). He claims that two-thirds of any typical audience were female, and a good proportion of these were young women, which had an effect on the type of drama produced: “Among the repercussions due to the flapper element . . . were the plays which showed that young women were in no mood to limit their choice of men friends to those whom parents judged desirable as home-makers” (197). Although it is tempting to dismiss Short’s comments as biased, his observations about drama are not entirely wrong. Many lighter comedies of the 1920s and 1930s do seem to pander to the fashionable

1The Pioneer Players were responding to complaints that they were interested only in suffrage propaganda. Their report is cited by Dymkowski, 221-22.
spirit of rebellion that infected many young women after the War. The feminism in such plays is usually superficial and often flippant, as in J. B. Priestley's *The Roundabout* (1933):

**LORD KETTLEWELL:** Seeing that you have arrived here and insist upon being my daughter, may I ask why you're wandering about the country-side in that ridiculous get-up?

**PAMELA:** It's not ridiculous. It's very sensible. Only of course it's not meant to have any feminine charm.

**SAUNDERS:** I'm glad you've reassured me on that point. (*PAMELA looks at SAUNDERS.*) I was beginning to wonder if I'd lost touch. (13)

Noel Coward's parodies of chic, brazen feminism in exchanges such as *Amanda* and Eliot's in *Private Lives* (1930) likewise reflect the extent to which feminism had become the vogue:

**AMANDA:** ... I expect your affairs well outnumbered mine anyhow.

**ELYOT:** That is a little different. I'm a man.

**AMANDA:** Excuse me a moment while I get a caraway biscuit and change my crinoline.

**ELYOT:** It doesn't suit women to be promiscuous.

**AMANDA:** It doesn't suit men for women to be promiscuous.

**ELYOT** (*with sarcasm*): Very modern dear; really your advanced views quite startle me. (44-45)

The targets of Coward's cynical satire are found in drama as well as society. Inter-war playwrights with a serious feminist message would have had to combat the growing perception, in the theatre and out, that feminism was becoming banal or cliché. Nevertheless, some major playwrights did continue to treat feminism seriously, as Shaw does in *Saint Joan* (1923).
Ironically, the many rapid and significant transformations in the lives of British women during the first half of the twentieth century have come down to us in the dramatic medium almost exclusively from men’s points of view. This era in drama so often acknowledged for its attention to feminism is frequently represented in criticism and anthologies by male playwrights alone. My dissertation seeks to redress that imbalance. Several women playwrights made valuable contributions to modern British drama and should be considered alongside their male contemporaries. In the last few years, feminist critics such as Sheila Stowell and Claire Hirshfield have turned their attention to women playwrights of the suffrage era preceding World War I. This thesis continues their work by focusing on the long-neglected women dramatists of the inter-war period. In spite of the theatrical trend of representing feminism as merely fashionable, several of these women playwrights persisted in bringing feminist issues to the stage in creative and interesting ways. Their feminism is not always overt; it is often tentative and sometimes even critical. But all of the playwrights I have selected show an awareness of contemporary feminist issues, and approach their subjects from a feminist perspective. Their drama in general, and their use of feminism in particular, form an important counterpart to the men’s plays that have come to represent this undervalued period in English drama.

When I began this dissertation, nothing substantial had been written about inter-war drama by women. In 1996, however, Maggie B. Gale published West End Women, a very useful history of women playwrights on the London stage from 1918 to 1962. Had it been available, this text would have greatly facilitated much of my preliminary work in discovering plays and playwrights. In many respects, our work is complementary. Gale’s approach is similar to mine in that she also considers women playwrights in light of feminist issues of their time. For both of us, this decision was driven by the material, since numerous women playwrights, if not overtly feminist, foreground female
experience and explore the transforming perception of women in their time. We focus on
different feminist issues; while we both look at women's dramatizations of history, Gale
discusses women as workers, mothers, and spinsters, whereas I consider women in
relation to marriage, war, and art. The principal difference between us is in scope. Gale
aims at a comprehensive overview of a period in women's theatrical history, whereas I
analyse a select number of texts and feminist debates in more depth.

The consistent neglect of inter-war women dramatists before Gale's book
appeared is somewhat surprising. Niloufer Harben's Twentieth-Century English History
Plays seems to be the only critical consideration of modern British drama to include a
work by an inter-war woman playwright, Gordon Daviot's Richard of Bordeaux (1932).
Yet most of these plays are available in print; only two of the plays covered in this thesis
were never published, Githa Sowerby's Sheila (1917) and Elizabeth Baker's Penelope
Forgives (1930). Several early-twentieth-century anthologies of British drama include a
representative proportion, and sometimes even greater, of plays by women. More
recently, Fidelis Morgan's anthology of plays by women on the London Stage between
1900 and 1950 has helped to make some of these playwrights even more readily
accessible. Even inter-war critics sometimes paid attention to women playwrights, as
Ernest Short does in his tribute to Clemence Dane, for instance: “the achievement of
Miss Dane is comparable with that of any living English playwright except Shaw, with
the added interest, as she has said, that the men in her plays are men as women see them
...” (199). Women's plays receive praise in several actors' and directors' biographies.
Yet inter-war women playwrights remain virtually unknown. In his recent study of
modern British drama from 1890 to 1990, Christopher Innes accurately states that “[apart]
from some minor exceptions ... female playwrights have been conspicuous by their
absence from British theatre up until the late 1950s” (448). The absence he notes,
however, should be applied to dramatic criticism, not to British theatre itself. This
perception that practically no women dramatists existed in Britain before 1950 allows Innes to propose that Granville-Barker's *The Madras House* (1910) may be the most effective feminist drama before Caryl Churchill (64). One of the few critics to take women playwrights into account is Allardyce Nicoll in his marvellously comprehensive treatment of British drama from 1900 to 1930, but he often includes them in such dismissive or even disparaging terms that it would almost be preferable that he omit them. Nevertheless, his handlist of plays has proved helpful in uncovering women's drama from this period.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this project was discovering many talented women playwrights who are now virtually unknown, though many of them were quite popular in their day. Of the many plays that were interesting enough to warrant critical consideration, those covered in this thesis were chosen for their diverse representation of women's positions with respect to four major subjects that provoked much debate, feminist and otherwise, during the inter-war period: genius, history, marriage, and war. Cicely Hamilton's prose and drama demonstrate her strength and independence of thought; her war play, *The Old Adam* (1924), draws on her political experience in the suffrage movement and in the war. Winifred Holtby, a prolific journalist and one of the strongest feminist voices of the inter-war era, wrote just one play before her untimely death, *Take Back Your Freedom* (1935), an intriguing psychological study of the rise of Fascism in the years preceding the Second World War. Clemence Dane was one of the most successful West End playwrights of the inter-war period. Her vitality and her desire to provoke are evident in her numerous plays, including *Will Shakespeare* (1921), in which she dramatizes Shakespeare's tumultuous relations with his wife, his mistress, and his Queen. Joan Temple starred in her own play, *Charles and Mary* (1930), providing herself with a wonderful role in her distinctive and sympathetic characterization of Mary Lamb and her struggles with madness. Githa Sowerby's sensitivity and subtlety are
evident in *Sheila* (1917), a delicate treatment of romantic illusions about marriage. Elizabeth Baker’s lower-class background gives her insight into the intersection between economics and gender which she brings to many of her plays, including *Penelope Forgive* (1930), in which she draws attention to women’s difficult economic and social position in divorce. Finally, two of Gordon Daviot’s plays, *The Laughing Woman* (1934) and *Queen of Scots* (1934), were selected to demonstrate her exceptional play-writing ability in their subtle irony and their suggestive, almost introspective power.

Deciding which plays to include was a difficult task, since women wrote so many interesting plays in this period. This study is by no means exhaustive. One notable omission is Dodie Smith, a dramatist now best known as the author of the children’s book *The Hundred and One Dalmations* (1956). She wrote many quirky and entertaining plays such as *Touch Wood* (1934), a popular reworking of Ibsen’s *The Master Builder*, set in a Scottish resort. Other noteworthy playwrights of the period include Naomi Royde-Smith, George Paston (a pseudonym for Emily Morse Symonds), Gladys Stern, Gwen John, and Evelyn Glover. Fryniwyd Tennyson Jesse, the grandniece of the famous poet, wrote several interesting plays including *Anyhouse* (1925), which deals with the relationship between women’s social class and their ability to be independent. Beatrice Mayor’s bizarre, poetic play, *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), shows the influence of Chekhov, and in some ways anticipates the absurdist drama of Pinter and Beckett. Gertrude Jennings’s farces and light comedies are also quite adept. The wealth of promising material suggests that a large portion of this field remains to be explored.

My decision to look at women’s plays in terms of inter-war feminism arises from a belief that women writers have the potential to offer particularly valuable and insightful perspectives on feminist issues of their time. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf introduces the idea that women have an insight into women’s lives that men do not share:

> It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane
Austen’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman’s life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose . . . a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men. (79)

Woolf finds this special knowledge of women not only in the works of such great writers as Jane Austen and George Eliot, but also in those of Mary Carmichael, a minor novelist of Woolf’s day. More recently, Elaine Showalter, whose title A Literature of Their Own reveals her debt to Woolf, has suggested that minor women writers help to elucidate “the daily lives, the physical experiences, the personal strategies and conflicts of ordinary women” (9). The playwrights covered in this thesis are particularly interesting for their ability to make connections between these ordinary, personal experiences and larger feminist issues, and they often do so more successfully than the male playwrights of their day. Though men and women are both personally affected by feminism, women’s relationship to feminism is more immediate, since feminism directly concerns itself with ameliorating their position. The strength of these women dramatists is their ability to show the realities behind the feminist positions — to bring women’s experiences to the public forum of the stage, and to show how these experiences intersect with feminist problems or ideals. The plays express a subtle and complex negotiation between particular women’s experiences and political feminism between the wars.

In making such claims based on the value of women’s experience, however, one must take into account the post-structuralist mistrust of arguments from experience. Historian Joan Wallach Scott defines the post-structuralist position as follows:

Experience is not seen as the objective circumstances that condition identity; identity is not an objectively determined sense of self defined by needs and interests; politics is not the collective coming to consciousness of similarly
situated individual subjects. Rather politics is the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity and experience. Identities and experiences are variable phenomena in this view, discursively organized in particular contexts or configurations. (5)

I do not suggest that these women share a unified experience simply because they are women, but I do suggest that their experience is similarly constituted because of their specific political context. The political ideas, feminist and otherwise, that I delineate at the beginning of each chapter form part of the knowledge that constitutes these playwrights' experience. It is precisely because of this political context that these women's experience differs from men's. The feminist debates that inform each chapter illustrate the range of conceptual possibilities within which these playwrights locate their experience and bring it to bear on the issues their plays address. Their experience as women within this political context forms a bridge between women's private lives and the feminist stances articulated in the political arena. This intersection between the personal and the political is an important element in their drama. Since it is generally through the women characters that the personal and the political come together in women's plays, my focus has been primarily on their roles. I shall return to this issue of how the personal intersects with the political in my conclusion.

Critics in the field of gender studies have raised concerns that projects dealing with women alone, as this one does, may perpetuate women's marginal status and reinforce overly simple conceptions of differences between the sexes. Joan Wallach Scott has made a compelling case for the study of gender as "the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences" (2) in order to avoid arguments about women's character or experience as separate and distinct (26-27). By focusing on women playwrights alone, I do not want to imply that these women have "inherent characteristics and objective identities consistently and predictably different from men's" (J. Scott 4).
As the theoretical discussions beginning each chapter indicate, this is a time when women's inherent characteristics and their role in society provoked much debate, both within and in reaction to the feminist movement. The plays themselves reflect these debates, allowing for no facile conclusions about women's inherent differences from men. The playwrights' conceptions of feminism and its connection to particular women and men differ considerably. Studying women's plays as a group, far from affirming simple conceptions of sexual differences, illustrates the variety of interpretations and representations of these differences. My aim in studying these women alone is to provide a necessary complement to the numerous projects that deal exclusively with male playwrights. Because these women dramatists have been excluded from earlier studies, I feel it is important to focus on their work alone before showing their relationship to male playwrights of the period.

Before turning my attention to the plays themselves, however, I will briefly situate them within their theatrical and political context. Generally, British inter-war drama does not fare well with its critics; the era is often condemned as one of the worst in English dramatic history. Critics who lived through it are especially damning. Robert Graves, for instance, comments that, "[e]xcept for small experimental groups who drew special audiences -- intellectual, Left, or Trade Union -- to small halls and cheap prices, and the keen provincial repertory companies . . . the British Theatre was as good as dead" (Long 425). Even more emphatically, Eric Bentley pronounces the theatre dead: "The past few years [preceding 1945] have seen the almost total extinction of artistic drama in the commodity theater. . . . One might be tempted to say that the theater at present fulfills only one precondition of renascence: it is dead" (xviii). Camillo Pellizzi's verdict on inter-war drama is no kinder, as his unfavourable contrast with pre-war drama indicates: "The war ended the epoch in which the public assembled in the theatre, drawn by certain authors, to relive their own social drama, to face it, and to be moved, enlightened and
even guided in a practical and everyday sense. To-day one would say that this society only *endures* its drama" (275). The image of death re-emerges in Norman Marshall’s attack on inter-war theatrical managers for “reducing the English theatre to a dead level of mediocrity” (13). Like Graves, however, Marshall limits his criticism to the West End, praising the independent theatres for their wonderful richness and variety. Gareth Lloyd Evans is one of the few to say anything positive about the era, with his reminder that, despite the critics, “countless theatregoers over the age of fifty would regard [the plays of the 1920s and 1930s] as the most poignantly affecting theatrical experiences of their lives: for many they are the be-all and the end-all of what they mean by the enchantment of theatre — and against what they provide all other theatrical experience is judged” (26).

Most critics attribute the problems with inter-war theatre to the steadily increasing gap between serious and commercial drama. The division between theatres had already begun before the war, with Grein’s and Archer’s independent theatres providing separate venues for intellectual and minority drama (Clarke 14-15). During the First World War, musicals, revues and farces became immensely popular and profitable, leaving little room for serious drama. After the war, the escapist mood lingered. Robert Graves comments that inter-war plays seldom reflected serious contemporary thought, but generally were written purely as upper-middle-class entertainment. Musical extravaganzas flourished, while more challenging plays were unlikely to run for more than a couple of weeks (Graves, Long 425). The pre-war actor-manager system was gradually replaced with a more commercial system that made profit, not art, the objective of West End managers. Several critics describe the effects of commercialization on inter-war drama in disparaging terms, as Pick does:

On stage, the new vulgarity combined with the old refinement to produce a characteristic kind of between-the-wars drama. Shows had a brittle new sophistication, which was inward-looking, and which fed upon its own
personalities and its own West End theatrical lore. Productions were no longer constrained by the manners and values of an identifiable London middle class, but created instead a new hybrid of innocence and world-weariness. . . . (Pick 117-18)

In response to this increased commercialization, the number of small theatres seeking special audiences for new forms of theatre grew. These theatres became alternatives to the glamorous West End, for actors as well as audiences (Pick 130). In the 1930s, the division became increasingly political with the development of numerous Left-leaning theatres. By the end of the decade around 300 “Left” theatre groups were performing for labour movement audiences throughout Britain (J. Clark 219-20). One of the most important of these alternative theatres was Rupert Doone’s Group Theatre in London, which produced plays by Auden, Isherwood, T. S. Eliot and Stephen Spender (Salgādo 186).

Another threat to the theatre was the cinema, which drew a great deal of attention, as well as talent, away from the stage in the twenties and thirties. Many stage stars left for Hollywood, hoping to follow in the footsteps of Rudolf Valentino and Charlie Chaplin, and many theatres had to be torn down or converted to cinemas. Competition with cinema may have increased the insularity of the West End, since the cinema particularly lured away the working classes because of its lower prices (Salgādo 191). In addition, theatre managers tended to emphasize the distinctive social cachet of the theatre in their attempts to raise the theatre above the cinema’s common popularity (Pick 124).

Women playwrights did not suffer as much as one might expect in this difficult dramatic climate. Of the three gifted playwrights that Norman Marshall credits the West End for discovering, two are women, Dodie Smith and Clemence Dane (14). The West End’s commercialism may even have worked in favour of women playwrights, since they were less of a risk. Gale calculates that approximately one-sixth of all plays written in the first half of this century were by women or male-female teams, and that these plays, on
average, ran longer than men’s (6, 11). Several plays by women were tremendously successful in the inter-war period, reaching over 400 performances, including Clemence Dane’s *Bill of Divorcement* (1921); Margaret Kennedy’s *The Constant Nymph* (1926), adapted from her best-selling novel; Gordon Daviot’s *Richard of Bordeaux* (1932); and Dodie Smith’s *Call It a Day* (1935). Most of the plays covered in this thesis had respectable though not impressive runs, except for Githa Sowerby’s *Sheila*, produced in the difficult circumstances of wartime, and Winifred Holtby’s *Take Back Your Freedom*, never staged because of the author’s death. The state of the inter-war theatre, however, does caution against making any direct link between a play’s popularity and its quality.

Like the theatre, organized feminism suffered a decline in the inter-war years. The period saw several legislative gains for women, but the women’s movement did not recover the prominence and excitement of the pre-war suffrage years until well after World War II. Feminist gains during the inter-war period were often ambivalent. When Parliament finally granted women the vote in 1918, for instance, only women over thirty qualified. Robert Graves wryly suggests that the concession was not magnanimous:

> It was expected that these elder women, uninfected with the revolutionary mood that possessed the younger ones -- who had done the hardest and most thankless war-work -- would be an asset to “the party of law and order” with which the Coalition now identified themselves. It was also calculated that few women in the early thirties would care to register as voters, for fear of revealing their age: in those days excessive delicacy was still observed in the matter of mentioning a woman’s age. (Long 20-21)

It was not until 1928 that women were finally enfranchised on exactly the same terms as men, a decision that was met with a violent outcry against “the flapper vote” in *The Daily Mail* (Graves, Long 246). After the war, one of the most prominent feminist issues became women’s right to work; as Graves puts it, the cry of “Votes for Women!” gave
way to “Equal Pay for Equal Work!” (Long 46). In 1919, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act stated that women were no longer disqualified from the professions. As many feminists and historians have noted, however, this Act did nothing to ensure that the professions actually employed women. Married women were still discouraged from working, and several professions, including teaching and the civil service, routinely dismissed women upon marriage. In 1922, Viscountess Rhondda at first succeeded in her bid to speak and vote in the House of Lords, but her application was subsequently denied by the Lord Chancellor. Women did make some gains in marriage legislation: in 1923, with the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act, they obtained the right to divorce on the same grounds as men, and in 1925, the Guardianship of Infants Act gave them equal claim to their children. Nevertheless, by the 1930s, political feminism was truly in decline. Even Eleanor Rathbone, one of the most optimistic feminists of the era, had to acknowledge that the progress of feminism slowed in the thirties. She attributes its deceleration to the movement’s successes having already removed the most widely acknowledged and easily legislated grievances, whereas issues such as equal pay and opportunity were more difficult to legislate. Rathbone also suggests that the pervasive unemployment problems made it difficult for men to be magnanimous (Family 54-55).

Divisions within the feminist movement, along with resistance to it, may have contributed to its decline. When women gained the vote in 1918, the women’s movement lost its most unifying cause. Already feminists were divided between those who believed in using militant tactics and those who did not, and then between those who supported the war and those who did not. After 1918, the women’s movement took various and sometimes conflicting directions. “New” feminists such as Eleanor Rathbone focused on women’s separate rights and needs, whereas “old” feminists such as Ray Strachey and Winifred Holtby asserted their equality with men. Historian Susan Kingsley Kent attributes the inter-war decline in feminism to the prominence of the “new” feminists who
gradually reasserted sexual difference and separate, complementary spheres for men and women. She argues that the “new” feminists’ understandings of masculinity and femininity had become so transformed that they were “virtually indistinguishable from those of antifeminists” (4). Kent thereby suggests that feminism itself was partly responsible for its own regression in the inter-war years. Harold L. Smith concurs that the divisions between feminists on basic principles, along with the post-war backlash against changes in women’s roles, put feminists very much on the defensive. It is important, however, not to overemphasize the divisions between inter-war feminists. “New” and “old” feminists were very much in dialogue with one another in a genuine attempt to determine what was best for women, and many inter-war feminists do not fall clearly into one camp or the other. Whatever the reasons, the 1930s saw an abundance of cultural pressures on women to return to domesticity and femininity. Several women’s magazines that emerged in that decade reflect that trend: Woman’s Own, for instance, actively encouraged women to stay home after marriage (Pugh 212-14). Deirdre Beddoe, describing the inter-war era as generally reactionary and anti-progressive, identifies its strongest feature as the notion that women’s place is in the home.

While most historians characterize the inter-war years as a set-back for feminism, Alison Light reads them more encouragingly, suggesting that these years marked the entry into modernity for many women, a time when pre-war feminist protests were beginning to make changes in women’s everyday life. She points out the difficulty in reconciling such a dismal view of inter-war feminism with the new freedoms accorded women in sport, entertainment, and fashion. Light argues convincingly that, though women’s domesticity and femininity were emphasized in the inter-war years, these qualities also became the centre of English national life. As Light suggests, women’s everyday lives were considerably freer than they had been before the war. They could go to restaurants without male escorts, dance to jazz, and smoke in public. Chaperones had become old-
fashioned. Hemlines rose; necklines fell; corsets were discarded; hair was cut short. Although femininity became fashionable again in the 1930s, fashions never returned to their pre-war restrictiveness. Graves observes that the image of the modern girl shifted from the popular heroine of the munitions factories to the chummy, sporting young flapper (Long 41). The war had changed many women's attitudes about chastity and virtue, so that women were freer to be promiscuous, at least in theory. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Dr. Marie Stopes, who opened a birth-control clinic in 1921, sex information and birth control had become more accessible and acceptable. Women's sexual desire and their need for sexual fulfilment began to be more widely acknowledged. The emphasis on motherhood that accompanied the inter-war birth-control and sexual-rights movement leads Kent to argue that these causes hurt feminism more than they helped it by adding to the ammunition against women who did not choose to marry or have children. Nevertheless, Stopes's best-selling sex-advice books and her birth-control clinics reached millions of British women, encouraging them to find pleasure in sex and showing them how to prevent unwanted pregnancy, information they otherwise might never have received.

The picture of women that emerges in these plays contrasts significantly with the sense of privacy, tradition, and "conservative modernity" that Light finds in women's writing between the wars. Light's selection of mainstream, middle-class authors such as Jan Struthers and Agatha Christie naturally leads her to a different perspective on the period than my deliberate focus on less conventional, feminist writers who seek to question or challenge accepted norms. These plays do reflect to some extent the decline in organized feminism between the wars. Overt or propagandistic feminism is rare; their feminism tends to be submerged, particularly in the later plays. Their tone differs markedly from suffrage-era propaganda plays such as Elizabeth Robins's Votes for Women! (1907) and Cicely Hamilton's When the Vote Was Won (1909), which were far
more direct in their feminist stances. Most inter-war plays by women seem to focus on the problems women still faced despite their legal gains. Many of them emphasize the internalized, psychological barriers felt by women instead of external obstacles, legal or political. This is not to say that the decline in feminism resulted in a deterioration in feminist drama. Rather, the era’s resistance to feminism may be partly responsible for the subtle complexity evident in these women’s dramatic treatments of feminist issues. Moreover, in a predominantly anti- or at least non-feminist culture, feminist drama is all the more important for its ability to represent situations that reveal the inadequacy of the status quo and demonstrate the need for feminist action. To illustrate how these plays reflect and challenge prevalent ideas of their time, I discuss them in the context of issues that provoked considerable feminist debate.

My first chapter considers an issue of immediate personal and political significance to the woman playwright: women’s problematic relationship to artistic genius. The playwrights’ treatment of the subject betrays their ambivalence about their own artistic importance. Rather than focus on women geniuses, Clemence Dane in Will Shakespeare (1921) and Gordon Daviot in The Laughing Woman (1934) take male artists as their subjects, exposing and questioning the roles women play in supporting and creating men’s genius. Dane dramatizes Shakespeare’s early career as playwright, emphasizing the parts played by his wife, his mistress, and his Queen. Daviot contrasts the successful career of a male sculptor with that of his companion, a female philosopher, who chooses to give up her work to support him. Both plays use feminist ideas to challenge the prevalent view that women were inherently less capable of genius than men. Dane shows how women inspired and developed Shakespeare’s genius, whereas Daviot questions women’s willingness to play those supportive roles. Like many feminists of their day, these playwrights demonstrate that historical conditions favoured the evolution of male genius.
My second chapter examines women's historical position more closely, this time through two plays that focus on women, Gordon Daviot's Queen of Scots (1934) and Joan Temple's Charles and Mary (1930). Daviot's Queen of Scots, like her earlier play The Laughing Woman, demonstrates women's difficulty in accepting their own power. Her play focuses on the obstacles Mary Stuart faced in her brief and troubled reign of Scotland, which ended with her abdication. Daviot's insistence on demystifying Mary answers feminist calls for unbiased treatments of women in history. Joan Temple's treatment of Charles and Mary Lamb, on the other hand, both reflects and inverts feminist views of the restrictions placed on early-nineteenth-century women. While Temple depicts Mary's madness as a form of feminist rebellion against the oppressive domestic demands of her family, her presentation of Mary's relationship to Charles reverses expected gender roles, with Charles playing the virtuous and self-sacrificing role usually allotted to the wife.

The issue of marriage touched upon in Charles and Mary becomes the focus of the third chapter, which explores feminist perspectives on marriage and divorce in Githa Sowerby's Sheila (1917) and Elizabeth Baker's Penelope Forgives (1930). Sowerby's play about a marriage between a young typist and her older and wealthier employer reflects contemporary feminist comparisons between marriage and trade. Sowerby also raises the issue of childbirth, suggesting that marriage is more than a means for men to reproduce. While Sowerby addresses some of the problems within marriage, Baker turns her attention to divorce. In her depiction of the economic and moral opposition women face in divorce, Baker shows that women's legal gains in the divorce laws have not rectified the situation entirely.

The fourth and final chapter turns to the grave events that frame this thesis, the two World Wars. Significantly, as these playwrights transfer their attention to the political realm, they assign men to the principal roles. Cicely Hamilton's The Old Adam
(1924) and Winifred Holtby’s *Take Back Your Freedom* (1935) make strong connections between masculinity and militarism. Although these plays make use of feminist positions against war and Fascism, they are not unquestioningly pacifist. *The Old Adam* posits a fictional world that could prevent war but chooses not to. Hamilton suggests that war is inevitably human, but critiques the male chivalric code that encourages complicity. Holtby, in her portrayal of the rise and fall of a Fascist dictator in England, takes a stand against the masculine appeal of Fascism, and shows its devastating implications for women. Holtby’s play, in its ominous anticipation of World War II, effectively brings us to the end of the inter-war era.

These plays treat feminist issues with vitality and skill. They provide thoughtful commentary on the feminism of their day, and demonstrate the continued need for its principles at a time when feminism seemed to many to be no longer necessary. They are particularly adept in their representation of political issues through their women characters on an intensely personal level. Recognizing the interplay between women’s drama and the contemporary debates among feminists, anti-feminists, and other theoreticians is but one way to illustrate the plays’ value. As I hope will become apparent when I discuss these plays in more depth, their richness and complexity allow for many different readings.
Chapter One:

Women and Creative Genius

in Clemence Dane’s *Will Shakespeare* (1921)

and Gordon Daviot’s *The Laughing Woman* (1934)

“A woman Shakespeare? When will she come?” asks Clemence Dane, prolific playwright and novelist, in her feminist treatise *The Women’s Side* (133). Like Dane, many feminists of the 1920s felt compelled to agree with the predominant contemporary view that women artists had not yet produced works equal in genius to those of the very greatest men. Dane, writing in 1926, believed that this was the one and only tenable opposition remaining to the idea of sex equality (*Women’s* 131). Her own play, *Will Shakespeare* (1921), and Gordon Daviot’s *The Laughing Woman* (1934) treat the question of artistic genius. Both dramas challenge contemporary assumptions about men’s biological predilection for genius by emphasizing women’s role in supporting and even creating men of genius. The two authors not only offer insight into the historical relationship between gender and genius, but also reveal some of the obstacles faced by women artists of their own time.

Curiously, very few plays by women dramatists of this period portray women as artists in their own right. Clemence Dane does write a play about the Brontë sisters, *Wild Decembers* (1932), but it focuses far more on Charlotte Brontë’s doomed love for Monsieur Heger and her eventual happiness with curate Arthur Nicholls than on the sisters’ literary achievements. One of the few serious treatments of a woman artist in the inter-war era is Susan Glaspell’s play about Emily Dickinson, *Alison’s House* (1930).
The plays discussed in this chapter, *Will Shakespeare* and *The Laughing Woman*, treat male artists, though by emphasizing their relations with women, they raise questions about the circumstances, including gender conditions, that produce men’s creative genius. Dane’s play focuses on Shakespeare’s early career and his relations with three women to whom she assigns influential roles in his life: Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare’s wife; Mary Fitton, his mistress and his inspiration for Juliet and the sonnets; and Queen Elizabeth, his ruler and his guide. Daviot’s play, set just before the First World War, treats the relationship between a male sculptor struggling for recognition and a female writer who gives up her ambition and independence to help him realize his potential. Neither text presents a radical challenge to the man of genius it portrays. By placing such emphasis on the women characters, however, both dramatists ask their audience to consider these men’s genius from the perspective of the women in their lives. The women play crucial roles in supporting, if not creating, artistic genius in men. Though neither playwright explicitly confronts the question of woman’s capacity for genius compared to man’s, both respond to different aspects of this issue as it was taken up by feminist theorists of their time.

Genius was a subject addressed by numerous scholars in early-twentieth-century Europe: psychologists, anthropologists, and historians, as well as feminists. The fact that most books on genius written in the early twentieth century address the issue of gender and genius attests to the notice paid to feminism at this time. Several male theorists believed that women were far less likely to be geniuses than men. Arthur Lynch’s *Moments of Genius*, for instance, describes twenty individuals representing different types of genius, only one of whom is a woman, Mnesarete. Although Lynch grants that women in history from Zenobia to Charlotte Corday deserve intellectual and moral admiration, he chooses Mnesarete to represent the type of female beauty because, “what man can understand the soul of a woman? I admire what I know, and that is her physical
beauty” (9-10). His attempt to justify his choice demonstrates his awareness, albeit superficial, of the feminist counter-arguments he expects to provoke. Havelock Ellis, in his more comprehensive study of British genius, uses the Dictionary of National Biography to conclude that there have been exactly 975 male and 55 female geniuses in British history. He claims that his own selection process favoured the inclusion of women, not pausing to evaluate that of his source.1 Equally confident, Arnold Bennett declares: “the truth is that intellectually and creatively man is the superior of woman, and in the region of creative intellect there are things which men almost habitually do but which women have not done and give practically no sign of ever being able to do” (112). Surprisingly, this assertion does not prevent him from professing to be a “feminist to the point of passionateness” (116). Osias Schwarz, a social pathologist with no such pretensions to feminism, dismisses women completely from his classification system of types of superior men: “Women are, as a rule, born philistines, i.e., they lack genuine intellectual needs and ideal or moral aspirations” (411). According to Schwarz, woman’s only redeeming feature is her “maternal altruism,” to which her intellectual functions are naturally subordinate (411). Similarly, Anthony Ludovici argues that woman’s natural, specialized role as “Custodian and Promoter of Life” necessarily implies that she is inferior to man in art, science and philosophy (Vindication 346). Not satisfied that he has sufficiently discouraged the potential woman artist, he adds that woman excels in art or intellect only when her reproductive instinct is weak or flawed, or when she uses her talent as a ploy to attract men (346-66).

Many less hostile writers of the period agreed that woman’s function as mother

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1Huntington Cairns, in his inter-war critique of Ellis, also points out that almost all of Ellis’s British poets were not only men but well-educated and fairly well off. He uses this point to support his argument that genius is not purely genetic, but socially conditioned (Schmalhausen 405-6).
conflicted with her capacity for intellectual or creative genius. Stating explicitly that he does not want to prejudice the feminist position in any way, Ernst Kretschmer, German professor of psychiatry and neurology, argues that women who produce original, creative work are an anomaly, and that most women can hope for no more than an intellectual endowment sufficient to produce genius in their sons. Austin Harrison, in his equivocal study of women’s past and present conditions, *Pandora’s Hope*, likewise contends that woman’s genius is procreative, not intellectual. Lamenting that genius does not reproduce genius, Harrison suggests that “woman may not yet be sufficiently attuned to give life to the male spermatozoa of genius -- not yet . . . her psychic evolution is not far enough advanced to recreate man’s supreme mentality. Hence genius dies in her womb” (181). This position proves to be a somewhat unlikely departure for his arguments supporting the further emancipation and education of women, not so much for women themselves, but for their ability to reproduce male genius. Even Maude Royden, a well-known feminist preacher and advocate for women’s sexuality, believes that there will always be more creators among men than women in art, literature, and science, because the vital creative force in women usually pours itself into motherhood rather than art. In taking this position, she reluctantly admits to sharing the views of anti-feminists who believe that women will never achieve what men have achieved in the arts. Royden does not preclude the possibility of a woman with genius as great as a man’s, but simply believes it is less likely that a woman would channel her genius into a great work of art (“Modern Love” 143). Bernard Shaw draws a similar distinction between men’s and women’s natural genius when he compares woman’s pursuit of man for the purpose of procreation with man’s pursuit of genius in his preface to *Man and Superman*:

> Accordingly, we observe in the man of genius all the unscrupulousness and all the “self-sacrifice” (the two things are the same) of Woman. He will risk the stake and the cross; starve, when necessary, in a garret all his life; study women and live
on their work and care as Darwin studied worms and lived upon sheep; work his nerves into rags without payment, a sublime altruist in his disregard of himself, an atrocious egotist in his disregard of others. (157)

Although Shaw is careful to incorporate the possibility of a woman genius, the structure of his analogy relegates her to exception rather than rule.

Most feminists, however, opposed the view that women were biologically less predisposed to genius, arguing instead that historical conditions have favoured the development of men’s rather than women’s artistic genius. Feminist activist and suffrage playwright Elizabeth Robins enters into the debate about sex and genius in Ancilla’s Share, one of the most forward-looking, comprehensive feminist texts of the inter-war period, first published anonymously in 1924. Robins poses a question similar to Dane’s: “If . . . women are not essentially inferior to men in intellectual genius, why has the mind of her sex never yet flowered in terms of a Homer, a Shakespeare, a Leonardo, a Beethoven, an Edison?” (102). Robins concludes that, without training and opportunity, women have “poured their gifts into the hands of men” (102). Acknowledging the uncredited contributions of women to the work of their lovers, their husbands, and their brothers, citing examples such as Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Lamb, Mary Shelley, and Louise Colet, Robins challenges her reader to conceive of a man who values a woman’s intellectual contribution to the world enough to play the supportive role in her life that women conventionally play in the lives of great men. She criticizes society for not encouraging the woman genius: “What gifted woman’s life has not been sucked dry by influences which have nothing to do with her productiveness except to abort them all—all except the physical child?” (105). Unlike many of her contemporaries, Robins focuses on the social and political conditions that stifle women’s intellectual and artistic self-realization rather than women’s intrinsic biological or psychological capacity for genius. Her arguments about male and female genius are submerged in a more general critique of
the ways in which men have traditionally controlled women and women have allowed themselves to be controlled.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf, like Dane and Robins before her, addresses the problem of a woman Shakespeare. She invents for Shakespeare a sister, whose equal artistic potential leads only to frustration and futility before all of the barriers restricting women of that time and culminates in her suicide. Nearly twenty years earlier, Cicely Hamilton made a similar argument in *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), in which she claimed that the historical limitations placed upon women of the past prevented them from achieving greatness. Specifically, woman's narrowly defined role and the qualities she was forced to develop in order to fulfil it were incompatible with artistic genius: "The perfected type of wife-and-mother-and-nothing-else sees life only through another's eyes; the artist through his own" (109). Woolf and Hamilton agree that the psychological effects of such constrictions would have prevented women from producing works of true genius, though they present divergent pictures of the results. Whereas Woolf describes a gifted woman becoming mad, a hermit, or suicidal, thwarted by others and tortured by her own contrary instincts, Hamilton portrays a woman whose every thought and action becomes directed toward the narrow ambition of procuring and pleasing a husband, and who, if she is able to express herself, presents in art a warped and dishonest picture of herself (Woolf 48; Hamilton, *Marriage* 107-10).

Inter-war feminists also pointed out the adverse effect of gender inequality on men's and women's art. In *The Truth about Woman* (1929), Catherine Gasquoine Hartley argues that women have not had adequate opportunity to prove themselves in the arts. Admitting that historically women have achieved less than men in most arts, Hartley points out the difficulty in distinguishing environmental from biological differences when one looks at sexual differences in the mind and in artistic impulse. She suggests that women's work has suffered because of her acceptance of man's self-flattering, unrealistic
image of her sex. As a result of her distorted self-image, woman has been able to realize herself only through man, whereas man has been able to realize himself with or without woman (292-306). Woolf furthers this argument about the effect of gender bias on creativity in *A Room of One's Own* by drawing her reader’s attention to the contorted picture of women that many male writers have created. She notes that many literary men have strong and conflicting opinions about women, but that what they write does not reflect actual women. Rather, these writers make woman their looking-glass, with the magical power of reflecting man at twice his natural size. She evokes a fictitious Professor von X, who has written an angry treatise entitled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex* "in the red light of emotion and not the white light of truth" (33), to show that women artists are not the only victims of gender bias; bitterness and anger can distort both men’s and women’s perceptions of the other sex.

In *The Women's Side*, a book of essays addressed to women covering topics ranging from shingled hair to the death penalty, playwright Clemence Dane answers the question that began this chapter. Contemplating the apparent absence of a woman with Shakespeare’s genius, Dane argues that women simply use different tools and a different medium to express their genius. Like the theorists who contend that women’s separate form of genius is motherhood, Dane compares artistic creation to sexual reproduction. Just as men father the children borne by women, women may arouse men’s artistic creation: “A play, a poem, a picture must have its parents like any other child of controlling spirit and obedient flesh: the actual relationship matters little -- mother, sister, lover, wife, patient servant, patient friend -- all these have served in turn his brush, his chisel and his pen” (*Women's* 138). Dane adds a new dimension to theories that motherhood is women’s separate form of genius with her claim that women metaphorically inseminate male genius. Maintaining a position of essential biological difference, Dane labours to promote women’s role as inspirer. Although her ideas would
hardly be considered feminist today, she clearly intends to support the feminist
movement. Her preface declares her purpose to be to encourage more women to vote,
and she writes in support of sex education in the schools, enfranchisement of women and
men at the same age, and shared housework for households with two wage-earners. If her
position that there is as much merit in the inspirer as in the one inspired does little to
encourage the female artist, it does at least present a much less bleak and perhaps more
empowering view of women's historical role than such feminists as Robins and Woolf
do. Dane's play Will Shakespeare (1921) likewise reflects her optimistic perspective on
women, though the dramatic medium allows her to examine the issue of women and
genius with more sensitivity to its range and complexity than she does in her later essay.
While Dane explores the powerful potential of women in inspiring, influencing, and even
creating genius in keeping with the theory she advances in The Woman's Side, she
concedes in the play that there are different ways in which women can play this role, not
all of them beneficial or productive. The second play discussed in this chapter, Gordon
Daviot's The Laughing Woman, delves further into the subtle complications and
limitations that a woman encounters when her own genius comes into direct conflict with
a man's.

Clemence Dane, Will Shakespeare, 1921

One of the most prolific and best-known women playwrights of the inter-war era,
Clemence Dane continued to write plays for stage, screen and radio until she died in
1965. Critic J. C. Trewin identifies her in 1953 as "the leader of our small band of
women dramatists" (Today 127). Clemence Dane is a pseudonym suggested to Winifred
Ashton by the church St. Clement's Dane on The Strand in London. Born in Blackheath,
London in 1887, Dane tried her hand briefly at art, teaching, and acting before she
became a writer. Her portrait of Noel Coward now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery
in London, and her bust of Shakespeare is displayed at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford. She enters into numerous actors’ autobiographies of the period, all of which attest to her liveliness and good humour. Many fondly recall the gatherings she hosted at her Covent Garden flat, which she shared with her secretary and companion, Olwen Bowen. Noel Coward pays tribute to her friendship in his autobiography: “Winifred is large in every way, and her capacity for friendship is without limits; apart from her recognised fame as a writer she is a brilliant sculptress and painter, and her vitality is inexhaustible” (348). Dane won an Oscar in 1945 for her screenplay for the film Perfect Strangers starring Deborah Kerr, and in 1953 she was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

Dane began writing in 1917: her first novel, Regiment of Women, treated a lesbian theme nine years before Radcliffe Hall’s more sympathetic The Well of Loneliness would be written and banned in Britain. Though Dane began as a novelist, she did not rise to fame until her first play, Bill of Divorcement, became a success in 1921. Written in response to a contemporary bill before Parliament proposing that insanity become legal grounds for divorce, the play ran to 401 performances, and later was filmed by George Cukor, starring John Barrymore and Billie Burke, and introducing Katherine Hepburn. Produced in the same year, Will Shakespeare is Dane’s second play. It did not achieve the same popular success as her first, though it ran a respectable ten

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2Regiment of Women has been reprinted recently as part of Virago’s Lesbian Landmarks series despite its flagrant anti-lesbian message. Series editor Alison Hennegan justifies the decision in her introduction to the edition: “... the enormous paradox of the book, planned as one of the great Awful Warnings of anti-lesbian literature, is that in it we have one of the most fascinatingly complex and subtly observed psychological portraits of a particular sort of homosexual woman. She’s not one we want to boast about or claim eagerly as our own, but she is utterly credible, even (dare we whisper it?) recognizable, and made so by the depth of knowledgeable engagement which Dane seems to bring to her subject” (v-vi).
weeks. The play’s producer, Basil Dean, describes it as a “distinguished failure” (147), and believes it contains some of Dane’s most passionate writing. Fidelis Morgan, in her introduction to the recent edition by Virago Press, attributes the play’s shorter run to its unfortunate concurrence with an influenza epidemic that afflicted both audience and cast (66). Basil Dean supplies a more intriguing and ultimately more convincing reason for the play’s lack of success: “The basic weakness of the play was that Shakespeare was presented in un-heroic guise, a weakling dominated by women. . . . The British public would not accept this view of our national poet, and the play failed” (149).

Contemporary reviews tend to support Dean’s claim. J. C. Trewin and W. A. Darlington agree that Dane’s roles for women outshine her roles for men (Trewin, Twenties 26; Darlington, clipping). Although both critics praise Dane’s portrayal of Queen Elizabeth, they disapprove of her representation of Shakespeare. Darlington suggests that the play failed partly because “the figure of Shakespeare which it presented lacked male vigour” (Obituary). In another article, he widens his claim to encompass all of Dane’s plays: “When Clemence Dane created a part for an actress she had true insight, and the actress . . . acted with magnificence. She had no power with men. No stage actor was even eager to play for her” (clipping). Stuart Mais praises the play as a whole, but states that “it is simply impossible for [Dane] to create a man who is more than a wooden block” (264-65). The TLS reviewer faults the play for having “too much Mary,” and disapproves of the power the author allows her to wield over Shakespeare (841). The Punch critic resents Dane for changing history to make Shakespeare more contemptible by deserting his wife sooner than he did in life ([O. S.] 436). St. John Ervine felt

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3Trewin describes Elizabeth as “one of the most plausible stage portraits of Elizabeth, who has frequently been just a Tudor in a tantrum behaving like Alice’s Red Queen” (Twenties, 26). Darlington’s praise is rather backhanded: “[William Shakespeare] contained a magnificently well-imagined figure of Elizabeth I which promised greater things than the young dramatist was ever to achieve” (Obituary).
compelled to attack the play in The Observer two weeks in a row, complaining that Shakespeare “is portrayed as a sort of dismal Jerry, whining and snivelling throughout his career and running after a worthless woman to the neglect of his work” (27 Nov. 1921, 11). Like the other critics, Ervine objects to Dane’s permitting other characters to outshine Shakespeare: “Miss Dane has brought so little apprehension of greatness to her play that she actually puts the best speeches of the piece into the mouth of anyone but Shakespeare” (27 Nov. 1921, 11). Ervine’s columns provoked a strong public reaction, and the following week The Observer printed three letters defending Dane, including one by playwright and novelist John Galsworthy. Galsworthy’s defence is double-edged: he agrees that Dane has failed to represent Shakespeare, but attempts to redeem her by arguing that no playwright would be capable of representing a great imaginative artist (17). After printing Ervine’s response the following week, the editor was forced to announce that no more space could be devoted to this topic (17). This controversy was probably responsible for the surge of interest in the play in early December, but it was not enough to keep the play running for very long. Philip Merivale’s lack-lustre performance as Shakespeare could not have helped the play’s critical reception; according to Dean, he played the part “as a man who had given up life’s struggle before ever he left Stratford” (148). Dane, a great admirer of Shakespeare, certainly would do nothing to undermine his genius. She does, however, give the women in his life varied and colourful parts that take some emphasis away from Shakespeare and that do not always show him in the best light.

Dane appropriately subtitles Will Shakespeare “an invention”; its plot imaginatively re-creates Shakespeare’s early career as a writer. Most of the play is written in blank verse, though it does not imitate Elizabethan language. Loosely based on facts known about Shakespeare’s life, the play invents a scenario in which Anne Hathaway falsely entraps Shakespeare in marriage by claiming to be pregnant, and
Shakespeare, resentful, leaves Stratford in order to pursue a career writing plays in London. There we find him co-writing plays with Christopher Marlowe, whom he eventually kills in a jealous rage over Mary Fitton, Shakespeare’s mistress and his model for Juliet and the Dark Lady of the sonnets. After Marlowe’s death, Queen Elizabeth becomes an important figure in the play as she comforts Shakespeare and calls him to his civic duty as poet. While Shakespeare may be a great writer, in Dane’s play he is not a great husband or father. Near the end of Act II, ten years after he leaves Stratford, Shakespeare learns that he and Anne have a son and this son has become very ill. Absorbed with Mary Fitton and the success of Romeo and Juliet, Will misses his only opportunity to see his child. Anne and Will never do meet again after the first act, but Anne’s off-stage voice continues to haunt him until the very end of the play. Dane’s theatrical adeptness and willingness to experiment are particularly evident in two clever play-within-a-play scenes, one in which Shakespeare’s own unwritten plays interweave with the players’ re-enactment of Orpheus and Euridice, and another which takes place backstage of the first performance of Romeo and Juliet. In both of these scenes, the fluid boundaries between the play-within-the-play and the play are particularly evocative.

Dane takes great liberties in her treatment of Shakespeare’s life, about which very little was known but much was speculated by the time of her writing. Although many biographers believed that Shakespeare might have apprenticed with Marlowe, none suggested anything but a professional and friendly association between the two men. Any rivalry proposed was on literary, and not romantic, ground. Although Marlowe was known to have been killed at a Deptford inn, nowhere is it suggested that his murderer may have been Shakespeare. Dane’s proposal that Anne lied about her pregnancy in

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4 Biographies of Shakespeare that would have been available to Dane include those by Cargill, Creighton, Dall, Elton, Furnivall and Munro, Halliwell-Phillipps, Harris, Lee, Raleigh, Rolfe and Tyler. Marlowe biographies include Ellis’s and Ingram’s.
order to trap Shakespeare in marriage also seems not to be based on any prior source. Shakespeare biographers struggled to explain his first child's birth only six months after he was married to Anne Hathaway; his apologists usually argued that his child's early birth was perfectly in keeping with the tradition of troth-plights in Elizabethan England (Halliwell-Phillips 110; Dall 33). Some biographers speculated that Shakespeare was forced into marrying Anne by his parents or the community, and as a result may have been unhappy in his marriage. Shakespeare biographer William Rolfe points out that there was already in 1904 a tradition of maligning Anne by insisting that she was responsible for what was assumed to have been an unhappy marriage (85). This tradition continues in Frank Harris's The Women of Shakespeare (1911), in which Harris makes Anne responsible for Shakespeare's representations of women as scolds, shrews, and termagants (20-46). Rolfe, on the other hand, argues quite sensibly that Shakespeare was no innocent and certainly as much to blame for the hasty marriage as Anne (85). Biographers concur that Shakespeare stayed with Anne long enough to have three children: first, a daughter, Susanna, and later, twins, one of whom was his son, Hamnet, who died at age ten. In Dane's version, Shakespeare leaves Stratford much sooner, and never even sets eyes on his only son. Although many biographers speculate that there may have been a real model for the Dark Lady of the sonnets, only a few go so far as to propose a name. Thomas Tyler in 1884 is the first to identify her as Mary Fitton; he is supported in this hypothesis by Creighton in 1904, and Harris in 1911 and 1921 (Tyler 73-92; Creighton 45-75; Harris, Women 104-19; Harris, Man 202-26). Shakespeare biographies available to Dane, then, only provide the sketchiest particulars upon which Dane devises her narrative.

As the immediate response to Dane's play indicates, the author's most suggestive departures from accepted truths concern the women in Shakespeare's life. She gives them more influence and more responsibility than do most biographers: Anne almost
single-handedly contrives her marriage to Shakespeare, Mary Fitton deliberately and intelligently inspires him to write *Romeo and Juliet*, while Queen Elizabeth is instrumental in orchestrating his affair with Mary Fitton and in preventing him from renouncing his art in his grief over Marlowe’s death. Dane’s women play more prominent, complex roles, not only in Shakespeare’s life but also in his artistry; his genius, as Dane represents it, relies greatly on women. Like Elizabeth Robins, Dane suggests that the genius of man is dependent upon the support and vitality of women around him: woman’s intellect, humour, vision, and poetry is evident in the work of her husband or lover. Curiously, Dane seems to be more sensitive to the problems inherent in this subordinate position in *Will Shakespeare* than she is when she expresses her theory of the different but equal genius of inspiration in *The Women’s Side* a few years later.

Although the play emphasizes the contributions of women to Shakespeare’s life and art, it also points out in Anne and to some extent in Mary the devastating toll this role can take on the women who play it, by contrast to the male genius, who emerges from each relationship revitalized.

Dane’s rendering of Shakespeare’s marriage to Anne Hathaway differs significantly from historical sources. Will and Anne’s relationship in the play is far more pernicious, yet more consequential, than in the biographies. Dane puts forward the unique and somewhat convoluted hypothesis that Anne’s first son was in fact conceived after marriage and born prematurely, and that Anne lied about pregnancy to convince Shakespeare to marry her. Despite absolving Will of responsibility for the hasty marriage and making Anne more conniving than in many sources, Dane appears to sympathize with Anne. John Gielgud, who admired the play as a young man, comments that Dane gave Anne all the sympathetic lines and had her reappear at intervals throughout the play, thereby making Shakespeare seem “an utter cad” (*Shakespeare* 104). Rather than dismiss Anne as a mistake or a burden, Dane assigns her a substantial and lasting place in
Shakespeare’s life, emphasizing her impact on Shakespeare’s genius, and the impact of his genius on her. In drawing a fuller and more human picture of Anne, Dane makes her at once more culpable and more forgivable than Shakespeare’s biographers do.

As Gielgud and others suggest, Shakespeare does not make an impressive husband in Dane’s play. Even before Shakespeare learns that Anne has lied about her pregnancy, he complains of being tied down by his wife and rudely silences her when he comes home with his player friends. Callously, he dismisses their earlier love-making: “Oh, you were easy, cheap, you flattered me. . . . / Why, did you not look at me / As I were God? And for a while I liked it. / It fed some weed in me that since has withered; / For now I like it not, nor like you for it!” (84). When he does discover Anne’s trap, his cruelty seems unduly harsh. He refuses even to acknowledge her existence, asking Henslowe, “What wife?” (91), and he does not hesitate to leave her behind for London. Later, when Anne’s mother arrives in London with important news about his son’s ill health, Shakespeare’s response is especially cold-hearted:

MRS. HATHAWAY. I bring you news.

SHAKESPEARE. Good news?

MRS. HATHAWAY. It’s as you take it.

SHAKESPEARE. Dead?

MRS. HATHAWAY. Is that good news, my half son? She is not so blessed.

SHAKESPEARE. I did not say it so. (111)

Shakespeare’s words seem particularly inappropriate when we learn that his only son is on his deathbed. Once his son dies, Will deliberately turns away from Henslowe’s poignant reports of Anne’s grief: “Ay, shut the door, Henslowe; for had she been this she / Ten years ago and it this other I -- / Well, I have friends to love! Heard Marlowe’s news?” (126) Although he appears to soften toward her, Will does nothing to console her
when he hears her cry out for him in anguish, but moves on with his new life and leaves her to her virtual death.

Anne, on the other hand, professes to exist for Will alone and wants nothing more than to devote her life to supporting him and his art. Without denigrating Anne or scolding her, Dane draws attention to the tragic emptiness of such an existence. Anne is absolutely devastated by Will's departure in Act I. Dane encourages a reading of Anne's plight in terms of gender, as Anne's words of self-denigration impugn her entire sex:

ANNE. Let me not be a woman! Let me be
Some twisting worm on a hook, or fish they catch
And fling again to catch another year,

Or let me as a heart-burst, screaming hare
Be wrenched in two by slavering deaths for sport;
But let me not again be cursed a woman
Surrendered to the mercy of her man!

(She sinks down in a crouching heap by the hearth.) (90)

Anne configures herself as victim, prey to heartless predator. Her metaphors invert the perception, evident in the biographies and in Will's accusations in this play, that Shakespeare is victim to her scheming. The stage directions emphasize the abject wretchedness of her role as Shakespeare's abandoned wife. For the rest of the play, she never acts, but merely awaits Will's return. Through Anne, Dane draws a distinction between actively inspiring genius and passively serving it. Anne falls into the class of women described earlier by Hamilton and later by Woolf as the warped, stifled woman of the past, forced by society to expend all of her energy in becoming wife and mother, and, failing that, driven to despair or oblivion. This role Anne plays serves neither herself nor Shakespeare, but Shakespeare at least has the means by which to escape and to realize
himself, whereas Anne is doomed to inaction. Will leaves Anne drained of all life -- a child player describes her as "all white and dead round her eyes," (93) -- while he runs off with Henslowe's players and begins anew in London. Throughout the play, Anne is strongly associated with death. The child actor notices her ghostlike appearance, and her disembodied voice infiltrates the stage as a ghost's would. Henslowe describes her poignantly to Shakespeare in the third act when he returns from Stratford. There he discovered her sitting alone in the cold, beside the empty chair of her dead child, looking "scarce human," and standing "So still you'd think she died there" (125).

Dane parallels Anne's deathlike existence with Eurydice's in the underworld, forever waiting for her Orpheus. When the players visit Shakespeare's house near the end of the first act, a child player begins to tell Anne about their play based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Both the child and Anne recognize Anne's resemblance to Eurydice, the wife lost in hell, waiting for her husband to find her. As the boy takes Anne's hand, the room grows dim and shadowy, and Will joins the players in a kind of masque while Anne looks on in wonder and in fear. Shakespeare goes down the stairs, like Orpheus descending into the underworld, and shadowy characters from his unwritten plays surround him, demanding that he tell their story. He then fades away while Anne, at once part and not part of the play-within-the-play, takes a more central role. She approaches three masked figures, the three Fates, asking each in turn to drop her mask. Behind the masks she discovers the Dark Lady, the Queen, and, lastly and most disturbingly, herself. Anne's vision-play brings together the three women who will most influence Shakespeare during the course of Dane's play. In this sense, her vision becomes a compact version of the play itself. As the implied dreamer, Anne takes the part of author or creator, at least momentarily. She first enters the players' world reluctantly, telling the child who leads her on that it is all dreams. She begins by simultaneously playing her part and resisting it, but is drawn into the play with the
unmasking of the Fates. The most significant moment of the vision comes when Anne does the very thing that contemporary feminists such as Hamilton and Woolf believed to be the greatest challenge facing the woman artist: she represents herself to herself. It is at this moment that she calls out in terror to Will, who by his entrance puts an end to her vision and dismisses it as unreal. The dream-play suddenly vanishes, the lights go up, and we realize that this nightmarish vision was her own. Ironically, Will, the recognized artist and creator of the characters in the dream, appears to have seen nothing of her vision, and mundanely chastises Anne for not serving food to his friends. His expectations about her wifely duties prevent him from seeing her sympathetically as a fellow dreamer and potential artist, and hinder him from being inspired by her as he is by Mary Fitton and Queen Elizabeth. Anne’s visionary faculty and her identification with the mythological Eurydice give her a far richer and more significant role than any contemporary biography does, transforming her from a simple or misguided country girl into a woman of creative and emotional power.

While Shakespeare goes on to London to perform and to write great plays, Anne stays home in Stratford and bears his son. Dane’s analogy between Anne’s childbirth and Shakespeare’s art reflects and comments on the contemporary view of motherhood as the female counterpart to male artistic genius. Will himself compares Anne’s pregnancy to his own creativity: “...you shrink from me, / Guarding your mystery still; so must I guard / My dreams from any touch till they are born” (70). Again, near the end of the play, Shakespeare refers to his developing ideas as “my pregnancy” (161). But the parallel only goes so far. At the very moment that Shakespeare becomes a success before the Queen and the London audiences, Anne’s mother brings news of their son’s impending death. Ultimately, Shakespeare finds fulfilment in his writing, despite his turmoil over Marlowe’s death. Anne, on the other hand, is continually waiting, never fulfilled, nor even really alive. Motherhood for Anne is not self-realizing in the way that
writing is for Shakespeare. Dane stands against many of her contemporaries in her implication that biological motherhood forms no real substitute for artistic creation.

Dane further suggests that Anne's subservient role in Shakespeare's life has an adverse impact not only on Anne but on Shakespeare's art. Her portrayal of their relationship presents a very different picture of Shakespeare from the one that emerges five years later in *The Women's Side*: "There never has been a woman Shakespeare: never has been, that is, a woman who has expressed on paper so large an understanding of the two sexes, and of the universe in which they swim like fish in the sea. There has never, in a word, been a universal woman to match this universal man" (131-32). Woolf likewise recognizes Shakespeare as the universal, androgynous ideal toward which male and female writers should aspire (*Room* 93-94). By contrast, the Shakespeare who lives with Anne in the first act of Dane's play reveals a distorted, one-sided view of women, the antithesis of this universal genius. Shakespeare's remarks as Anne exits with her mother seem far from unbiased:

**SHAKESPEARE.** Oh women! women! women!

They slink about you, noiseless as a cat,

With ready smiles and ready silences.

These women are too humble and too wise

In pricking needle-ways: they drive you mad

With fibs and slips and kisses out of time:

And if you do not trip and feign as they

And cover all with kisses, do but wince

Once in your soul (the soul they shall not touch,

Never, I tell you, never! Sooner the smeared,

The old-time honey death from a thousand stings,
Than let their tongue prick patterns on your soul!)

Then, then all's catlike clamour and annoy! (78)

His perspective on women becomes even more poisoned once he learns of Anne's deceit. Anne recognizes that his uncharitable view of her will hurt his art: "When I, your own, show you my heart of hearts, / A book for you to read all women by, / Blindly you turn my page with -- 'Here are lies!'" (88). Whereas biographers tended to blame Anne for Shakespeare's less flattering depictions of women, Dane suggests that Shakespeare himself is to blame for refusing to accept the insight Anne could offer. It is only through his later experiences with Mary Fitton and Queen Elizabeth that Shakespeare achieves a more balanced view of women reflecting the universal perspective integral to his genius, according to Woolf as well as Dane.

Shakespeare's views on women evolve as his experience of women broadens. Dane does not articulate her theory of woman's genius of inspiration in The Women's Side until several years after Will Shakespeare. It is clear, however, that Mary Fitton is a prototype for this thesis. In The Women's Side, Dane writes: "We know something of what the Dark Lady gave Shakespeare: the good and the ill she did him vibrates in every line he wrote" (138). Moreover, she insists that this influence is likely conscious: "But by all accounts, you say, she didn't know what she was doing, didn't realise with whom she was dealing. Ah well! That's not a safe thing to say of the woman who sat for Cleopatra" (Women's 138). Certainly, in this play, Mary's influence on Will is quite intentional. Queen Elizabeth virtually orders Mary to inspire and prod Shakespeare's talent, directing her toward Shakespeare rather than Marlowe because she believes Shakespeare to be the greater genius. Especially in its beginning stages, Will and Mary's affair has its basis in artistic inspiration. She challenges him to write, flirting and playing with him, but all the while insisting that he come to her daily and read the scenes of Romeo and Juliet as he develops them.
Mary's role differs greatly from Anne's: Mary challenges the limitations placed on her sex and refuses to be made a victim to any man. She has come to court as a man would, to make a fortune on her own resources, and has achieved a position of power. She further defies gender conventions by taking Juliet's part when the actor who was supposed to play her breaks his arm. To Henslowe's objection, "What! a woman play on the stage?" Mary replies, "Ay, when the men fail!" (116). She thinks nothing of donning men's clothing to meet Marlowe at the Deptford Inn. She scorns traditional female subordination to men: "What! must I live his nun, his stay-at-home? / Your servant and a lady of the court!" (149). These words, spoken to Queen Elizabeth, illustrate Mary's inclination to defy subservience of any sort. Whereas Anne denigrates herself and all women in response to Shakespeare's anger, Mary remonstrates when Shakespeare rails against her and her gender after Marlowe's death:

SHAKESPEARE: Weep, clamorous harlot! We have given him death,
And shall we dock his rights of death, his peace
Upon his bed, his sun of hair smoothed, hands
Crossed decently by me, his friend? Close you
His eyes with kisses, lest I kill you too!
Give him his due, I say! his woman's tears!
You were his woman -- oh, deny it not!
You were his woman. Pay him what you owe!

MARY: What? Do you glove my clean hand with your stain,
Red fingers? Soft! This is your kill, not mine!
My free soul is not sticky with your sins.
You pinch your lips? You singe me with your tongue?
Your country lilac that you left for me
Taught you strange names for a woman. Harlot? I?
Sweep your own stable, trickster, married man!

Lie, cheat, break faith, until you end a man

That bettered you as roses better weeds — (137)

Throughout the play, Mary presents an image of vigour, independence, and resilience, providing a sharp contrast to Anne’s passive resignation.

Mary frankly adjusts and contests Will’s view of women, and Dane implies that his art improves as a consequence. When Mary first meets Shakespeare, she tells him, “That’s you, that’s you, with the careful fingers and no good word in your plays for any woman” (108). She responds to his offer to show her fairyland with, “Not I, not I! I’m a woman of this world. Give me flesh and blood, not gossamer” (108). When Shakespeare tells her the story of Romeo and Juliet and remarks, “Poor Juliet!”, Mary objects: “Not so poor if I know her. Oh, make that plain -- she was not poor!” (108) Once the play is written, Shakespeare credits her for virtually writing Juliet’s part: “She knows each line, she knows each word, she breathed them / Into my heart long ere I wrote them down” (116). Though Mary, in her forthrightness, does much to redress his perspective on women, Shakespeare’s views are still distorted when they part at the end of Act II. He tells her: “Eve, / Eve, Eve, the snake has been with you! You draw, / You drink my soul as I your body --” (120). Shakespeare recognizes a vital force and an independence in Mary that he has not found in Anne, but he still associates women with manipulation and treachery. Passion and bitterness continue to poison his perspective on women until he meets the third woman to perform an important role in his life, Queen Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, though she appears in only two scenes, plays a crucial part in Shakespeare’s artistic development. In addition to orchestrating Mary’s involvement with Shakespeare, the Queen is instrumental in persuading him not to give up writing altogether after Marlowe dies. This, Dane’s first of many dramatic renderings of
Elizabeth, is a powerful and sympathetic portrait of the Queen. Emphasizing her strength and wisdom, Dane describes her when she first appears on stage as: "old, as an oak or a cliff or a cathedral is old -- there is no frailty of age in her" (100). In performance, the part was particularly impressive in the hands of actress Haidée Wright, whom John Gielgud describes as "a tiny little woman but a splendidly intense actress" (Shakespeare 104). Wright’s small stature was accentuated by fifty-foot draperies hanging from the high roof of the Shaftesbury theatre, where the play was first performed (Dean 148). Producer Basil Dean recalls: “The diminutive shaking figure of Haidée Wright, seated on her throne, speaking the Queen’s grandiloquent lines with demonic energy, had a thrilling effect, and nightly stirred the audience to interruptive applause” (148). Dane’s Elizabeth is shrewd and dignified, in complete control of every situation; she cannot be deceived. With decorum, she makes Shakespeare understand that it is his duty, as it is hers, to serve England with his genius, and to renounce all human ties that impede him. With Elizabeth’s line, “Why else were we two born?” (155), Dane makes explicit the parallel between Shakespeare’s genius and the Queen’s.

Dane does not allow her audience to forget that Elizabeth is a woman as well as Head of State. When Elizabeth sets out to restore order after the chaos caused by Marlowe’s death, she deliberately contrasts her independence of judgement with that of kings. She tells Henslowe, “You’re honest, Henslowe! Your son’s son one day / May help a king to thread a needle’s eye,” and then proceeds: “I thread my own needles,

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5 In the course of her career, Dane wrote four plays about Queen Elizabeth: The Golden Reign of Queen Elizabeth, a short tableau of significant moments in the Queen’s reign, performed in 1941; The Lion and the Unicorn, an interesting full-length play written in 1943 that never achieved performance due to the untimely death of one of the lead actors; The Light of Britain, part of a series of radio plays, broadcast in 1942; and Till Time Shall End, broadcast on television in 1958.
Henslowe, being a woman" (148). Furthermore, her success in persuading Shakespeare to write again rests upon her gender:

ELIZABETH. I tell you, I, a queen,
Ruling myself and half a world. I know
What fate is laid upon you. Carry it!
Or, if you choose, flinch, weaken, and fall down,
Lie flat and howl, and let the ones that love you
(Not burdened less) half carry it and you!
Will you do that? Proud man, will you do that?

SHAKESPEARE. Because you are all woman —

ELIZABETH. Have you seen it?
None other sees.

SHAKESPEARE. -- and not as you're the Queen,
I'll let you be the tongue to my own soul,
Yet not for long I'll bear it.

ELIZABETH. To each his angel
For good or ill.
Women to a man, the man to a woman ever
Mated or fated. I am this fate to you,
As to me once a fallen star you knew not. (157)

Despite their collaborative tone, a suggestive tension exists between Shakespeare's and Elizabeth's expression of the bond between them. While Elizabeth stresses the equality of the interchange, Shakespeare fixes on its advantage to him. Elizabeth even allows Shakespeare metaphorically to take her power: when he commands her to leave and to "Give me this crown and reach the sceptre here!" (158), she descends from her throne and goes out. After she exits, we find him sitting at a table, pen in hand, his mind and his
speech overflowing with allusions to the numerous plays he is to write over the course of his career.

Dane gives women a role not only in inspiring genius but in its end result. She thereby addresses the problem of male writers’ emotionally biased representation of women that Woolf would later criticize in *A Room of One’s Own*. Mary and especially Elizabeth help to adjust Shakespeare’s initially distorted perspective on their sex revealed in his harsh treatment of Anne at the beginning of the play. As Shakespeare’s views toward women advance, so does his career. Dane thereby suggests that women are not only useful but necessary to the universality of his genius.

In addition to the role she plays in Shakespeare’s genius, each woman is a creator in her own right. In the first act, Anne’s vision indicates her potential as creator. In the second, Mary becomes inspirer and even part-author of *Romeo and Juliet*. She breathes life into Juliet, figuratively in Shakespeare’s writing, and literally when she takes her role on stage. Finally, Queen Elizabeth becomes creator by conceiving Shakespeare metaphorically: “I am a barren woman. Mary’s child / Reigns after me in England. Yet, tonight, / I crown my heir. I, England, crown my son” (155). Elizabeth’s figurative conception of Shakespeare’s genius is ultimately more productive and vital than Anne’s literal conception of his child, who dies early in the play and is never seen on stage.

In Dane’s rendition of Shakespeare’s life, women do more than support his genius; they create it. Although the roles the three women play in *Will Shakespeare* are conventional in the sense that they all enhance the acknowledged genius of a great man, Dane insists that these women have lives of their own, independent of their contact with Shakespeare. Both Mary and Elizabeth use Shakespeare to their advantage as much as he uses them to his: Mary, to get ahead in court and in Elizabeth’s good graces, and Elizabeth, for the glory of England. The strong roles these women play contrast with Anne’s more conventional role as wife and mother, which makes her dependent on
Shakespeare and her life empty without him. Writing about a time in which there were very few known female artists, Dane gives women the strongest and most creative role she can. By contrast, Daviot’s *The Laughing Woman*, though set at a time much more amenable to women artists, dwells more on the limitations to women’s genius than on its possibilities. Depicting the relationship between a renowned male sculptor and an obscure female philosopher, *The Laughing Woman* contemplates women’s unrealized potential.

**Gordon Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 1934**

Born in Inverness, Scotland, in 1896, Elizabeth Mackintosh abandoned her career as physical training instructor in the mid-1920s to care for her invalid father and to write. She authored numerous popular detective novels under the pseudonym Josephine Tey, the first of which she wrote for a contest. In 1932, she began to write plays under a different pseudonym, Gordon Daviot. This is the name by which she was known to the theatre world, and the one under which she produced her most serious work (Gielgud, *Introduction* ix-xii; Roy; Williamson 139-41). Her first play, *Richard of Bordeaux* (1932), was immensely successful, running for fourteen months at the New Theatre in London. The director and star of this play was the young John Gielgud. Gielgud, who remained a friend of Mackintosh until she died in 1952, credits this play as the one in which he “won his spurs” as both actor and director; it brought him confidence as well as success (xi). He characterizes the playwright as a very private woman who shunned publicity and who resisted showing her manuscripts to friends and actors. By contrast to her initial success with *Richard*, Daviot’s second play, *The Laughing Woman*, produced by Leslie Banks in 1934, ran only a few weeks. Ernest Short nevertheless describes the play as a success, to be remembered especially for the remarkable acting of Stephen Haggard, Sir Rider Haggard’s great-nephew, in the lead (201). Stephen Haggard’s life
was to follow a course remarkably similar to the part he played: his burgeoning literary career was cut short by his death during the Second World War at the age of thirty-one. No other play of Daviot's was a popular success, though she continued to write for almost twenty years. She did not consider her detective novels as serious as her plays; ironically, these novels won her far more acclaim during her lifetime, and she is now best remembered for them. Many of them have gone through several reprints and one, *Brat Farrar*, was made into a BBC television series.

*The Laughing Woman* is based on the lives of Sophie Brzeska and Henri Gaudier, a Swedish writer and a French sculptor who had recently gained notoriety in two biographies, Harold Ede's and Horace Brodzky's, written from Brzeska's letters and diaries shortly after her death. The play explores the unusual and difficult relationship between René Latour, an impudent nineteen-year-old artist of considerable genius, and his companion Ingrid Rydman, nicknamed Frik, a thirty-eight-year-old Swedish woman who plans to write a book of philosophy. Set just before World War I, the narrative traces their relationship from their first meeting until Latour's death in the War. Latour convinces Rydman to come to England and share an apartment with him. In London, as in Paris before that, the pair are desperately poor, living on the meagre pay Latour receives from his office job and on the small but regular income from Rydman's property in Sweden. While Latour is proudly oblivious to the squalor that surrounds them, Rydman is mortified before visitors and puts a great deal of effort into making the apartment look respectable. Her efforts disgust Latour as paltry and bourgeois, though he often seems to take for granted her financial support. Their relationship is explicitly non-sexual, although they live together and show a great deal of affection for each other. For propriety, they present themselves to others as half-brother and sister, but even so they become a target for malicious gossip.
Gradually, René makes a name and a career for himself. There is often evidence of his work on stage, specifically his bust of Hazel Graham, the young and flirtatious daughter of a surgeon who uses hints of her father’s patronage to entice René, and his bust of Ingrid, entitled “The Laughing Woman,” which lends its name to the play. As René succeeds, Ingrid fails. At first, she pretends to be hard at work on her book, though she produces nothing. Later, she puts aside her aspirations in order to support René’s work more effectively, claiming that she could only ever produce a book like thousands of others, and could never achieve work of his calibre. After a fight in which she destroys Hazel Graham’s bust out of jealousy, Frik leaves René in order to continue her studies, but returns to him just a few months later, having decided to sell her Swedish property so that they may live more comfortably and together sustain his genius. At the end of the third act, René decides, much to Frik’s surprise, to go to war for France. He does not survive. The play is framed by prologue and epilogue set in a present-day art gallery. There we discover an older, despondent woman, played by the same actress as Ingrid Rydman but not explicitly named in the text, sitting by Latour’s sculpture of “The Laughing Woman.” We are left with the ironic and disturbing juxtaposition of the bust of the younger Ingrid, poised for laughter, set against its original model, much older, silent and immobile, her eyes fixed on the gallery floor.

Daviot claims in her program notes and in the first published versions of the text that the play is only loosely based on the lives of Henri Gaudier and Sophie Brzeska, and that the leading characters are not to be taken as portraits. However, the two Gaudier-Brzeska biographies published just before her play was written clearly influenced Daviot’s characterizations of René and Frik. Harold Ede’s biography in particular, the more sensational and melodramatic of the two, seems to have generated much of the dynamic between Frik and René in the play. Ede focuses far more on the Gaudier-Brzeska relationship than on Gaudier’s art, reprinting large portions of Brzeska’s personal
The letters from Henri Gaudier to Sophie Brzeska reproduced at length in the text suggest that their relationship was perhaps even stranger in life than Daviot represents it in her play. Gaudier gives Brzeska several nicknames that represent her at once as mother and child, often addressing her in his letters as “poor little Mamusienka” or “little Maman” (44-45). His tone is often that of a little boy addressing his mother, often imploring her to take care of him even while he claims he is willing to sacrifice everything to her so that she may work. As in the play, Brzeska and Gaudier publicly disguise their relationship by calling themselves brother and sister, and their liaison is non-sexual, though the diary and letters have a much stronger undercurrent of sexual attraction. Ede, however, paints Gaudier and particularly Brzeska on a grander scale than Daviot does. Ede’s initial description of Brzeska reveals his ambivalence and even slight contempt for her: “She was a woman who was bodily ill and mentally diseased, whose life had been a succession of continual emotional crises; of terror, intuitions of evil, forebodings of madness, outbursts of rage, meditations of suicide and intimations of her own greatness” (2). He claims that Brzeska’s difficult personality prevented many of Gaudier’s potential friendships, and that her creative pretensions were nothing more than delusions of grandeur.

Daviot’s Ingrid Rydman bears some resemblance to Ede’s Brzeska, unstable and difficult, a social and psychological burden to Gaudier. Her Rydman, however, leans more toward Horace Brodzky’s version of Brzeska as helpmate and surrogate mother to Gaudier, unable to live without him. Brodzky, deliberately opposing Ede in a more temperate portrait of the couple based on his acquaintance with them, describes Brzeska as fiery, poetic, and radiating intelligence. He takes her writing far more seriously than Ede does, and even suggests that sometimes Gaudier disturbed the peace and quiet Brzeska needed in order to work. Unlike Ede, Brodzky sees her as the stronger of the two:
She mothered him. She was the power that fed the dynamo, and despite the continuous wrangling and outbursts of temper, they had a great affection for each other. Each was necessary to the other. . . . She wanted to see him a success -- a great artist -- and she spurred him on and on. His success as an artist would have quite satisfied her. Her own aspirations she could thrust aside. (147)

Brodzky paints his heroine as a martyr whose death in an insane asylum resulted from her pain at losing Gaudier in the War.

Daviot's drama departs from both biographies in making Frik's role of equal or perhaps even greater importance than René's. By placing Frik on stage at the beginning and end of the play, Daviot asks the spectator to look at René Latour through this woman's eyes. Daviot places much more emphasis on the intellectual and economic sacrifices Frik makes in order to support René's genius. Far from being soothed by her alliance with René, as Brodzky claims in his biography, Daviot's Frik is much distressed by it, and in Act I explicitly renounces her own peace in order to be with him. Both biographies note that Brzeska is somewhat preoccupied with tidiness and money matters, but neither suggests as Daviot does that her caring for René and for their apartment keeps her from working on her book. According to Ede, Gaudier found a job in England before Brzeska did and supported her for awhile, whereas Daviot makes René dependent on Ingrid's property income. Frik's ultimate resolution to sell her property in order to support René is Daviot's invention. These modifications serve to accentuate, albeit subtly, Frik's sacrifices for René and the difficulty she has in making them.

In The Laughing Woman, Rydman and Latour's relationship is the ground upon which Daviot explores the dynamic between male and female creative forces. Ostensibly, Frik gives up intellectual aspirations in deference to René, the greater genius. Daviot nevertheless does not encourage a facile interpretation of Frik's act of self-sacrifice. Daviot's characterization of the relationship suggests that Frik is influenced, perhaps
detrimentally, by René’s dependence on her and by her own motherly feelings toward him. The play questions, and does not resolve, Frik’s true motivation for giving up her work. Whereas René’s creativity seems to thrive on his love for Frik, although in many ways his genius is oblivious to her, Frik’s productivity seems to be impeded or stifled by her love for René. Like Anne in *Will Shakespeare*, Frik stagnates while René realizes his dreams. But Frik, unlike Anne, makes a deliberate and seemingly well-considered decision to put aside her own work for the sake of René’s art, and claims to be quite content with her subsidiary role. Daviot, however, does not allow her audience to take Frik’s decision at face value; she gently questions the merit of Frik’s decision by examining its basis. Her play resonates with the views of her feminist contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Robins and Cicely Hamilton, who contend that social conditioning convinces women that they are happier in taking second place to men. The questions her play raises are particularly important in the context of an increasing emphasis on women’s domesticity in the 1930s.

From the play’s beginning, Daviot draws attention to the unconventional, complicated nature of René and Frik’s relationship. The two discuss their attraction to each other in the first act:

RENÉ. . . . To those others you are a woman, yes. An attractive one, too, perhaps. (*He outlines with his finger the shape of her mouth.*) It is a nice curve, that. But to me you are (*he searches for a word that will explain*) a person. Another person like myself. Someone I love and admire as I would — oh, not a saint, perhaps; that is too distant; but —

[FRIK]. As you would your mother?

RENÉ. No, my sister, I think. (22)

This passage introduces the dual nature of René’s feelings for Frik. On the one hand, he insists that he sees her as a person and not a woman, implying complete respect and
equality in the relationship. In the same breath, however, he notes how attractive she is and strokes her mouth, scrutinizing her as a potential subject for his art as he does in the first moments of the play when he removes her hat "gently and expertly" to admire her head (15). Even while he insists that he respects her as an individual and a writer, much of his initial attraction to her appears to arise from the idea that he can use her to support his work, as model and as critic.

Despite their seemingly emancipated partnership, the attachment between René and Frik becomes very conventional on one level. Although the couple seem to begin on equal footing with mutual respect, Frik, whether by her own doing or by René's, ends by sacrificing her ambition and her independence to him, offering him financial as well as moral support, and encouraging his genius while denying her own. Daviot's subtle exploration of the motivation for and consequences of this decision is one of the most suggestive and interesting aspects of her play. In her analysis of the intricate fluctuations of Frik's role in relation to René, Daviot touches on many aspects of the complex issue of gender and genius. Frik and René's relationship exemplifies Elizabeth Robins's belief that women pour their gifts into the hands of talented men, whereas men do not do the same for women with intellectual gifts. Daviot complicates Robins's scenario by making Frik a well-educated woman with a realistic opportunity to succeed as a writer on her own. She attributes Frik's lack of success more to psychological than to material causes, though one does not necessarily exclude the other. In this, Daviot appears to agree with feminists such as Hamilton who suggest that women have absorbed the patriarchal point of view to the extent that it checks their potential and compels them to impose limits on themselves.

Taken as a whole, René and Frik's relationship plays out Catherine Gasquoine Hartley's claim that man has traditionally been able to realize himself with or without woman, whereas woman has been able to realize herself only through man. There is an
oblivious selfishness about René that makes his own work and needs a priority despite his manifest inclination to encourage and support Frik. Supremely confident about his own genius, René makes decisions that favour his own work, and tries to convince Frik that these will be best for her, too, despite accumulated evidence to the contrary. At the beginning of their acquaintance, René asks Frik to interrupt her studies in Paris and to come to England to live with him, arguing that she should stop studying and finish her book. Although he claims to want what is best for her and her art, this conveniently happens to be what is best for him. Daviot very subtly points to the unconscious selfishness of his outlook in René’s brief exchange with Mrs. Smith in the second scene:

RENÉ. . . . But Frik and I, we agree about everything.

MRS. SMITH (with no satiric intention, but because that is her usual method of filling conversational gaps). How nice for you. (35)

Mrs. Smith may be unaware of the irony in her pat response, but the audience is not. It is very convenient for René to remain oblivious to the fact that Frik continually denies herself in order to make things comfortable for him, and he remains so until she confronts him with this problem in the second act.

At the end of the first scene of Act II, Frik and René argue about her inability to write. Frik threatens to leave him, and does, if only temporarily. René appears to be genuinely unaware of the negative effect he has had on her work. He claims that he does not ask her to buy and to bargain for him, refusing to believe that she must do so in order for them both to survive on their modest income. His insistence that Frik not pretend to herself that he keeps her from working effectively renounces any responsibility for his impact on her productivity. He denies his financial dependence on her, though previous scenes have shown him delving into her purse to pay his bills. He remains conveniently oblivious to her feelings of jealousy toward Hazel. When Frik insists for a second time that she needs to go away in order to work in peace, René finally begins to understand his
effect on her and to take some responsibility for it, though he does so ambiguously. Although he supports her decision, he insists that it is futile: "You may go away, but you cannot separate us that way. We are so much a part of each other now. We cannot be alone any more" (71). He proves to be right, that they will not long be separated, but Frik's return may not be as straightforward as his explanation suggests.

When Frik returns in the following act, it appears that René has been making a real effort to set her free. He has been pretending to be still employed at his office job so that she does not worry about him, and he seems to be genuinely pleased that she has been able to do some work. In the same breath, however, he awakens her motherly feelings of protectiveness toward him by clinging to her desperately: "... don't go away again just because the place is untidy (he clutches at her like a scared child), will you, Frik?" (82). His wording downplays and even belittles Frik's reasons for leaving him. Ostensibly supportive of Frik's work and respectful of her freedom, René displays an unconscious impulse to the contrary that may influence Frik's final decision to devote her life to him. The play does not, however, present a straightforward condemnation of the patriarchal control of women's decisions. Rather, Daviot explores the subtle ways in which women allow themselves to absorb the traditional limitations set upon them, and the psychological difficulty they have in emancipating themselves from these conditions.

Daviot intimates that it is as much something within Frik as something imposed by René that prevents her from achieving greatness. From the beginning, Frik admits to René that she needs to feel needed, and we see her preoccupation with domestic concerns almost as soon as she enters René's apartment and comments on its untidiness. Although Frik instinctively realizes that René and her feelings toward him will disrupt the peace in her life, she gives in to his wish that they go together to England. She continually puts aside her own concerns and her own work in order to accommodate his. Even when René tries to spur her to work, Frik finds reasons not to persevere. He encourages her, for
instance, to work elsewhere since she is bothered by the noise in the apartment, but she replies: "And who is to cook for you, and wash for you, and mend for you --" (53). When René asks whether she is pretending she cannot work because of him, Frik assures him she is not when it is clear that she is beginning to use him as an excuse to avoid work. As the argument escalates, she accuses him of being incapable of caring for himself, and insists that he is dependent on her. Later, the work that René is able to do without her demonstrates that he is not so dependent on her as she would like to believe, a realization she first stumbles upon before she leaves him in Act II. Rather than regain independence in the time she spends away from him, however, Frik decides once and for all to devote her life to caring for him. She chooses to sell her property in Sweden in order to invest the money in him as she spends her life supporting his work. She returns with the awareness that she takes on a role that she has chosen, not a role that she plays of necessity. What seemed an obligation in the first two acts she now sees as a privilege. In effect, Frik deliberately relinquishes a room of her own. Her shift from resentful, subconscious subservience to conscious and willing self-sacrifice makes the spectator, as well as Frik herself, more aware of Frik’s ancillary position in relation to René. Moreover, as Maggie Gale points out, Daviot further emphasizes the element of choice in Frik’s decision by contrasting her with Hazel Graham, a young woman who is tied to performing domestic duties for her famous father since she is dependent on his income to survive (150-51).

Frik’s self-imposed role as supporter and almost surrogate mother to René raises the question addressed by Maude Royden, as well as male theorists such as Ludovici and Harrison, that women may be naturally predisposed toward motherhood and therefore not toward genius. At least one contemporary reviewer interprets the play as a celebration of the genius of motherhood as different but analogous to artistic genius: “Genius was in this shy, awkward, uncouth youth with the wonderful hands and genius of another sort --
the genius of mothering — in that dark and sombre creature Rydman, many years older than he, who inspired, encouraged and protected him” (Evening Star). This review interprets the play in the terms of contemporary theorists who believed that woman was intrinsically different from man, and that her differences predisposed her to create children rather than create a work of art. Though Daviot admits that women may be more comfortable in this motherly role, she hardly celebrates it as the reviewer suggests. Instead, she questions the willingness with which women play this supportive role, and suggests that the sacrifices they make for men are not as noble and fulfilling as either men or women might like to believe.

Daviot introduces only very subtle hints that Frik’s decision may not be for the best. Before she leaves, Frik shows signs of understanding the extent to which she has denied herself in her relations with René: “I must possess myself again,” she says (70). René implores her not to leave, but she replies: “I want my own life again. I have work to do. I cannot do it when I am like this” (70). Her “I am like this” suggests that she realizes that the problem is within herself and not in René, but this realization leads only to feelings of worthlessness: “You are equal to everything that happens. It is I who am inadequate” (71). Frik later explains her decision to return to René by denigrating her own work in favour of his: “You can do those great things that I can never do. If I invest the money again, it brings only daily bread; if I spend it this way [on René’s art], it makes beauty and happiness. You can’t refuse it, René. It is the measure of my faith in you” (84). René responds, after a long pause, “Of your love” (84). His mild alteration of her words implies that he understands she is sacrificing herself for him rather than for his art, and that her gesture of self-sacrifice is not so much in deference to his greater genius as a symbol of her love. Daviot thus allows at least the possibility that Frik’s work is inferior only because she allows it to take second place to René.
Daviot further questions Frik’s decision to sacrifice her work by suggesting that Frik’s doubts about her own ability may be due in part to René’s lack of confidence in her. Although he overtly supports her work, René never has as much confidence in her as he has in himself:

RENÉ. You think I am a boy, to be petted. But I am the strong one of us two.

[FRIK]. You are just a baby.

RENÉ. All the same, it is so. You need looking after more than I do. I know what I shall do with my life.

[FRIK]. And I do not? Is there not my book to be written?

RENÉ. Yes, of course. But --

[FRIK.] (having caught sight of a drawing). That is me! (19)

René’s “But --” is significant here in its implication that Frik’s ambition is not on the same footing as his. With Frik’s encouragement, he allows the conversation to turn immediately to his own work. In a discussion with Hazel Graham in Frik’s absence, René makes his scepticism of Frik’s ability to produce more explicit:

HAZEL. How is her book progressing?

RENÉ (pausing before his answer, because he is interested in what he is doing -- out of his absorption). Oh, she will never do anything.

HAZEL (astonished). Never do -- ! Do you mean that she has no -- ?

RENÉ (retrieving hastily). I mean that she will never be persuaded to give up house-cleaning and attend to her talent.

HAZEL. Oh, I see. I thought for a moment -- But she is very clever, isn’t she?

RENÉ. She is a genius. (46)

Daviot’s stage directions indicate that René’s confidence in Frik’s genius may be assumed for Hazel’s benefit, and not genuine.
Whatever his private doubts, however, René consistently demonstrates his support for Frik’s work in her presence. Only once does he seem to undermine her success before her, and his motivation here is ambiguous. Smith, the poet through whom René had hoped to gain acclaim in England, proves to be a disappointment, and the pair make fun of him when he leaves their apartment. René’s sarcasm discloses a hint of jealousy; the lines he selects to imitate are the very lines in which Smith, albeit patronizingly, flatters Frik and predicts success for her: “RENÉ (imitating Smith). And some day I hope I shall read your book, and I shall say: ‘I had tea with her once; a charming woman’; and I shall -- ” (43). Though hesitant at first to partake in René’s rampage, Frik allows herself to be swayed by his contempt for Smith, and obediently follows his suggestion that they burn their copies of Smith’s books.

Interestingly, René’s overt support for Frik’s work does not appear to come from actually reading any of it. Whereas René often displays his work to other characters within the play, as well as to the audience, Frik appears not to show her work to anyone, even René, and there is never any evidence on stage of her work in progress. Her behaviour is reminiscent of Jane Austen’s, who felt compelled to hide her manuscripts when people interrupted her at work, as Virginia Woolf notes in A Room of One’s Own by way of reproaching society for discouraging women writers (64). Because we have no external evidence of Frik’s talent, we can never be sure whether her decision to defer to René’s genius is warranted.

Whether or not René has contributed to Frik’s lack of self-confidence, her discomfort with her own ability is evident throughout the play. Her embarrassment at telling Smith about her book contrasts with René’s inclination to flaunt his ability. Hazel Graham, the young woman who appears with the Smiths and is introduced to René as a writer, also plays down her writing. Through this similarity between the two women’s attitudes toward their literary talent, Daviot may be proposing a more general contrast
between male and female artists. Again, at the literary dinner party in Act II, Frik balks at the idea that she might be a genius like René, and seems to be right in assuming the word is applied to her in jest. When she returns to René in the third act, Frik gives in entirely to her feelings of inferiority:

FRIK. No, listen to me. I know much now. I know, first, that I shall never write the great book we talked of.

[As RENÉ shows signs of protesting
Oh, yes, I have talent. I shall write a book -- like ten thousand other books. When at last I make myself acknowledge that, I see how selfish I am. All the time I live on my little cheque, thinking only of myself and the book I should write. I keep that small security to myself, jealous, like a miser. And at last I see how shameful I am. (83-84)

Frik's humility stands in stark contrast to René's audacious self-confidence. His conviction of his own greatness never falters. For instance, when asked who is the greatest influence in modern art, René gives his own name (87). Self-confidence is almost a religion for him, as seen in his exchange with Frik when he decides to go to war. Frik comments that there is not even a God to pray to, and René replies, “No. Only our own belief in ourselves” (100). Whether Frik has no confidence in her ability because, as Ede suggests in his biography, she has no talent, or whether she has less self-assurance because she is a woman, is a question that Daviot's play leaves unanswered. But this ambiguity introduces at least the possibility that Frik's concession to René stems not from lesser genius, but merely from less confidence.

The play remains inconclusive about Ingrid's decision to give up her art and her independence for René. On one level, Daviot encourages the spectator to admire Frik's gesture of self-sacrifice for the sake of love. With very subtle irony, however, Daviot indicates the problem of this very act. In Act III, just after Frik has declared her intention
to devote her life to serving René’s genius, the author chooses a revealing time for Frik’s entrance on stage. An art dealer, Hergesheimer, comments on a successful female author:

HERGESHEIMER. Oh, she’s not a bad sort really. Wants slapping. All these successful women do. Once they get the vote there’ll be no holding them.

[Enter FRIK, from the street. She is carrying books and shopping basket, and she looks happy and at peace] (89-90)

Frik’s timing is surely no coincidence. Her entrance exposes the fallacy of Hergesheimer’s pronouncement: here is a potentially successful woman who has essentially stopped herself; who has deliberately decided to continue in a subordinate role; and, moreover, who seems quite content with her decision. Written and performed several years after the vote has been won (though set just before that time), the play suggests that political equality may not be enough for all women to achieve independence and success. Like most inter-war feminists, Daviot sees that the vote in itself cannot redress the psychological ramifications of centuries of women’s subordination to men.

Daviot’s irony becomes most incisive at the end of the play, when the juxtaposition of René’s parting words and the epilogue emphasizes the tragedy of Frik’s decision. Just before the end of the last act, René guiltily pays tribute to Frik’s contribution to his art:

REÑÉ. I have felt often that if it had not been for me your book might be finished by now. It hurt me, that. Don’t feel that you have wasted those years with me, Frik, will you? Whatever happens. Because no one could have done for me what you did. (Indicating her portrait) You have done that as much as I have. And when they crowd round to admire, you can say: “I made René Latour.”

(100)

Immediately following this declamation, the epilogue discovers Ingrid in a gallery next to this same portrait, but the scene in no other way resembles René’s vision of the future.
There is no crowd of admirers, but merely a few stragglers who pay very little attention to the sculpture, with the exception of one curious schoolgirl. Frik's absent and unexpectant gaze conveys none of the pride that René imagines; her life of self-sacrifice has been rewarded not with praise and glory, but with anonymity and sorrow. Daviot leaves the audience to decide whether Frik's life has been as much wasted as René's was by the War.

The scenes that frame *The Laughing Woman* provide an important context within which Frik and René's tragic story unfolds. Only at the end of the play do we realize that the despondent, silent woman of the prologue is Ingrid Rydman, and that the laughing bust we find on stage in the prologue is hers. The juxtaposition between the work of art and its real subject lends an ironic element to the sentimentality of the ending. At the very end, the audience is left not with the dejected woman, but with an "*amused, smiling woman on the pedestal*" (103). Set apart from the essentially tragic story of a woman who has never overcome the loss of the man she loves, the sculpture figuratively laughs at the tragedy of the ending as the curtain falls. The ironic distance between Ingrid the woman, who almost never laughs except viciously during the play and who is certainly far from laughing at the end, and this permanently laughing representation of her comments on the artist as well as his subject. René, wanting to believe Frik was happy in her life with him, chose to immortalize this expression. Frik, who has chosen to give over her life to support René, is a broken, lifeless woman now that he has died. The sculpture seems to have more life than she has; its countenance is more animated than the silent, listless woman on stage.

Daviot draws the spectator's attention to the extent to which Frik is effectively obliterated from the present and from posterity. She is nameless (the guard refers to her as "lady"), expressionless (the stage directions describe her as unexpectant, her eyes always on the floor), and motionless (she does not move until she is ushered out the
door). An inquisitive schoolgirl comments that the gallery literature does not even identify her as subject of the portrait: “I wish they had said who she was” (103). Frik may have “made René Latour,” as René himself concedes, but she will not be remembered for that. We are left with an emblem of what has happened in the play: a woman whose energy is evident only in a man’s art.

Daviot’s juxtaposition of the bust and its original model is also significant in the context of the modern British art scene. At a time when British art theorists such as Clive Bell and, to a lesser extent, Roger Fry, were emphasizing the formal qualities of art and moving away from its representational function and subject matter, Daviot provides her audience with a poignant reminder of the importance of the subject or model, bringing her to life and rousing our sympathy for her. She draws attention to Frik as subject by placing her next to her bust on stage in the scenes framing the play, and by bringing this subject to life in the acts in between. The fact that she gives her play the same title as René’s portrait highlights their similarity of subject matter as well as the discrepancy between their interpretations. René chooses to show Frik laughing because, as he tells Hazel, that is when she is at her most beautiful: “Yes, she is very beautiful. Some day I shall show the world how beautiful. It is when she is amused -- have you noticed? -- that she is most lovely. All her spirit flows into -- (Halting abruptly, coming to earth)” (47). Daviot’s title is more ironic. During most of the play, Ingrid is anxious, upset, or angry. In the last act, she smiles, but does not laugh. The only time she laughs is after the Smiths’ visit, but then she does so viciously as she tears and burns Smith’s books. This discrepancy suggests that René, in privileging beauty, may present a work of artistic

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6 Clive Bell describes his “aesthetic emotion” as coming strictly from form, not from subject; Roger Fry insists that there is no direct and decisive connection between life and art, but does believe that some element of representation, however distant, is a necessary third dimension to any picture.
genius, but he does not present a true picture of Ingrid Rydman. In showing the reality of Frik’s life in ironic contrast to René’s idealized representation of her, Daviot intimates that the modernist aesthetic, in its attention to form and beauty over subject, misrepresents the reality of this woman’s life. This reading would suggest that Daviot makes deliberate use of realism to convey her feminist message.

Separated by more than ten years, Will Shakespeare and The Laughing Woman offer differing perspectives on women’s potential for genius. Dane strives to demonstrate that women are in fact quite present in the works of men, and seeks to rectify their apparent absence by championing their role in inspiring men’s genius. Daviot, on the other hand, focuses on the social and psychological elements that impede women’s genius while furthering men’s. Will Shakespeare, written soon after women won the right to vote, reflects the more optimistic feminist perspective of the early twenties in its celebration of women’s power to inspire. The Laughing Woman, written during the growing political, social, and economic disillusionment of the thirties, presents a bleaker picture of women’s self-perpetuating ancillary role with respect to male genius.

Both authors discussed in this chapter turn to earlier periods in history -- Daviot, to the pre-war era and Dane, to the Renaissance -- in order to re-examine women’s role in the lives of men of genius. The chapter that follows will delve further into feminist interpretations of history by examining two more plays by inter-war women dramatists, Gordon Daviot’s Queen of Scots (1934) and Joan Temple’s Charles and Mary (1930). The new focus on history will allow a fuller treatment of some of the issues raised in this chapter, particularly the traditional restrictions placed on women, and women’s misrepresentation by men.
Chapter Two: 

Historical Women 

in Gordon Daviot's Queen of Scots (1934) 

and Joan Temple's Charles and Mary (1930) 

It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of [Newnham or Girton] that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided. . . . For one often catches a glimpse of [women] in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh, perhaps a tear. (Woolf, Room 44-45)

Many inter-war feminists echo Virginia Woolf's complaint that women have been effaced from history. In A Room of One's Own, Woolf points out just how little historical knowledge exists about the lives of ordinary women. She proposes that women must have been far less significant than they seem to be in the works of great authors, and that they would have had very little opportunity to participate in any of the great movements that constitute historians' view of the past (42-44). Elizabeth Robins makes a similar argument in her feminist treatise, Ancilla's Share, in which she calls upon women to redress the imbalance created by male historians and biographers in their representations of great women: "Would that we could see Queen Elizabeth through the eyes of the contemporary woman, or could hear of Sappho from some Aspasia of an earlier day!" (62). Robins's stance is more radical than Woolf's: she believes that men should not write women's biographies since they are not as qualified for the task as women. John
Langdon-Davies, in *A Short History of Women*, agrees that women have been misrepresented by historians. He holds that the history of women is built upon a series of fictitious conceptions of womanhood emphasizing their sexual, mental or physical differences from men (4-5). The need for more histories of women written by women identified by these inter-war feminists is answered in part by the two plays discussed in this chapter, Gordon Daviot’s *Queen of Scots* (1934) and Joan Temple’s *Charles and Mary* (1930).

This chapter deals with historical women from a different perspective than the last. The plays treated in Chapter One, *Will Shakespeare* and *The Laughing Woman*, acknowledged and challenged women’s traditional, often invisible, role in supporting great male artists of history. The two plays considered in this chapter feature female protagonists who are famous in their own right. At the time these plays were written, neither Mary Stuart nor Mary Lamb had been ignored by history, but their presentation had been distorted by gender assumptions such as those Langdon-Davies identifies. Mary Stuart’s biographers tended to represent her in extreme and even mystical terms, either sanctifying her as victim and martyr, or vilifying her as wanton and cruel. Mary Lamb tended to be relegated to a secondary role in biographies of Charles, which praised Charles for his continued devotion to her in her madness. Daviot and Temple work against these biases in very different ways. Daviot breaks down the mystique and the mythology of Mary Stuart, presenting her in ordinary, human terms. Like Frik in Daviot’s earlier play, *The Laughing Woman*, Mary is no feminist paragon; rather, she becomes an example of how destructive it can be for women to succumb to men’s images of them. Temple’s portrayal of Mary Lamb, on the other hand, does contain suggestions of feminist resistance or subversion, both through Mary’s madness and through her relationship with her brother Charles.
Despite Woolf's and Robins's complaints concerning the dearth of solid information about women of previous centuries, numerous books dating from the suffrage era and beyond included their own histories of women. For the most part, these feminist histories were not as interested in uncovering new information about women as they were in promoting a progressive view of history leading inevitably toward the emancipation of women. As early as 1916, Rebecca West commented wryly on the plethora of feminist books incorporating chapters on women's history:

We all know the customary progression of a book on feminism. First there is the biological prelude with its deductions on the position of women drawn from notes on the courtship of the octopus. Then there comes the historical section, which leaps hastily from a period of alleged matriarchy, the surrender of which (if it ever existed) argues such weakness on the part of women that feminists really ought to keep quiet about it, to an enumeration of the privileges enjoyed by abbesses in the Middle Ages. . . . ending in the demand, as sharp, as lacking in restraint and self-control as the cry of a man with an assassin's knife in his breast, that women should have the vote. (327)¹

As West implies, many of these feminist histories are far from reliable; they tend to manipulate the scant information available to serve their own purposes. Nevertheless, these histories flourished well into the inter-war years, and doubtless influenced the inter-war perception of women's historical position.

These feminist histories tended to present the history of women as a gradual progression toward emancipation, and would trace the historical degradation of women

¹From West's review of Towards a Sane Feminism by Wilma Meikle in Daily News 17 Nov. 1916, reprinted in The Young Rebecca.
while recognizing their improving rights\(^2\). As Rebecca West points out, many histories of the time, whether written by men or by women, would trace women's history back to a Matriarchal Age that preceded the current Patriarchal Age\(^3\). The matriarchy theory was first introduced in 1865 by a German historian, Bachofen, and was met with disfavour at that time. The theory was revived, however, during the height of the suffrage battle, and its popularity endured well into the 1920s (Harrison 3-4). Certain feminist historians used the theory of a primitive matriarchy to illustrate that women's historical subjection to men was not natural, but imposed by force\(^4\). According to this theory, recorded history became virtually synonymous with patriarchy. Austin Harrison summarizes this perspective neatly: “Thus, as ‘history’ begins, the wife and mother no longer have rights” (16). Other inter-war feminists were as reluctant as West to accept the matriarchy theory. Winifred Holtby, for one, concurs in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (1934) that the few known facts about primitive communities can be made to fit almost any theory (8). John Langdon-Davies more bluntly dismisses what he terms the “stupid and inconsequent” matriarchy theory espoused by “the propagandists of progress” for having no scientific basis and making no historical sense (3).

While most accounts of women’s history from this period convey a general sense of evolution, they do not usually claim that the position of women steadily improved without periods of deterioration. Most feminist historians believe the Renaissance to be a high point for women, followed by a bad fall in the Restoration, with conditions for

\(^2\)These histories include Blease, Finot, Gamble, G. Hill, and Staars.

\(^3\)Proponents of the Matriarchal Age theory include Christie, Farr, Finot, Harrison, Hartley, and Lumsden.

\(^4\)These historians include Ralcy Husted Bell, Christie, and Ward.
women improving only gradually over the course of the nineteenth century. As the two plays discussed in this chapter are set in the Elizabethan period and in the early nineteenth century, the remainder of this section will be devoted to the inter-war views of women's position at these times.

Inter-war histories tend to see the Elizabethan age as one in which women were granted considerable respect (G. Hill 117; Langdon-Davies 306-14). W. Lyon Blease goes so far as to say that, until the generation before his, the position of women in the Elizabethan era was higher than ever before or since (3). Winifred Holtby presents a more balanced perspective of the Renaissance: she recognizes that Renaissance laws discriminated against women in general, but that certain individual women of the upper classes did have new opportunities for intellectual and artistic development (Women 32). Holtby adds, however, that the puritanical mistrust of women's bodies brought about by Protestantism and John Knox afflicted women for centuries (33). Phillips and Tomkinson concur with Holtby that the age saw advances as well as setbacks for women, including gentlewomen's education on the one hand, and John Knox's bitter attacks on women on the other (31, 34). Eliza Burt Gamble points out that, though the Renaissance was a positive time for women, and Queen Elizabeth's reign a brilliant one, the conditions of the masses remained bad (367-80). Similarly, both Georgiana Hill and John Langdon-Davies caution that the advantage of learning held by many upper-class women during this period does not necessarily imply that the average woman was educated or even considered a reasonable being. Most historians, nevertheless, concede that the Elizabethan period was considerably better than the Stuart reign that followed, despite these discrepancies between great and ordinary women. Only Austin Harrison depicts the Elizabethan age as particularly dire for women, "essentially a male ebullition, Platonic

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5Blease, Winter, and Lumsden are among those who identify this pattern.
and homogenic,” in which women were relegated to a purely decorative and ancillary role (24-25).

Women’s historians frequently turned to literature, particularly Shakespeare, as evidence for women’s position in the Renaissance. Ida Beatrice O’Malley, basing her claims on Renaissance poetry and drama, contends that the Elizabethans thought of women as guiding stars and helpmates (57). Drawing on Shakespeare’s plays, Alice Ames Winter paints the Tudor period as a robust time for women: “Probably we can hardly overestimate what it has meant to our national tradition that the greatest of our dramatists saw for himself that powerful, self-willed, wily, wise, old, red-headed Queen Bess ruling his land” (192). David Staars comes to a much less optimistic conclusion by using Shakespeare to piece together the “inner life” of women in the Renaissance. After a detailed examination of the various types of women in Shakespeare, he decides that women appealed to Shakespeare only in their youth and in their first love; upon marriage, they ceased to be of interest (114). Staars suggests that Shakespeare’s preferences reflect women’s status in the Renaissance: before marriage, a young woman belonged to herself and was free, whereas after marriage she became the humble servant of her lord and master (115). It is precisely this practice of generalizing from the works of great men to women’s position in history that Virginia Woolf critiques in A Room of One’s Own. She points out that, while women pervade the poetry of all ages, they are virtually absent from history. To illustrate, she contrasts Shakespeare’s impressive women with Trevelyan’s references to women in his social history as having been “locked up, beaten, and flung about the room” (Woolf, Room 43). Given the contradictory inferences drawn from Shakespeare’s plays about women’s position in the Renaissance, Woolf’s proposition that great works of art do not represent an accurate historical view of women is particularly germane.
While women's historians disagreed about the position of ordinary women in the Renaissance, they all agreed on one thing: Queen Elizabeth. Even the sketchiest feminist histories paused to admire the Queen, and to remind the reader that she was indeed a woman. Langdon-Davies and Elizabeth Robins both identify a tendency among their contemporaries to depict Elizabeth as masculine because of her intellect and her strength of will. Langdon-Davies suggests that this inclination arises from a perceived incongruity between being a female and being a public character that emerged after the Elizabethan era (307). Robins more bitterly ascribes the modern tribute to the “masculine intellect” of Queen Elizabeth to men’s custom of referring to any strong or great quality in woman as masculine (77). Whatever its origin, this tendency to emphasize Elizabeth’s masculinity is probably the reason that so many inter-war historians felt the need to insist on her femininity. A rather extreme example can be found in Rose Champion de Crespigny’s tribute to Elizabeth’s leadership and intelligence in effusively feminine, as well as feminist, terms:

And with it all, she too was a woman, with feminine vanity, and feminine whole-heartedness where she loved. He must have been either a very splendid representative of manhood, or a blind egotist, who could have honestly considered Elizabeth his inferior, and her rule was no mere empty name, bestowed by courtesy on the head of the State. She ruled by the strength of her own will, and a power of statesmanship that commanded respect, and it can never be said that under the influence -- even dominance -- of a woman a nation is bound to deteriorate in either position or morals. (90-91)

One of the most ludicrous inter-war accounts of Elizabeth’s femininity is Beverley Tucker’s. In his study of the Queen’s genius, he describes her as “the world’s premier flapper,” comparing her to modern women in physique, dress, and propensity to shock. Intending to praise Elizabeth’s character and statesmanship, Tucker emphasizes her
brazen qualities and focuses on her love affairs and flirtations. Though Tucker's portrait of Elizabeth is laughable, he at least acknowledges that good statesmanship is not necessarily incompatible with femininity. A more sensible tribute to Elizabeth's femininity can be found in Trevelyan's *History of England*, which characterizes the Queen as a ruler who made everything subservient to the purposes of state, "without ceasing to be a woman" (326). Trevelyan suggests that Elizabeth used coquetry as a means of keeping nobles and courtiers in their places and exacting personal devotion in public service. He also points out that this "heroic" woman, unlike any man in English history, served as her own Prime Minister for forty-five years, most of them fraught with danger, and she never allowed her poor health to shake her course (327).

Just as Queen Elizabeth became for feminist historians the emblematic figure of the Renaissance, so did Mary Wollstonecraft play this role for the early nineteenth century. The early years of the twentieth century saw a general resurgence in Wollstonecraft's popularity, and several new editions of her writings brought her to the attention of feminists. Millicent Garrett Fawcett's introduction to her 1889 edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* links Wollstonecraft to the contemporary feminist movement through her claims for women's right to education, economic independence, and representation in Parliament. By the time of Winifred Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (1934), Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* had been reprinted eighteen times, and Holtby could pronounce it "the bible of the women's movement in Great Britain" (41).

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6In Tucker's defence, it should perhaps be noted that Elizabeth Jenkins, in her 1955 description of Elizabeth, is hardly any better at combatting female stereotypes: "Elizabeth had it is true neither of the drawbacks which are supposed commonly to afflict intellectual women. She was attractive to look at and she had an innate sense of dress" (36).
Though a feminist came to represent the times, feminist histories by no means saw the early nineteenth century as a high point for women; the time is known rather for the conditions and attitudes that Wollstonecraft criticizes. Madeline Linford, who published Wollstonecraft’s biography in 1924, describes her as “the great pioneer of the feminist movement,” but notes that Wollstonecraft’s work was ridiculed in her lifetime (7). Linford draws attention to women’s low status, the restrictions placed on them, and their absolute lack of rights in the years preceding and immediately following Wollstonecraft’s life; in Linford’s view, woman was no better off than an animal created for her husband’s physical pleasure. Rose Champion de Crespigny likewise describes Wollstonecraft’s times as unjust and even antagonistic to women (126). Several feminist historians turn to the anti-feminist views of Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries, Rousseau, Dr. Fordyce and Dr. Gregory, to explain women’s position at that time. In A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Wollstonecraft attacks all three men for limiting woman’s purpose to making men’s lives agreeable. She criticizes husbands’ despotic power over their wives, and argues that the control parents have over their daughters amounts to a form of bondage: “thus taught slavishly to submit to their parents, [women] are prepared for the slavery of marriage” (170). Wollstonecraft insists that women should not merely acquire superficial accomplishments, but should enlarge their minds with learning as men do. Early-twentieth-century feminists, following Wollstonecraft’s lead, look back to Rousseau’s diatribe against women’s education and Dr. Fordyce’s and Dr. Gregory’s antiquated advice for young women as evidence of the reprehensible attitude toward women prevalent at this time. These writers conjure a vision of women’s life in the early nineteenth century as one of modesty, reserve, and silent suffering, a time when woman was naturally passive, weak, and subject to man’s restraint.

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7 These feminists include Langdon-Davies, Linford, Fawcett, and Champion de Crespigny.
The early nineteenth century came to be seen as the base of a curve leading up to women's emancipation. According to Gamble, women were completely dependent upon men at this time, but over the course of the century they slowly awakened from this "hideous nightmare" as they moved towards their right to self-government (375). Blease detects a movement toward women's independence and equality early in the nineteenth century, as women began to move into the work-force and were no longer strictly confined to the home. Finally, Hill describes the Victorian era as an age of women's progress: "Even those who advocate keeping woman in what is called her 'sphere,' have admitted into her sphere many things that would have amazed their predecessors" (G. Hill 88). Women were beginning to share in social and intellectual activities; they were becoming more than mere objects of pleasure or domesticity. For early twentieth-century women's historians, the early nineteenth century, though a time when women enjoyed few rights and little independence, also marked the beginning of the modern feminist movement.

Gordon Daviot's Queen of Scots and Joan Temple's Charles and Mary do not focus on the women designated by early-twentieth-century histories as emblematic of their age. Both, however, place these figures in the backgrounds of their dramatizations of history. Daviot gives Queen Elizabeth a strong off-stage presence, contrasting her calculated efficiency with Mary's emotional blunders. In Temple's play, Wollstonecraft is never mentioned but implied: William Godwin and the woman he married three years after Wollstonecraft's death host a gathering in the second act of the play. Wollstonecraft's outcry against the tyranny of the family structure and the servitude of women emerges in the play through Mary Lamb's treatment by her mother and her eldest brother. Temple and Daviot, in choosing to focus on historical women who had not yet received much feminist attention, fill a gap that existed in both feminist and traditional histories. Their heroines are not held up as feminist prototypes, Queen Mary because of
her troubled reign and Mary Lamb because of her troubled mind. Yet both authors turn history's ambivalence toward their heroines to their advantage, using their hardships to indicate ways in which women have been manipulated or oppressed in the past as in the present. While Daviot dwells on the difficulties Mary Stuart faced because of her gender, Temple offers some means of escaping traditional gender confines through Mary Lamb's unconventional relationship with her brother Charles.

Gordon Daviot, *Queen of Scots*, 1934

“Woman’s shortest road to consideration [in men’s books] has been through her appeal . . . to his sex instincts” (50), Elizabeth Robins writes in *Ancilla’s Share*. She adds: “To say ‘a public man’ is to convey the idea of one arrived at eminence, usually at office; at honours, if not honour. To say ‘a public woman’ is, or was recently, to say a woman of the streets” (76). Robins’s argument holds especially true for Mary, Queen of Scots. Mary’s reputation as a great lover and a great beauty has followed her from her own time to the present day. Gordon Daviot’s sensitive and subtle portrayal of Mary Stuart in *Queen of Scots* represents a significant departure from the mystique that usually surrounds historical and biographical treatments of this Queen. In her portrayal of Mary as an ordinary woman lacking the political savvy necessary to her position, Daviot carefully avoids the temptation to romanticize. She makes no apologies for her heroine’s shortcomings as leader, but her dramatization does reflect a feminist awareness of the forces operating against women in positions of power. As in her play *The Laughing Woman* discussed in the last chapter, Daviot emphasizes the ways in which women absorb and reproduce society’s lower expectations of them. Mary’s preoccupation with beauty and her lack of control over her emotions make her exactly what feminists of Daviot’s day were fighting against. Daviot does not attempt to deny the existence of such
women; instead, she shows that these traits neither uniquely nor necessarily belong to women, and illustrates how men can manipulate such weaknesses to gain control.

Queen of Scots covers Mary’s short rule in Scotland, from 1561 to 1568. It begins and ends at a commoner’s house in the port town of Leith. Mary receives a cold welcome to Scotland: the weather is bad, her brother James greets her with resentment, and John Knox lambastes her with decided animosity. Things only get worse once she ascends the throne. Mary discovers a plot to take her prisoner, orchestrated by her advisor Lord Bothwell, and she is forced to send him to exile in France. The obvious sexual attraction between them makes her task all the more difficult. Growing ever more lonely and miserable, Mary foolishly settles upon Lord Darnley as a husband. Her decision is very unpopular, not only with Queen Elizabeth but with most of her own council, and results in James leaving her court. Mary uses his departure as an excuse to pardon Bothwell, an act she rationalizes as an attempt to garner more support. Darnley proves to be an unfaithful drunkard and shirks his official responsibilities, but it is not until he conspires with Bothwell and others to murder Mary’s faithful Italian secretary, Rizzio, that Darnley loses her favour irretrievably. Mary does not have to suffer this burdensome husband for long. Shortly after she bears Darnley’s child, Bothwell succeeds in yet another violent plot, Darnley’s murder. With his rival safely out of the way, Bothwell, true to the type of romantic villain, kidnaps the Queen with plans to marry her. Swept away by passion, Mary does not resist his scheme. Her willingness to sacrifice public opinion by forming an alliance with the man known to have murdered her husband forces Lethington, her one reliable advisor, to resign. Mary’s happiness with Bothwell is short-lived. She soon learns that Bothwell does not share her love, but desires marriage only for the sake of power. The play ends with Mary abdication in her child’s favour, with her brother James as Regent.
Queen of Scots was first produced by John Gielgud at the New Theatre on June 8th, 1934. It was only mildly successful, especially compared to the brilliant success of Daviot's first history play, Richard of Bordeaux (1932), also directed by Gielgud. In his foreword to a collection of Daviot's plays, Gielgud hints that the author was not happy with the revision process for Queen of Scots, and from that point on was less willing to allow much directorial interference with her manuscripts (ix). The part of Mary Stuart was played by Gwen Ffrangçon-Davies, an actress Daviot greatly admired, and to whom she dedicated the play. Laurence Olivier played the Earl of Bothwell, and James Mason (of Hollywood fame) played two minor roles. This production was important for introducing Olivier to Gielgud, a partnership that introduced Olivier to Shakespeare the following year when Gielgud suggested that they alternate the roles of Romeo and Mercutio in his production of Romeo and Juliet. Olivier was brought into the Queen of Scots production only a week before its opening. He replaced Ralph Richardson, who recommended that Olivier take his place since he believed himself miscast as Bothwell and unable to meet the romantic demands of the part (Holden 79; O'Connor 79n.). The role turned out to be Olivier's first undisputed success (O'Connor 79n.). Olivier speaks fondly of the play, describing it as a "lovely job" that he relished all the more for coming in at the last minute (73-74). During the play's run, Olivier, Glen Byam Shaw (who played Lord Darnley), and Campbell Gullan (who played Lethington) formed a threesome they called the Bothwellians, after Olivier's character. Behind the scenes, they created their own little drama: as each actor finished his part in the last act, he would prepare a drink so that they could all begin drinking the moment Olivier finished his scene (Olivier 74). It is probably for this reason that Mason's biographer claims the production was remembered by its survivors mainly for the vast amounts of food and drink consumed backstage during some of its longer duologues (Morley 28).
In his foreword to Daviot’s plays, Gielgud observes that Daviot would not accept the view of Mary as *femme fatale* advanced by other writers, nor would she paint her as the victim of circumstance: “She tried to take a middle way, neither praising nor blaming, and, though this treatment might have succeeded in a novel, I do not think she has given sufficiently powerful opportunities in her play for an actress, however brilliant, to carry off with complete success” (xi). *Spectator* critic Peter Fleming echoes Gielgud’s criticism in his suggestion that the play lacks “good drama.” He explains that, though the play is “admirable and fascinating,” “conflict seethes incessantly, but comes to a head too seldom” (920). *Saturday Review* critic Russell Gregory expresses a similar view when he first reviews the play, but then appears to change his mind two months later when he names it one of the best plays of the year. Critics seem undecided about whether or not Mary’s inconsistency of character was deliberate: Gregory raises this as a criticism in his initial review, whereas Fleming and the *Punch* critic accept instability as part of Mary’s true character: “A Mary quite puzzling and contrary, as is fitting” ([T.] 692). Daviot’s subtle delineation of character and her avoidance of dramatic climax seem to intrigue her critics, but also sometimes leave them slightly dissatisfied.

Gielgud also expresses his opinion that Daviot understood neither the intriguer nor the harlot in Mary Stuart. What Gielgud seems not to recognize is that Daviot, by taking a middle road, deliberately avoids presenting Mary in terms of the sexual stereotypes prevalent in other historical and literary treatments. The *Punch* reviewer comments that “[t]here are about as many Queens of Scots as there are historians, the choice for the dramatist lying between canonisable saints at one end of the scale and treacherous wantons at the other” ([T.] 692). Indeed, contemporary histories of Mary reflect both ends of that spectrum. Ian B. Cowan traces the genesis of Mary’s interpretation by historians, placing Victorians Froude (who vilified her) and Strickland (who idealized her) at each extreme (24). In the early twentieth century, historians’ view
of Mary hinged on the controversial Casket Letters that implicated Mary in Darnley’s murder, the authenticity of which was heatedly debated. Although Lang, the principal historian denying their authenticity, eventually admitted their credibility, the tendency was to defend Mary against accusations of immorality and deliberate cruelty (Cowan 29). Many inter-war histories, whether or not they side with Mary, are replete with distorted views of women and womanly behaviour that colour their portrayal of the Queen.

Trevelyan, one of the most reliable historians of the day, describes Mary evenhandedly as “able, energetic and attractive,” unwilling to submit to Knox and the Lords of the Congregation (333). Though he does not take sides, he does imply criticism of Mary for not controlling her private passions in deference to public policy, and acknowledges that her marriage to Bothwell “delivered her reputation and her kingdom into her enemies’ hands” (335-36). Most inter-war histories are not so free from bias. Charles Sanford Terry, in an unsympathetic portrayal of Mary, paints her as a modern-world Helen who provoked men by “the witchery of her sex” (204). On the one hand, he claims Mary was victimized by Bothwell, who contrived her ruin; on the other, he condemns her as a consenting partner of Bothwell’s evil plots against Darnley (205). Terry’s account manages to combine the wanton with the victim, employing both stereotypes to Mary’s disadvantage. Far more common at this time, however, were accounts that romanticized and exonerated Mary. Andrew Dakers portrays Mary as a tragic victim, her life a series of bereavements and betrayals. According to his highly idealized picture of Mary, “tragedy had been her only faithful companion, from the day that she lost her father when she was one week old,” until the day she died (269). He insists that her charm and beauty emanated from a “very kindly and sterling character,” and that her “band of bloody, avaricious, and treacherous nobles” forced her into very difficult positions, within the constraints of which she behaved admirably and wisely (3, 16). Edward Parry turns to mythology in his vindication of Mary, describing her as an
Andromeda without a Perseus (v). He, too, paints Mary as a victim, this time of
Elizabeth's ministers rather than her own. He supports the tradition that sees her as a
kind, honest and beautiful woman who was treated basely by Scots traitors in English
pay, "a Queen Bee in a hive of rebels" (xii). Parry emphasizes Mary's youth and
loneliness, and defends her against the early propaganda that depicted her as a vicious,
immoral and intolerant woman who murdered her husband and married her lover (vii-
viii).

The inter-war tendency to idealize Mary is most evident in the work of Grant R.
Francis and Eric Linklater, both of whom insist upon her chastity and purity (Francis xi;
Linklater 13). Francis's response to criticisms that his book whitewashes Mary will serve
to illustrate the sentimentality that permeates his and many other accounts:

Mary Stuart needs no whitewashing! She needs understanding and sympathy,
compassion in the misfortunes and the fate which befell her, and the common
justice which has hitherto been denied her, even by many of her defenders. . . . [I]f
I can succeed in securing for the most maligned woman of modern history, some
meed of justice from her thoughtless traducers, my task has been accomplished.
(xvii)

Linklater's tribute to Mary's beauty represents another common form of romanticization:
Even a cold catalogue of her features can rouse a little wonder, a little envy of
those who knew her, and anger against those who failed her; but to the inventory
of a fine straight nose, eyes that were full of light, and a most lovely mouth, must
be added courage, gaiety, a mind quick and cultivated, a kindling friendship; she
could think wisely, talk wittily, live gracefully, and be moved to highest spirits
when she rode in roughness and danger. . . . (25)

Francis and Linklater are not unique: many accounts of Mary are written in a tone which
resembles more closely that of a lover than that of an historian or a biographer. Though
Daviot gives Mary many of the qualities these men describe, such as beauty and kindness, she does not romanticize or mythologize her as they do. Instead, Daviot demonstrates the fragility of these qualities, and their susceptibility to distortion or manipulation by men.

Daviot's play also stands apart from other inter-war theatrical treatments of Mary. John Drinkwater's earlier Mary Stuart (1921) represents the Queen as a great lover who could not, and should not, be restricted to one man. The play, fittingly framed by two men's discussion about women, focuses almost exclusively on Mary's passionate nature, and the impossibility of her finding just one man to fulfil her extraordinary needs. Perhaps Shaw had this play in mind when he said that his purpose in writing Saint Joan was "to save Joan of Arc from John Drinkwater" (Graves, Long 144). Maxwell Anderson's Mary of Scotland (1934), on the other hand, characterizes Mary as a strong-willed and sharp-witted queen treated unjustly by Elizabeth. Anderson's heroine is far more reasonable and emotionally stable than Daviot's, and her actions are far less morally questionable. In Anderson's version, it is Elizabeth, not Mary's male counsellors, who preys on Mary's vulnerability as a woman. Interestingly, Anderson's Mary is more overtly feminist than Daviot's; for instance, she refuses to marry Bothwell because of the authority he would want to claim over her and her country. Anderson's feminist exertions, however, come to a somewhat disappointing end when Mary, in the climactic confrontation scene with Elizabeth, equates womanliness with sexuality and motherhood:

MARY: ... Still, STILL I win! I have been
A woman, and I have loved as a woman loves,
Lost as a woman loses. I have borne a son,
And he will rule Scotland -- and England. You have no heir!

A devil has no children. (201)
Demonizing Elizabeth for her lack of children, Mary hardly represents feminist ideals. Daviot’s feminism is more subtle and more consistent than Anderson’s, though unlike Anderson she does not try to make Mary a feminist role model.

Daviot’s representation of Mary is more ambivalent than any of these historical or dramatic treatments. Though her portrayal is sympathetic, she does not exonerate Mary from all wrongdoing. The last scene leaves the question of Mary’s culpability unresolved:

MARY (considering her): You must have heard strange things about me.

(As JANET does not answer immediately) Yes? And yet you are loyal. It is a sweet folly.

JANET: But you didn’t do those things, my lady; you couldn’t. (As MARY does not agree at once to her confident protest, she looks to her for assurance.)

MARY (quietly, reassuring and pitying): Of course I didn’t. (478)

As Mary’s tone implies, her conduct has not been irreproachable, particularly in the events leading up to Darnley’s murder and her subsequent escape with Bothwell. Mary initially permits Lethington to find some way of relieving her of her burdensome husband, as long as it does not reflect badly on her, but she subsequently retracts her request. When Darnley’s murder is about to take place, Mary seems to be aware that something is about to happen, yet she does nothing to prevent it, deliberately turning her back on the situation when Bothwell urges her to leave Darnley’s room. The stage directions during her final conversation with Darnley indicate a mixture of awareness and incapacity: “This is what she has been doing for months past: not thinking, letting things drift,” and later, “[s]he still hesitates, uncertain” yet “[s]he turns quickly and goes out of the room” (451, 454). Subsequently, she complies with Bothwell’s plans to kidnap her, but once again her thinking is confused, this time by misplaced love. Daviot’s Mary is no
saintly martyr; the moral ambiguity of her representation insists on Mary’s humanity and her susceptibility to error.

Nor does Daviot’s Mary fall at the other end of the spectrum, as witch or whore. In the play, this position is represented by John Knox, to whom Daviot does not even grant an appearance on stage. Daviot introduces Knox’s views through Mary herself, in an early conversation with Lethington:

MARY: I am a scarlet woman — altogether given over to the Devil. I spend my evenings in abominations such as dancing — he calls it prancing and posturing, by the way. I am also responsible for the foggy weather; it is a divine judgment on Scotland for harbouring me. There were other things too that I was responsible for — the poor harvest in Aberdeenshire, for instance — but I can’t recall them all.... He said if Paul had managed to live under Nero’s rule, he perhaps could make shift to live under mine. (382)

Daviot dismisses Knox as a raving lunatic, lending no credibility to his accusations. By presenting Knox’s misogynist views entirely from Mary’s point of view, Daviot begins to undermine the myth of the Scarlet Woman. She does not even portray Mary as a great lover. Bothwell observes that Mary has no idea what love is, and fears it, while Darnley insinuates that she is frigid. Darnley begins to spread rumours that his son is a bastard only after the conspirators arouse his suspicions about Mary’s relations with her secretary. Daviot thereby suggests that the myth of the Scarlet Woman was created by Knox and Mary’s male counsellors, men who knew how to use Mary’s gender and sexuality against her. The entire scene in which the conspirators convince Darnley of Mary’s infidelity is punctuated by stage directions such as “[DARNLEY] pours more whiskey, laughing in drunken hysteria. The others laugh in congratulation to each other” (420). Daviot emphasizes the clannish, masculine atmosphere in which the men work together to undermine Mary’s power.
More than the rumoured affair with Rizzio, the possibility of the Queen’s marriage to Bothwell just three months after her husband’s death leaves her open to charges of lewdness and immorality. Lethington, who throughout the play remains the most honourable of Mary’s advisors, embodies the severe moral standard for women in Mary’s day:

LETHINGTON: . . . (Indicating the window) It is fifty feet to the rocks. A quick death for outraged virtue.

MARY (looking at his hard face): Lethington, I’ve never known you like this before.

LETHINGTON: My sense of humour is not equal to you, madam. A folly so colossal, so wanton —

MARY (angry): That is enough! I don’t want to hear your opinion. (464).

Mary’s “wanton” behaviour causes a permanent break with Lethington. Though Daviot does not condone Mary’s ill-considered actions, she implies that Lethington’s uncompromising moral judgement is too extreme. In the following scene, Daviot recaptures sympathy for Mary by revealing that Bothwell has taken advantage of her love to manipulate her into compliance. Mary’s dubious behaviour is motivated not by lust but by love, misplaced though it may be, and she is devastated when she learns that Bothwell sees her as no more than a means to gain power. Rather than whitewash Mary, Daviot confronts her various offences, but resists interpreting them as categorically immoral.

Daviot also resists convention in her representation of Mary’s beauty. She draws attention to Mary’s good looks without romanticizing them, revealing instead Mary’s harmful preoccupation with her own appearance. Drawing attention to Mary’s vanity, Daviot echoes contemporary feminist Elizabeth Robins’s suggestion that society has taught women to gain assurance of their value by evoking a response from men. Robins,
having pointed out that woman’s surest way into the books of men is through her sex appeal, observes that men have taught women to cultivate their beauty: “To reach the pleasant things of life, [woman] must make herself desirable in men’s eyes” (63). In Queen of Scots, Mary shows pleasure at any recognition of her beauty, no matter how presumptuous, as when a petitioner exclaims “Sco’land’s in luck,” or when a commoner compliments Darnley’s “rare good taste” (402). Too often Mary is preoccupied with her appearance when she should be concerned about diplomacy. The commoner who shelters Mary in the opening scene draws attention to the Queen’s vanity as Mary arranges her hair in anticipation of her brother’s arrival: “A bonnie-like Queen that has to keek in a mirror before she can meet her own brother!” (367). Mary is even more particular about her dress in preparation for Lethington’s visit, since she has heard that he admires Elizabeth. Her lady-in-waiting, Beaton, must remind her that, “It isn’t her dress he admires; it’s her diplomacy” (379). Mary takes refuge in her beauty when politics overwhelm her, as we see after she exiles Bothwell at the end of Act I: “A little sojourn in France will do my lord of Bothwell a world of good. (As she catches sight of herself in the mirror) You know, I quite forgot to ask Lethington if that is a wig that Elizabeth wears” (391). Mary’s petty rivalry with Elizabeth in terms of appearance seems inappropriate at such a serious juncture. Insecure in her statesmanship, Mary frivolously reverts to her beauty as ground on which she can more easily compete with the English Queen.

From the moment Mary enters the stage, Daviot undercuts the mystique that has grown around her. To Daviot, Mary is no mythological figure; she is an ordinary woman who probably should never have become Queen. Daviot first presents Mary through the eyes of commoners, focusing on her reception by an earthy Scotswoman who refuses to make a fuss over her. Mary’s entrance is hardly dignified: she complains childishly about the lack of ceremony on her arrival and almost laughs at the hospitality she
receives. To seal the indignity, a report comes that her dog has vomited on the provost’s doublet. It becomes increasingly obvious that Mary is miscast as Queen, a role that has been thrust upon her against her will. An offhand comment reinforces the distance between Mary’s nature and Lethington’s expectations of a queen:

MARY: Do you know my greatest ambition, Lethington?
LETHINGTON: To be Queen of every country in Europe.
MARY: No. Some day to stand very silent and superior in the background while you make a fool of yourself. (400)

Mary is interested too much in the personal and not enough in the political; she does not have the *sang-froid* required of a good statesperson. Bothwell scoffs at James’s attempt to influence Mary with policy: “Policy! What an argument to move a woman with!” (443). Bothwell proves to be right: he successfully manipulates Mary through her jealousy of Queen Elizabeth, whereas James makes no impact with his political arguments.

Daviot’s emphasis on Mary’s absence of political judgement may at first appear to support the anti-feminist position that women’s weak wills and susceptibility to emotion make them unfit to be rulers. The idea that Queen Elizabeth must be masculine because of her strong will introduced earlier in this chapter follows directly from this point of view. With characteristic subtlety, Daviot resists this reading of Mary on several levels. Daviot suggests that emotions are not always damaging to a ruler. Mary’s warm heart, though a liability in council, endears her to the common people. Her dealings with her subjects are exemplary in their kindness: she pardons men who were caught playing Robin Hood on Sunday; she gives a poor old woman some food; she consoles a servant who has made a mistake following orders for her son’s christening. Until she flees with Bothwell, Mary proves to be much more popular with the Scottish people than her brother James, who ruled before her. Daviot’s earlier play, *Richard of Bordeaux*, makes a related
point. While Richard’s major failing in youth is his susceptibility to his emotions, an even greater fault is his indifference in adulthood. Richard becomes bitter and weary after his wife’s death; in gaining a thick skin, he loses direction and vision. In both plays, Daviot betrays her preference for youthful impulsiveness over mature composure.

In *Queen of Scots*, as in *Richard of Bordeaux*, Daviot shows that women are not the only creatures ruled by emotion. Both Darnley and an earlier suitor, the Earl of Arran, are highly emotional and weak, without any of Mary’s charm. Arran is even more volatile than Mary: moments after he agrees to help Bothwell take Mary prisoner in his indignation at her refusal, he repents and gives the plot away. On stage, Arran is literally hysterical; off stage, he is escorted to an asylum. Darnley also allows his emotions to influence his political stance, first agreeing to participate in Rizzio’s murder, and then turning around and asking Mary’s forgiveness. Mary knows how to manipulate Darnley, and triumphs in converting him to her side in this matter. He is far less reliable a king than she a queen, never attending council meetings and spending most of his time drinking and womanizing.

Through the strong off-stage presence of Queen Elizabeth, moreover, Daviot shows that not all women are ruled by emotion in matters of state. Daviot contrasts Mary’s warmth with Elizabeth’s coldness, but suggests that coldness may be necessary to rule well. While Mary competes with Elizabeth on the grounds of her beauty and popularity with men, the audience becomes aware of a deeper contrast between the two Queens’ modes of statesmanship. Though we learn of Elizabeth only through others’ reports, we know that she is more diplomatic, wiser, and less emotional than Mary. She is clearly the better leader, even in the eyes of Mary’s most loyal supporters, her ladies-in-waiting. While Elizabeth acts with cool calculation, Mary becomes obsessed with jealousy. Mary continually measures herself against Elizabeth, alternately fuelling their rivalry and attempting to ingratiate herself. Mary’s jealousy toward Elizabeth leads her
into some bad decisions, and her counsellors take advantage of her vulnerability on that front in order to manipulate her. Lethington, for instance, alarmed that Mary would consider Philip of Spain as a husband, suggests to her that Elizabeth will not be envious of a woman married to a "half-mad epileptic" (396). Immediately defeated, Mary determines that she will defy Elizabeth by marrying Darnley instead. Bothwell, in his turn, uses the rivalry to sway Mary against her husband and ultimately to support his own bid for power.

Daviot’s representation of Elizabeth reflects the views of inter-war feminist historians who praise the Queen for her strong will and good judgement. Yet, while Daviot retains Elizabeth’s positive qualities, the comparison to Mary does not always work in Elizabeth’s favour. Elizabeth seems almost superhuman in her ability to win every contest with Mary by sheer force of character. By making Elizabeth’s presence felt but never seen on stage, Daviot further reinforces Elizabeth’s detachment. Daviot’s juxtaposition of Elizabeth and Mary calls into question not only the anti-feminist perspective that women’s emotional nature makes them unfit to rule, but also the feminist perspective on Elizabeth as the perfect example of a strong woman ruler. Daviot does not seek to prove that women make good rulers; rather, she acknowledges that women, like men, vary in their qualities as rulers, and asks her audience to consider whether they prefer Elizabeth’s ideal and perhaps unnatural disengagement to Mary’s human warmth and vulnerability. Daviot does not deny that gender plays some role in forming character, but by contrasting the two Queens she suggests that gender alone does not make or break a ruler.

While maintaining the spectator’s sympathy for Mary’s emotional vulnerability, Daviot admits that this quality allows men to take advantage of the Queen. Most of the men surrounding Mary are either weak and powerless, like Darnley and Arran, or power-hungry and self-serving, like Bothwell. Bothwell is particularly apt at controlling Mary
through her emotions. As soon as they meet, Bothwell claims he cannot bow to her because of his armour, and she permits the impertinence because she is attracted to him. Where Bothwell is concerned, Mary seems incapable of behaving rationally. She allows him to return from exile far too soon, and makes no objection when he continues to forget his position. Bothwell, aware of Mary’s attraction to him, taunts her with it. He is confident of his complete control over women:

MARY: Do women always do what you want?

BOTHWELL: Yes.

MARY (agreeing): Even the Queen, it seems. . . . (463)

Though Mary recognizes the hold Bothwell has over her, she seems unable to resist it. Her sexuality makes her powerless, just as Bothwell’s makes him powerful.

The men in Queen of Scots are a violent and callous lot who seem to do nothing but plot murders. Virtually every scene that takes place between two men leads to schemes of violence. The masculine exploits and power plays culminate with Paris and Bothwell orchestrating Mary’s kidnapping. In the exchange ensuing from their victory, Paris’s lower rank makes his arrogance especially inappropriate:

PARIS: . . . (Smoothing the doublet on his master’s back) That used to be the King’s doublet, didn’t it?

BOTHWELL: Yes. She gave it to me. The executioner always inherits the victim’s clothes. (Peering over his shoulder) Does it show where it was let out?

PARIS: No, sir. Fits wonderfully. . . . (468)

These men, proud of their conquest, appraise their spoils. This scene makes clear to Mary, as it does to the audience, that Bothwell is consumed by ambition, not passion. Daviot reveals how little Mary has to do with the men’s triumph over the late king; this is a contest between men in a male-dominated land. The women, by contrast to these men,
are loyal, and have Mary’s best interests at heart. Beaton and Fleming, though they see
their mistress’s faults, stand by her as long as they are able. Because of this distinction
between the men and women of Mary’s court Scottish court, Gale suggests, “Daviot
presents the history as a battle not only of the sexes but of a ‘male’ set of knowledge and
rules against those which could be considered to be ‘female’. . . . Ultimately Mary’s
failing is her naivety and inability to understand the rules of the political arena in which
she is manoeuvring” (147-48). Gale’s claim, though helpful, requires careful
qualification. A battle of the sexes does exist within Mary’s court, but the rivalry
between Mary and Elizabeth is at least as strong. And while it is true that Mary does not
understand the rules of her own court, it is not her gender in itself, but her capitulation to
stereotypical feminine weaknesses such as vanity and jealousy, that proves to be her
downfall. Elizabeth does not succumb to these weaknesses, and Daviot does not suggest,
as playwright Maxwell Anderson does, that Elizabeth’s success as a ruler comes at the
expense of her gender. While Daviot does present a kind of battle of the sexes in the
Scottish court, she eschews hard and fast distinctions between male and female
behaviour.

This is not to say that Daviot pays no attention to gender. What interests her in
Queen of Scots, as in The Laughing Woman before that, is how women internalize their
traditional ancillary role. The female protagonists of both plays have the opportunity to
exempt themselves from the restrictions usually placed on women of their time, Frik
because of her talent combined with an independent income, and Mary because of her
noble birth. But just as Frik allows domestic concerns to override her creative potential,
so Mary relinquishes political power in favour of personal conciliation. These women are
held back by men, but mainly because they allow themselves to be held. In the brief
moments when Mary gains the upper hand, Daviot reminds her audience that Mary,
despite her gender, has the power to overcome Bothwell, if only she would use it:
MARY (angry): You will not touch him. I make you surety for his safety here and now. I may be a woman, but my name on paper still means death to a man.

And it will be your death — or any other man's who harms Lethington.

BOTHWELL (furious): Has he converted you?

MARY (quietly): I wish he had. (466)

Mary is capable of taking charge, but will do so only on Lethington’s behalf, not her own.

Moments later, having lost Lethington’s allegiance, Mary gives in completely to Bothwell's wishes:

MARY (coldly, shocked into half-consciousness that her world is the world of the man she has dismissed and not BOTHWELL's): Your ideas are very limited, aren’t they?

BOTHWELL (coming over to her, resenting the hint of hostility and anxious to emphasise his power over her): I haven’t Lethington’s vivid imagination. (Puts an arm around her.)

MARY (contemplative): He prophesied long ago that this would happen to me. Perhaps (a little afraid) his other predictions will be true too. (Reckless) But I don’t care. I don’t care!

BOTHWELL (pointing to the door, left): That is your room. You will find your things there. (Enter PARIS, with a doublet over his arm.) Here is Paris to look after me. (Exit MARY.) Well, Paris, how are things on the Border? (467)

No longer caring what happens to her, Mary does not use what political power she has, but allows herself to submit to Bothwell’s orders as a child would. She thereby undermines her own authority irrevocably, abdicating in spirit well before she is forced to abdicate officially.

Daviot expresses Mary’s psychological powerlessness physically on stage through her imprisonment. For much of the play, Mary is held captive by her own men. She is
first imprisoned in her own home by Ruthven’s soldiers during the plot against Rizzio.
Rather than insist on her power as Queen, Mary takes pity on the guards, whom Ruthven will kill if they do not keep control, and elects to stay captive. She resortsto conventional feminine wiles to turn the situation around, feigning illness to avoid signing the conspirators’ pardons and seducing Darnley to win him back to her side. The kidnapping scene confirms that Mary’s captivity is at least partly self-imposed. Mary appears to be completely in Bothwell’s control until Lethington reminds her that she still has the means to act: “No one can keep you here against your will. Huntly and Melville would not be a party to force. You have only to say --” (465). Lethington comes to realize, as the audience does, that Mary’s imprisonment is psychological, not physical: she may have the power to act, but she does not have the will. As before, Mary’s emotions paralyse her and she puts up no resistance. Daviot does not place the entire blame for Mary’s powerlessness on the men who surround her, as violent and manipulative as they are. She makes Mary at least partly responsible for her own disempowerment, thereby also placing the power to change her situation in her own hands.

In Queen of Scots, as in The Laughing Woman, Daviot focuses on her female protagonist’s vulnerability rather than her strength. She suggests that, though women may have absorbed men’s perception of them as weak and easily manipulable, men are not exclusively responsible for women’s vulnerability. Daviot is ultimately more interested in how women limit themselves than in how men limit women. Throughout the play, Mary must be reminded that she is Queen, and therefore has more power than she realizes. Scotland may be a rough, male-dominated society, but Mary has the political power to make men respect her, if only she would use it as effectively as Elizabeth does in England. Although Mary’s vanity and emotionalism may stem from society’s long-standing bias against her gender, Daviot implies that Mary does not have to remain as helpless as she is. Joan Temple, in Charles and Mary, is more extreme in her
demonstration of the historical burden placed on women and its psychological effects. Unlike Daviot, however, Temple provides an alternative to traditional gender relations through the respectful camaraderie of Mary and Charles Lamb.

Joan Temple, Charles and Mary, 1930

As Elizabeth Robins observes in her critique of men's histories, women who have held a place in history have often done so only because of their association with famous men. Mary Lamb is one such woman: if not for the fame of her brother and his literary circle, Mary Lamb's extraordinary life would likely have gone unnoticed. Temple's drama Charles and Mary, though subtitled "A play on the life of Charles Lamb," gives Mary equal prominence with her celebrated brother. Their relationship, as Temple renders it, goes against received notions of gender roles in the early-nineteenth and even the early-twentieth centuries. In her madness, Mary Lamb is nothing like the silent, suffering angel that had come to typify early-nineteenth-century womanhood. Temple presents her madness as a form of feminist rebellion against mounting pressures of domestic life. It is Charles who most closely approximates the feminine ideal, unbegrudgingly sacrificing marriage and children in order to support his sister in her domestic and intellectual pursuits. In dramatizing Charles's exceptional relationship with his sister, Temple offers an alternative to the model of female servitude and male dominance that her feminist contemporaries still sought to overcome.

An actor as well as a dramatist, Joan Temple first appeared on stage in 1909. She studied at the Royal Academy for Dramatic Arts in London, and in 1916 was awarded their Bancroft Gold Medal for her portrayal of Grandpa in a student production of Miles Malleson's children's play, Paddly Pools. During the First World War, she worked with the British Naval Mission in Rome for two years. Her first plays were performed and published after the war. She took leading roles in at least two of her own plays, Charles
and Mary (1930) and Mrs. Fischer's War (1931). Temple died in 1965, having written over a dozen plays. Many of her plays from the inter-war years demonstrate her feminist sensibilities. The Cage (1927), for instance, describes the plight of two daughters suffering under the constraints of a traditional Victorian upbringing. The younger daughter longs to do something more than housework, while the older daughter is caught between her love for a married man whose wife is in an asylum and the old-fashioned moral code that would prevent her from being with him. This feminist consciousness is also present in Charles and Mary, which opened to favourable reviews in February 1930. The author herself was given top billing as Mary Lamb, and after the performance personally thanked the audience for the play’s warm reception. After a month, the play moved from the Everyman theatre to the Globe to continue its run for a total of fifty-eight performances. Temple’s most successful play, No Room at the Inn (1946), a sensational wartime drama about children billeted with a despicable woman whom they ultimately murder, ran for over a year at the Winter Garden theatre.

Charles and Mary, as the title suggests, focuses on Charles Lamb’s affectionate relationship with his sister. The framing scenes, set in the protagonists’ old age, show Charles and Mary writing and talking in contented, if wistful, companionship. The first act, which returns to a time when Charles and Mary’s parents were alive, contrasts greatly with the peaceful prologue. Mrs. Lamb’s pious austerity and Mr. Lamb’s peevish senility create a trying home life. Both parents show a marked preference for their eldest son, John, whom they encourage to relax while Charles and Mary struggle to support the household and to pacify their parents. Mary becomes increasingly harassed as her occupational and domestic concerns multiply. Finally, she becomes so irritated with the incompetent young girl hired to help her with her needlework that she rushes at her with a knife. Overcome by madness and unconscious of her actions, Mary stabs her own mother, who tries to restrain her. Mrs. Lamb dies while Charles comforts Mary, who
suddenly realizes what she has done. This fast-paced, action-oriented scene stands apart from the rest of the play, which remains considerably more subdued. In the second scene, John decides to move away from his family to escape the taint of Mary’s madness, while Charles convinces his father to move closer to the asylum where Mary is placed, and announces his intention to take care of her for life.

The second act finds Mary released from the asylum, a guest in William Godwin’s home along with Charles and several of their literary friends. Here Temple becomes mildly satirical as she introduces her audience to an amusingly absent-minded George Dyer, a sympathetic but needy Coleridge, and a rather obnoxious and self-centred Wordsworth, who takes every opportunity to force his poetry on unwilling ears. Charles convinces the Godwins to ask Mary to write for their new publishing house, and orchestrates the scene so that their offer does not seem to arise from pity. The tone becomes more serious by the end of the act when Charles, furious at a guest’s insensitivity about his sister’s madness, feigns rowdy drunkenness to draw attention away from her. His brotherly devotion to Mary becomes even more evident in the last act when they are forced to move because the landlady believes Mary might harm her children. Charles sacrifices not only his home but also his love for their young Quaker neighbour, Hester Savory. His self-sacrifice becomes even harder to bear when he learns, in a heart-rending moment, that Hester has resigned herself to marrying Dudley, the same guest who showed such insensitivity to Mary at the Godwins’.

Charles feels compelled to give up happiness with Hester, not so much because of his responsibility for Mary, as because his own blood is tainted with insanity. In taking up the theme of eugenics, Temple addresses a topic that attracted considerable attention in the inter-war period, in part because of the increased acceptance of birth control. Years earlier, Clemence Dane’s first play, A Bill of Divorcement (1921), had gained wide popularity for its treatment of a woman’s right to divorce on the grounds of her husband’s
insanity. The tragedy of Dane's play, however, is not so much the divorce as the daughter's forced decision to give up marriage and children because her father's insanity might be passed on. Eugenic theory likewise drives the tragedy of Charles and Mary: Charles's tainted blood forces him to deny himself a family, when clearly in all other respects he would make a much better husband and father to Hester's children than Dudley ever could.

Charles Lamb's life of good-humoured self-sacrifice encouraged sentimentality in many of his biographers. Temple's play, though often sentimental and romantic, pales in comparison to such gushing accounts as Flora Masson's, for instance, which ends:

It is the young city clerk, with the nervous stutter, the Titian head, the almost immaterial legs, and the unforgettable smile, whose memory we cherish; the Elia who took upon himself, in a moment of agony, a life's duty, and performed it; making his whole life subservient to it; sacrificing much, loving greatly, failing sometimes, weeping often, light-hearted and whimsical to the end. This is the man who has been called the most universally beloved of English writers. This is the Elia whom Thackeray has called "Saint Charles." (88-89)

Temple's sentimentality falls more in the line of exaggerating both Charles's and Mary's trials. According to most biographies, Mr. and Mrs. Lamb and John were not as difficult as Temple suggests. Lamb's original biographer, Talfourd, whom Temple acknowledges in her stage directions, describes the Lambs' home as a happy one, with affectionate parents (4). To a similar end, Temple strengthens Charles's attachment to Hester Savory by making their marriage far more of a possibility than it had been in life. According to biographer Masson, Charles's interest in the Quaker girl was actually based solely on watching her pass by his window (51).

Generally, Charles Lamb's biographers accord Mary Lamb a great deal of respect; she does not suffer from the gender bias that Mary Stuart does. Most take pains to show,
as Charles did in his letters, that their relationship was not a one-sided dependence. Talfourd describes Charles’s duty to Mary as repayment for her solicitude in his infancy (14); Ainger describes Mary in the early days as filling the position of mother as well as sister for Charles (19). Biographers show respect for Mary’s intellect as well as her character. Expressing his regret that so few of Mary Lamb’s letters have survived, E. V. Lucas describes those he has been able to collect as exhibiting “sympathetic kindliness, calm good sense, and transparent honesty beyond any writing that I know” (298). Talfourd comments on how reasonable and wise Mary was when she was herself. Masson, even more than the other biographers, speaks seriously of Mary as a writer of books for children, and emphasizes her literary career (57). In 1933, Temple’s contemporary Ida Beatrice O’Malley describes Mary Lamb as heroic, inspiring others to write though she did not publish much herself (236). O’Malley criticizes biographers who imply that Charles’s devotion to Mary prevented him from having children; like Temple before her, she believes that any insanity in the family would have been enough to prevent his marriage. Despite these respectful treatments, the fact remains that, had Charles and his literary friends not commemorated his love for his sister and commended her literary work, Mary Lamb probably would never have been known.

Temple is more careful than most biographers to give Charles and Mary equal prominence in her play. The first act is far more Mary’s than Charles’s; the gradual build-up of Mary’s madness, culminating in the murder of her mother, makes Mary the centre of attention. She is constantly in motion, coming and going from the room while the others, except for Charles, sit still in their chairs. In the rest of the play, Charles helps to keep the focus on Mary with his constant watchfulness, so that any small gesture or nervousness on her part builds exaggerated tension. Even when Mary is not on stage, her presence is strongly felt, since most conversation either centres on her or conspicuously
avoids the subject of her madness. Joan Temple wrote the part of Mary Lamb for herself to play, and in so doing created a role with great theatrical potential.

Notwithstanding the play's emphasis on Mary and Joan Temple's top billing as Mary Lamb, most contemporary reviews focused more on Charles than on Mary. Several reflect some gender bias in their patronizing praise: James Agate describes it as an "endearing little play," for instance, and Richard Jennings names it a "sweet and tender piece of sentiment." The Observer reviewer dwells further on his critique of Temple's "feminine" portrayal of Charles:

This conception of Lamb [his self-sacrificing devotion to his sister], though fired with truth, seemed to me essentially feminine, a furthering of the legend of St. Charles. For while substantiating his affections and tenderness of heart, it takes his mind for granted. It shows him whimsical (as he was) to the point of clowning, but neglects the remorseful convivialist, the literary genius, the correspondent of Manning, the happy play-goer. . . . Mary herself, on the contrary, is as firmly drawn as she is hauntingly played. ([H.H.])

This critic resents Temple's characterization of Charles as an emotional creature whose primary role is to support his sister. His concern that a woman author cannot appreciate a man of genius is reminiscent of the critical response to Clemence Dane's Will Shakespeare, outlined in the last chapter.

According to Lamb's biographers, Mary's involuntary stabbing of her mother did happen much as Temple dramatizes it in the first scene. The details that Temple adds to the incident, however, turn Mary's madness into a form of feminist rebellion against domesticity and servitude to her family. Charles Lamb's description of the incident in a letter to Coleridge is quoted by several biographers: "My poor dear, dearest sister, in a fit of insanity, has been the death of her own mother. I was at hand only time enough to snatch the knife out of her grasp. She is at present in a madhouse, from whence I fear she
must be moved to an hospital" (Ainger 28; Lucas 114). Temple's drama fleshes out this statement so as to emphasize the reasons behind Mary's madness. According to Temple, Mary's madness is not a sudden and irrational break from sanity, but the legitimate result of increasing tension arising from her family's unreasonable expectations. Both parents give Mary orders, Mrs. Lamb demanding that she pick up her bookmark, and Mr. Lamb irrationally requesting that she find his fretsaw. Both are blind to Mary's urgent need to finish her needlework for an irate customer, work that she does to help earn much-needed income for the family. When Mary becomes distressed at her parents' fighting and shouts at them to stop, Mrs. Lamb orders her to her room like a child, despite her thirty-two years. Mary's frustration heightens as her young apprentice repeatedly returns with the wrong braid for her needlework, with Mr. Lamb all the while complaining that his dinner is not served. The eldest son, John, adds to Mary's distress by insisting that she fetch his pipe from his bedroom, only to decide not to smoke until she has dinner ready. Mary's distress clearly arises from her family's insistence that she serve them before she attend to her paid work. While she does her best to meet all the demands before her, they unfairly accuse her of thinking too much about herself.

Temple's interpretation of Mary's madness does have some historical basis. Hints of frustration with traditional feminine occupations can be found in the real Mary Lamb's writings. Suggestively, it is on the subject of needlework that Mary's resistance to women's expected role emerges most clearly. In his biography of Charles Lamb, Lucas draws attention to Mary's article for the April 1815 issue of British Lady's Magazine, which he believes "abounds in Mary Lamb's shrewd, practical common sense, with perhaps a note of irony now and then" (428). The article in fact constitutes a passionate feminist statement against unpaid needlework: "I affirm that I know not a single family where there is not some essential drawback to its comfort which may be traced to needlework done at home... for which no remuneration in money is received or expected"
Lamb points out the discrepancy between women’s work and men’s, noting that many women who do not allow themselves even fifteen minutes of leisure in a day consider their husbands hardworking if they work steadily until dinnertime. She even slips in a plea for women’s education: “The disadvantages we labour under from an education differing from a manly one make the hours in which we sit and do nothing in men’s company too often any thing but a relaxation; although, as to pleasure and instruction, time so passed may be esteemed more or less delightful” (Lamb 206; Lucas 428). Lamb argues that women too often contribute to, without partaking in, men’s leisure hours. Far more subtly than Mary Wollstonecraft before her, Mary Lamb critiques the extent to which women’s lives are spent satisfying men’s every need. But though the article does show signs of discontent, it in no way anticipates the rage and violence that characterize Mary’s response to her feminine duties in the first scene of Temple’s play.

The provocative connection Temple establishes between women’s oppression and madness more likely has its roots in Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings. Mary Wollstonecraft is literally and figuratively in the background of Charles and Mary: the second act takes place about three years after her death in the home of her husband, William Godwin, and his new wife. Though Wollstonecraft is never mentioned, Temple does stress that her play’s Mrs. Godwin is Godwin’s “new” and “second” wife (48, 54, 63). Temple’s Mary dramatizes Wollstonecraft’s resistance to women’s subservient role within the family as she cries out against her parents and their unreasonable demands. Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel published posthumously by Godwin, The Wrongs of Women: or, Maria, directly links women’s unjust treatment to madness. The novel begins in a madhouse where the protagonist, Maria, is wrongfully confined by her tyrannical husband. Unlike Maria, the woman in the cell next to her is genuinely mad, having become so as a consequence of her husband’s jealousy and brutality (88). This sketch appears to be based on Wollstonecraft’s sister, Eliza Bishop, who went mad in
similar circumstances (Linford). Wollstonecraft’s projected plans for the end of her book suggest that she hoped to make an even stronger connection between feminism and madness. The judge at Maria’s trial argues that Maria’s resistance to her husband’s authority in itself constitutes madness, and that her husband was therefore justified in confining her (Wollstonecraft, Wrongs 199). Wollstonecraft makes a causal link not only between women’s madness and men’s tyranny in the home, but also between women’s confinement in asylums and men’s desire to suppress feminist rebellion. In her play, Temple does not suggest that Mary should never have been confined, but she does indicate that Mary’s madness was caused at least in part by grievances common to women in the early-nineteenth, and the early-twentieth, centuries.

While Mary’s situation accords with views of early-nineteenth-century feminism, her frustration at not being able to balance domestic and occupational expectations would also resonate with Temple’s contemporaries. Since the War and the vote, more occupations had opened to women, and more women were choosing to work outside the home. Simultaneously, however, the inter-war years saw an ever-increasing emphasis on women’s domesticity. Women’s ability to balance work and home life became a subject for debate as feminists including Winifred Holtby and Dora Russell continued to promote woman’s right to a career. Mary’s difficulty with conflicting domestic and employment duties reflects women’s position in Temple’s day as much as it does their Victorian past. Temple’s feminist interpretation of Mary’s madness thus becomes a means of bridging the gap between Lamb’s time and her own.

Through Mary, Temple demonstrates the pressures of women’s traditional servile role. By contrast to the prologue in which Mary and Charles sit side by side at a table, writing, the first act shows Mr. Lamb at the table with a cribbage-board, with his daughter “sitting opposite him, trying to utilize the little space he leaves her at the table for her business as a mantua-maker” (13-14). Literally marginalized, Mary is treated no better
than a servant. In fact, when Mary goes to the asylum in the second scene, a servant comes to take her place. Only Charles helps Mary with her domestic chores, and sympathizes with her anxiety. The contrast between the brothers is not just in character but in their attitude toward women's work:

JOHN [laying down the law]: Well, dinner-time is dinner-time, and I dislike the routine of the home being interfered with!

CHARLES: While you do nothing yourself to help m'matters on!

JOHN: This is a woman's job.

CHARLES: For Heaven's sake, let Mary alone! You know she isn't well! And yet you all try to worry her to death! I will have her treated with more consideration. (29)

John's patriarchal stance is presented as rigid and insensitive, virtually driving Mary to madness.

Mary's madness has further feminist implications in its rejection of standards of feminine behaviour. She does not suffer in silence as Charles does. In the first act, she tries her best to stay silent and obey her family, but does so with great resentment, unable to hold back complaints. As she grows angrier, her gestures correspond less and less to traditional standards of feminine behaviour. She shouts back at her parents, stamps her feet, and bangs her clenched fists on the table in a most unladylike fashion. Her assertiveness shocks her mother, who objects: "But I will have respect, Mary! Why, if I had spoken to my parents as you choose to speak to your father and me, I should have been beaten black and blue -- and with justice! [Her regal tone is intensified. During this, MARY stands clinging to the table, biting her thumb to keep herself from screaming.]" (30). Her indelicacy escalates into swearing as she shouts, "The Devil take the woman!" (31) in response to her client's impatience. Outside of her madness, Mary is very feminine and ladylike: when she returns from the asylum in the second act, "[h]er
manners are gentle, her voice is low” (49). In her 1925 biography of the Lambs, Constance Hill anticipates Temple in drawing attention to this aspect of Talfourd’s biography. Hill quotes Talfourd’s description of Mary as womanly in all her thoughts and feelings, “‘keeping under even undue subordination to her notion of a woman’s province, an intellect of rare excellence, which flashed out when the restraints of gentle habit and humble manner were withdrawn by the terrible force of disease. Though her conversation in sanity was never marked by smartness or repartee [...] it was otherwise in her madness’” (Hill 74, quoting Talfourd). As Hill implies in her selection of material, Mary’s madness allows her to step outside of traditionally ladylike behaviour, if only temporarily. Mary continues to resist traditional notions of femininity until the end of the play, when she “takes a noisy pinch of snuff” (111) and sneezes as the curtain lowers.

There is a remarkable correspondence between Temple’s play and Elaine Showalter’s recent work on hysteria in The Female Malady (1985). Showalter argues that hysteria and feminism exist on a kind of continuum, both representing a form of resistance to patriarchy, though in different ways (161). When the hysteric becomes sick, she no longer plays the role of self-sacrificing daughter or wife, but demands service from others (133). Mary’s madness, though painful and frightening, becomes her means to escape the domestic drudgery her family expects of her and the strict confines of ladylike behaviour. The onset of Mary’s madness is marked by her resistance to performing family duties and her insistence on her own rights. Her illness completely rearranges her environment: her mother dies, John moves away, and her father and Charles leave the family home to be near her. On the one hand, her madness is a curse, in that it frightens the neighbours and the landlady and requires sacrifices from those she loves; on the other, it is a blessing, in that it removes her from a life of servitude and gives her the freedom to choose a more fulfilling career as a writer.
Whereas Mary rebels against the early-nineteenth-century model of saintly womanhood, Charles fulfils that role of self-sacrifice, chastity and silent suffering. From the time he offers to check the potatoes for Mary in the first act, Charles is clearly no domineering patriarch. He readily helps his sister with her domestic duties, unconcerned about the rigid gender distinctions that his brother and father insist on. At the Godwins’ dinner party in Act II, Temple alludes to Charles’s proximity to the nineteenth-century ideal of womanly behaviour:

[MRS. GODWIN enters with tray, followed by MARY, who carries the teapot.]
GODWIN: Our ministering angels, eh, gentlemen?

[GODWIN capers an obeisance, but it is CHARLES who takes the tea-tray from MRS. GODWIN.]

CHARLES: Where shall I put this, ma’am? (65)

Taking the tea-tray, Charles figuratively takes on the role of ministering angel himself. Temple’s slightly anachronistic allusion to Scott’s poem returns when Mary refers to Charles as her “angel brother” and loving friend (110). Even with respect to chastity, Charles resembles the nineteenth-century paradigm of feminine virtue. John’s crude references to the flesh when he questions Charles’s decision to take responsibility for Mary complete the implication that Charles, in committing himself to celibacy, also commits himself to chastity:

JOHN: But -- but -- man alive! The time will come when you will want to marry.

Don’t you see -- marriage will be an utter impossibility with Mary on your hands!

CHARLES: I -- I don’t think I shall ever marry, John.

JOHN: Oh, nonsense! That’s pledging yourself to too great a sacrifice. The flesh is weak, my boy, but it often conquers the spirit.

CHARLES: Do you intend to m’marry, John?
JOHN: Of course I shall — when I find a woman worthy of my choice. And
you'll do the same — no less — when the time comes.

CHARLES [thoughtfully]: I wonder! (44-45).

In many respects, Charles fulfills the role that early twentieth-century feminist historians
ascribed to women of the nineteenth century.

Nowhere is Charles's self-sacrifice more strongly felt than in his choice to give up
marriage and children. Temple reverses the conventional emphasis on women as wives
and mothers by drawing attention to Charles's unfulfilled potential as husband and father.
Her departures from the biographies in her rendition of Charles's love for Hester serve to
emphasize Charles's sacrifice in marriage; Temple makes the possibility of Charles's
marriage more tangible than it was in life, thereby making his sacrifice more poignant.
She depicts Hester as the ideal mate for Charles, and even allows Hester to hint that she
would welcome his advances. Against his heart, Charles holds firm in his conviction that
he cannot ask any woman to share the curse of madness in his blood. Hester is clearly
disappointed: striving to keep back her tears, she tells him that he chooses a lonely path,
and that God will reward his courage. Temple defines Charles, far more so than Mary,
through his inability to marry and have children.

Temple also configures Charles's self-sacrifice as a loss in feminist terms. She
contrasts Charles with Dudley, the man whom Hester ultimately must marry, in terms of
their sensitivity and respect for her. Charles speaks of Hester with admiration of her
mind and character: “That is no common spirit. That heart of hers is hard to bind, and
they would hold it with a Quaker stillness! That seeking mind of hers, which shocks her
own demureness! Oh, M'Mary, she is a human angel!” (91). Charles's “human angel”
contrasts directly with Dudley's possessive diminutive, “my little shy angel” (103).
Though Dudley looks on Hester with great affection, he treats her condescendingly,
calling her “Hester, child” and addressing her “indulgently” and with jealousy (102).
"[W]ith a superior smile," he tells Charles that Hester has permission to befriend him in married life (103). Dudley takes Hester's acceptance of his proposal for granted, unaware just how close she came to refusing him for Charles. The tragedy of forsaken love is as much Hester's as it is Charles's: in marrying Dudley, Hester marries a man incapable of offering her the equal partnership that Charles could. Meanwhile, Charles must be content with playing the role of respectful companion in his sister's life.

In Ancilla's Share, Elizabeth Robins dares her reader to conceive of a man who has served the creative spirit of woman, who plays the part in her life which woman has usually played in the intellectual life of man (105). In Temple's play, Charles serves Mary's intellectual life in precisely this way. When he convinces Godwin to let Mary write for his new publishing business, Charles shows his supportiveness not only for her writing but for her having a purposeful existence:

CHARLES: . . . I've been encouraging her to write for s-ome time.

GODWIN [still doubtful]: But -- er -- but isn't it rather a strain for her?

CHARLES: No. It makes her very happy. She says it gives her a purpose in life.

GODWIN [smiling]: Mary says her purpose in life is to take care of you.

CHARLES [also smiling]: I make her think so. So as to convince her that I can't get on without her, I give her as m'much trouble as possible. But she wants something more than that.

GODWIN: She is a wonderful friend to us all. You have made a great self-sacrifice for her, Charles. I think you can pride yourself that it has not been -- sterile.

CHARLES [eagerly]: That is why you must ask M'Mary to write for you. To -- to complete what I have tried to do. M'make her feel that her life is -- worth while. (51-52)
Charles’s language is very much the language of Temple’s contemporary world, in which women were seeking purposive occupations outside the home. He recognizes, as Wollstonecraft did, that a woman must do more with her life than simply care for a man. Charles supports Mary with a perfect mixture of playfulness and respect, thus avoiding condescension: “M’Mary has been writing quite a deal of late. Of course I have to look after her grammar and all of the spelling, but although I should not praise her, I do declare, on my honour, that the ideas are -- m’m’middling!” (54). His supportiveness contrasts directly with John’s sceptical reaction to the project: “JOHN [to MARY, discouragingly]: Oh -- do you think you could?” (69). Charles immediately jumps to Mary’s defence, saying, “Why, of course, John! M’Mary has already written one or two stories from Shakespeare that are most excellent, and I’ve promised that if she will do all the comedies, I will do the tragedies” (69).

In his willingness to take on aspects of women’s traditional role, Charles represents an alternative to the patriarchal domination that inter-war feminist historians considered typical of his day. The domestic comfort brought about by a mutually supportive companionship between brother and sister, as seen in the prologue and epilogue, makes a strong contrast to the first act, in which only chaos and anger result from women’s traditional servile role. Charles and Mary serve as a model for equality in men’s and women’s roles within the family. Their relationship resembles the companionate marriage advocated by inter-war feminists, which will be discussed at more length in the following chapter. At the end of the play, the stage directions show them both taking up their pens “to write in busy contentment” (112).

Elin Diamond has recently drawn some intriguing connections between realism and psychoanalysis that shed light on the relationship between Temple’s representation of Mary’s madness and her play as a whole. Diamond argues that, like psychoanalysis, the realist drama of Ibsen, Pinero and Jones relies on examining and exposing the woman
with a past: "Like Freud's case histories, the new realism progressed by going backward, revealing the psychobiography of nervous women. Through confessions and self-exploration, woven into dialogue and action, an etiology emerged" ("Realism" 68). In the hands of these men, Diamond suggests, realism puts the spectator in the position of the analyst who must discover the reasons behind the hysteric's symptoms. Temple's play manages to avoid this pattern. Although Temple would likely have been aware of Freud in 1930, as Freud and psychoanalysis had become very popular among British writers and intellectuals in the late 1920s (Showalter, Female 196), her representation of Mary's madness does not replicate the psychoanalytic model. 8 Whereas Ibsen and his followers tended to focus on neurotic or hysterical women, Temple brings full-blown psychosis to the stage. She emphasizes the inherited and sociological aspects of Mary's illness, presenting it as a reasonable response to an impossible situation, and avoids any exploration of individual psychology or repressed desires. By having Mary break down at the beginning rather than the end of the play, Temple dwells more on the effects than the causes of madness. Temple's form of realism does not exploit Mary's past through discoveries and confessions; she does not use Mary's symptoms to titillate the spectator. If the spectator plays a role in Mary's madness, it is not as analyst but as caregiver, since Temple encourages identification with Charles, who plays that part. This reading of the play would suggest that realism does not always affirm patterns of female exploitation, but sometimes can serve feminist purposes.

Joan Temple and Gordon Daviot, in bringing historical women to life in their plays, comment on their own time period as much as they do on the past. Both playwrights address contemporary feminist issues such as women's work and women's

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8I would like to thank Cynthia Zimmerman for pointing out that Temple's representation of madness differs significantly from other early-twentieth-century theatrical representations of madness.
leadership as they strive to redress the imbalance created in men's histories. For both, feminism is a means of bringing history to bear on their own time. Temple uses the inter-war feminist interpretation of the period to illustrate the pressures of rigid role definitions as well as the possibility of escaping them. Her portrayal of Charles and Mary resists and even inverts inter-war conceptions of male and female roles in the early-nineteenth century. While Temple offers an alternative to contemporary conceptions of gender roles in Charles and Mary's time, Daviot aims to correct her contemporaries' biased portrayal of Mary. Her contemporaries' split perspective on the Renaissance as potentially progressive for women of Mary's stature but as still difficult for ordinary women forms a suitable backdrop for Daviot's ambiguous presentation of the Queen. As she undercuts Mary's distorted image in the early-twentieth century, Daviot shows how Mary's inability to take control of her image in her own lifetime might lend itself to such misinterpretation. Unlike Mary Lamb, Mary Stuart does not escape the constraints of her gender, although these constraints are largely self-imposed. Temple's Mary, however, finds the means to escape her historical position only through radical means unacceptable and undesirable to most women, whereas Daviot's Mary has at least the potential to control her own fate.

The plays discussed in this chapter and the last have treated gender issues on a personal level, mapping relations between the sexes onto relations between individual men and women. Charles and Mary in particular focuses on relations between the sexes within the home. The plays of the following chapter explore the most intimate and often the most difficult personal relation between men and women, marriage. These plays, Githa Sowerby's Sheila (1917) and Elizabeth Baker's Penelope Forgives (1930), move us out of the past and into the present in their depictions of women's position in marriage. More than the issues of genius and history discussed in the last chapters, the issue of marriage directly concerned the lives of ordinary men and women, and therefore attracted
more feminist and anti-feminist attention in the inter-war period. The next chapter, after outlining the inter-war debates about marriage, will consider how these two women playwrights represent this contentious contemporary issue in their plays.
Chapter Three:
Marriage and Divorce
in Githa Sowerby’s Sheila (1917)
and Elizabeth Baker’s Penelope Forgiven (1930)

In 1924, Eleanor Rathbone aptly described women’s position in marriage: "The position of the wife and mother in this and most other western countries according to theory and sentiment, according to law, and according to prevalent practice is a curious example of human inconsistency. Popular sentiment places her a little lower than the angels; the law a little higher than a serf" (Family 68). Feminist commentary on marriage from the first part of this century could be characterized in much the same way. While many feminists focused on the vestiges of slavery lingering in the marriage contract, others idealized woman’s real or potential position in marriage through her role as mother. Marriage was an important subject for feminists to address, since married women tended to lag behind their unmarried counterparts in claiming and advancing their equal rights. Women’s right to work, their right to limit reproduction, and their right to divorce on the same grounds as men were hotly contested. The two plays discussed in this chapter, Githa Sowerby’s Sheila (1917) and Elizabeth Baker’s Penelope Forgiven (1930), take up these issues surrounding marriage in intensely personal terms. Both plays present problematic marriages: Sheila revolves around a temporary separation between husband and wife, while Penelope Forgiven deals with a divorce. Sheila cannot accept a marriage in which she is a mother and nothing more; Penelope cannot accept a marriage in which she is expected to overlook her husband’s infidelity. In both plays, the female protagonist has difficulty accepting a role that feminist theorists of the time had begun to
question. An examination of feminist and anti-feminist positions on marriage and
divorce enhances the understanding of these plays, and the plays in turn enrich the
expression of these issues.

Many early-twentieth-century feminists acknowledged a debt to John Stuart Mill
in their calls for marriage reform. In The Subjection of Women (1869), Mill criticizes
women's legal position in marriage with his assertion that the wife is no less the bond-
servant of her husband than a slave: "She vows a livelong (sic) obedience to him at the
altar, and is held to it all through her life by law. . . . I am far from pretending that wives
are in general no better treated than slaves; but no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and
in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is" (247-48). This description of marriage, along
with Mary Wollstonecraft's views discussed in Chapter Two, heavily influenced later
feminist positions; the comparison between wives and slaves emerges frequently in
twentieth-century feminist discussions of marriage. After The Subjection of Women, the
rights of married women improved considerably. The property rights advocated by Mill
materialized in a series of statutes dated 1870 to 1908, the Married Women’s Property
Acts. The most important of these was the Act of 1882, which gave married women the
right to hold any property acquired before or after marriage as their separate estate. The
Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 further improved a woman's legal equality in marriage
by allowing her the same grounds for divorce as her husband: wives could now divorce
for adultery alone, whereas before they could claim adultery only if it were accompanied
by incest, bigamy, rape, cruelty or desertion (Crofts 23). As one inter-war feminist
pointed out, however, the implication that the wife is the husband's property remained,
since a husband could still obtain damages from the man with whom his wife committed
adultery (Neilans 209).

Alongside these legal changes came medical and social developments that had a
major impact on women's position in marriage. The contraception movement had been
gradually gaining acceptance ever since Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh's 1876 trial for disseminating birth-control information by distributing Charles Knowlton's *The Fruits of Philosophy*. During the inter-war period, thanks mostly to the remarkable efforts of Dr. Marie Stopes, birth-control information became much more widely available, particularly to married women. In 1921, Stopes opened the first birth-control clinic in England, from which she dispensed contraceptive information and apparatus.

Throughout the inter-war years, Stopes remained a vocal and highly controversial spokesperson for the birth-control movement. Her book *Married Love*, which provided information about sex and birth control, was reprinted twenty-six times between 1918 and 1923, and by 1939 had sold one million copies (Pugh 255). In a 1933 article for the feminist journal *Time and Tide*, Winifred Holtby recognizes Stopes and her work:

>[She is] one of the few people whose names are familiar to practically every English-speaking person; her work, for good or evil (I personally think for good) is one of the most revolutionary, far-reaching, and important pieces of individual pioneering in our century; the changes effected by her on society are impossible to ignore even by her opponents. (80)

Several years later, in *Lady into Woman* (1953), Holtby's friend Vera Brittain acknowledges the contraceptive movement as one of the most important revolutions for married women, by which they gained the power to plan their families, choose their work, and organize their future (162).

Like the birth-control movement, the purported disproportion of the sexes drew a great deal of public attention to women's changing position in marriage. The common perception that there were far more women of marriageable age than there were men to marry them gave rise to much concern after World War I. Even before the War, there had already been some discussion of a disproportion of the sexes (Colquhoun 1). After the War, the press generated a great deal of publicity over there being two million "surplus"
women in England due to wartime casualties and higher numbers of male emigrants. Inter-war marriage theorists, feminist and anti-feminist, became preoccupied with the question of how to cope with this rather alarming disproportion that would seem to make marriage an impossibility for many women. Martin Pugh has since argued that the impact of this imbalance on marriage was not in fact statistically supported, but the claim seems to have remained unchallenged at the time (222). The range of responses can be illustrated by two theorists writing from opposing perspectives in the early 1920s, Maude Royden and Anthony Ludovici. Royden, a feminist theologian and birth-control advocate, expresses concern that the denial of marriage for a disproportionate number of women could have a detrimental effect since these unmarried women’s sex needs would not be met (Sex 23-24). She objects to these women being labelled “superfluous,” and urges that they not be criticized for missing their object in life if they do not become wives and mothers (Sex 31-32). At the other end of the spectrum is Ludovici, whose paranoiac anti-feminist tract Lysistrata is far from sympathetic to the plight of the “surplus” women. Ludovici blames these “two million spinsters,” along with another two or three million disgruntled married women, for the very existence of the women’s movement and, by extension, the degenerate state of England (46-48). According to Ludovici, these women’s thwarted instincts have corroded the institution of marriage, since their bitter hatred of men and their unconscious jealousy of healthy and happy married women are manifested in an attempt to wean married women from men and love (Lysistrata 47).

Ludovici’s idiosyncratic critique of marriage is interesting not only for its aversion to feminism but also for its reaction against the scientific and social developments that were giving women more control over motherhood. Ludovici focuses his treatment of marriage primarily on the medical changes surrounding conception and motherhood. He abhors contemporary women’s reliance on artificial aids, from anaesthetics in childbirth
to bottles instead of breast-feeding, and longs for the day that women, aided by science, will rediscover natural childbirth and give new value to motherhood, domesticity, and marriage (Lysistrata 53, 113-14). Ludovici’s paranoia culminates with his prediction that, if “surplus” spinsters and embittered wives continue to lead the way, women will begin to keep men’s numbers to an essential minimum through an annual slaughter of all males who are not meek, emasculated, or stupid (Lysistrata 95). If the world is to be saved, he argues, woman must be put back in her place. Ludovici therefore posits the development of a higher type of “manly man,” a crude variation on the Nietzschean Übermensch, the highest type of whom is the ruler who provides a new order and a new goal (the author himself, presumably), and the lowest, the husband whom woman delights in obeying and serving (Lysistrata 107). The regeneration of man would immediately transform women: their contempt for men would spontaneously vanish, and they would recover the lost joy of looking up to their mates (Lysistrata 111). In his patriarchal utopia, Ludovici generously provides for the surplus women by means of open, tolerated, and fruitful concubinage (Lysistrata 116).

Hardly less colourful is Norwegian professor of economics and jurisprudence Knud Asbjørn Wieth-Knudsen’s anti-feminist tract, Feminism: A Sociological Study of the Woman Question from Ancient Times to the Present Day (1928). Whereas Ludovici reacts against scientific developments, Wieth-Knudsen reacts against the changes in the law. Wieth-Knudsen contends that the most disastrous result of “the blind doctrinaireism of Feminism” is the gradual destruction of family life through matrimonial legislation that has gradually deprived the father of all authority and weakened his influence in bringing up the children, at the same time as it has “[opened] the flood-gates to the unsocial and unmoral instincts of Woman” (269-70). He describes marriage in its present juridical aspect as a trap laid by feminists, from which only the rich can escape by keeping up two establishments. The rest, apparently, must slave day and night for a woman whose true
nature they only discovered upon marriage (280). Wieth-Knudsen claims to have seen much male misery and female depravity in modern marriages, the most unpleasant being cases where the man is not even conscious of his own misery, since his suppression has come about so slowly that he does not perceive it (282). He conjures a vision of modern marriage as a world conspiracy of women. These women gradually undermine man's supremacy in the home, by such insidious methods as introducing small animals into the bedroom thereby depriving him of sleep,¹ and stifle by degrees man's intellect and strength until they succeed in destroying the whole of white civilization and the very basis of all human progress (280-90). Like Ludovici, Wieth-Knudson believes that peace between men and women can be reached only through the restoration of women's natural subordination to men, and the reinstatement of man as the family's centre of gravity (287).

Although these examples are extreme in their hostility toward women, they are by no means exceptional for their time. Maud Churton Braby holds men's hostility toward women responsible for the prevalent discontent about marriage. In her popular work, *Modern Marriage and How to Bear It* (1909), she points to a preponderance of misogynous sentiment:

The range of men's fault-finding is endless; one will assert that women are mere domestic machines, unfit companions for any intelligent man . . . another that they are mere blue-stockings striving after an unattainable intellectualty; a third that they are mere frivolous dolls without brain or ear, engrossed in the pursuit of pleasure; a fourth that they are sexless, slangy, misclad masculine monsters. (11)

¹Wieth-Knudsen credits Strindberg for recognizing this phenomenon: "How [sleep deprivation] can be managed in married life may be read in Strindberg's *Confession of a Fool*, where his wife coerces him by introducing animals into their bedroom, which, as is well known, is intolerable to higher natures, but by no means a sufficient reason for obtaining a divorce without expenses that would last a lifetime . . ." (281).
Braby argues that it is not feminism but men’s resistance to the changes brought by feminism that is responsible for the current disillusionment with marriage.

Suffrage opponent Ethel Colquhoun adds a feminine voice to conservative criticism of women’s changing position in marriage. Writing just before the war, Colquhoun argues that the women’s movement has overvalued education at the expense of women’s natural vocations, motherhood and wifehood. Like Ludovici, though in less misogynous terms, Colquhoun expresses concern that feminists may be creating a prejudice against marriage by raising spinsterhood to a heroic level (5). She argues that marriage and the family are seriously undermined by the theory that modern woman’s first duty is to herself, since both marriage and family life demand some abnegation of oneself in favour of others (321). She does, however, encourage greater paternal obligations: in her view, women should focus on winning men to a higher view of men’s and women’s shared responsibility to the family (322). Convinced that women are fundamentally subservient, Colquhoun concludes with a melodramatic plea for the future of the family, which she perceives to be threatened by the women’s movement:

To the leaders of the self-styled Woman Movement, feminists and suffragists, we others, we women who believe in the future of our sex only as an integral part of the race, who see no salvation for women which is not involved in the salvation of that eternal trinity of man, woman and child, would say, as Lacordaire said to his countrymen at the height of their frenzied fight for freedom, “You have written upon the monuments of your city the words Liberty, Fraternity, Equality. Above Liberty write Duty, above Fraternity write Humility, above Equality write Service. Above the immemorial creed of your rights inscribe the divine creed of your duties.” (340-41)

Colquhoun was reacting against feminists such as Cicely Hamilton, who criticized marriage for denying women’s right to an existence independent of husbands or children.
In her influential work *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), Hamilton carefully defines woman independently of her role as wife and mother:

By a woman . . . I understand an individual human being whose life is her own concern; whose worth, in my eyes (worth being an entirely personal matter) is in no way advanced or detracted from by the accident of marriage; who does not rise in my estimation by reason of a purely physical capacity for bearing children, or sink in my estimation through lack of that capacity. (19-20)

Hamilton argues that marriage, from a woman’s perspective, is essentially a trade, since through it she exchanges the possession of her person for the means of existence (26-27). As in trade, “the regulations governing exchange and barter in the marriage market . . . are necessarily framed in the interest of the employer -- the male” (36). This system results in women’s complete dependence on men. Thus, Hamilton argues, the characteristics often supposed to be inherent in woman are no more than characteristics of a repressed class, and the artificial result of her surroundings and training (121).

Numerous early-twentieth-century feminists echo Hamilton, and Mill and Wollstonecraft before her, by referring to women’s position in marriage in terms of slavery and trade. Bernard Shaw, for instance, in his preface to *Getting Married* (1911), dismisses the marriage service as “an honest attempt to make the best of a commercial contract of property and slavery by subjecting it to some religious restraint and elevating it by some touch of poetry” (34). Charlotte Gasquoine Hartley pushes the trade analogy further, stating that “marriage is itself in many cases a legalised form of prostitution . . . the only difference is in the price paid and the duration of the contract” (342). She takes the position that marriage in its current form is founded on the patriarchal idea of woman as man’s property (344). Florence Farr likewise describes the relationship in terms of servitude and trade, claiming that the average middle-class Englishman looks upon his married life as a business partnership in which he pays money so that his domestic and
emotional needs are met: “The average working man, of course not only marries a housekeeper, a cook, a maid-of-all-work, but the mother and nurse of his continuous flow of offspring, and the butt of his temper when the world has used him ill” (28). Arnold Bennett somewhat redeems his uncompromising position on women’s genius that was outlined in the first chapter with his sympathetic treatment of the economics of marriage. He protests that the married woman’s economic slavery taints the entire relationship for her. He argues further that husbands should be legally compelled to disclose their financial situation to their wives, allotting a percentage of their incomes to their wives’ private and uncontrolled use. His solution, however, does not remedy the problem as Hamilton defines it, since men would still essentially act as their wives’ employers. Although women had gained many legal rights in the years since *The Subjection of Women*, Vera Brittain could still claim in 1935 that most wives “seemed content to accept the position of [their] husband’s chattel” (“Married” 161).

After the First World War, feminists continued to challenge the implications of the marriage contract. In 1925, Dora Russell responded to Ludovici’s *Lysistrata* with *Hypatia*, a philosophical treatise on marriage in which she argues that feminism is nowhere so much needed as in the home. Russell, who was married to philosopher Bertrand Russell from 1923 to 1935, presents a bleak picture of marriage: “Marriage brings a jealous intolerant husband, children, prying and impertinent neighbours -- degraded and humiliating slavery for the vast majority of women” (29-30). Her memorable pronouncement that “conversation is a masculine monologue, punctuated by assent” (74) came to epitomize the imbalance between men and women in traditional marriages. Dora Russell argues that free women are corrupted by the marriage contract, and that nothing but desire for children would make women enter this “contract based on rights of property and possession, buying and selling of our bodies; a law whose conception of conjugal wrongs is sin, punishment, and just revenge; and a Church whose
utmost concession is to bid us 'serve' instead of 'obey' our husbands” (39). Clearly unsatisfied with recent legal reforms to the marriage laws, Russell calls for a new form of marriage that does not restrict women’s minds and bodies.

Feminists posited a model of partnership to replace the traditional master-slave configuration of marriage. Cicely Hamilton, for instance, proposes that marriage should be a “life companionship” between a self-respecting man and a self-respecting woman (Marriage 141). She maintains that marriage should be a voluntary contract for both parties, not a necessity for the woman and a choice for the man (Marriage 144). Dora Russell is more passionate in her vision, calling for a “trade union of lovers” (39) who will seek a higher form of marriage, a partnership of mind and body: “There is nothing in life to compare with this uniting of minds and bodies in men and women who have laid aside hostility and fear and seek in love the fullest understanding of themselves and of the universe” (80). The idea of marriage as union or equal partnership pervades feminist literature from the suffrage years on.

Feminists were nevertheless divided on the issue of women’s natural role within this new partnership. Count Keyserling, in the introduction to his 1920 collection of essays on marriage, evidently intends to support feminism with his position that marriage must change in accordance with the change in contemporary women (31). Believing that woman stands closer to nature on account of her maternal instinct, Keyserling argues that she is therefore the natural ruler of men, governing not by coercion but by suggestion based on her instinctive consideration for others. He argues that “the art of marriage seems inborn in most women” because of women’s natural responsibility, altruism, and work ethic (34). When Keyserling thanks the feminist movement for these insights into women’s natural role, he is not entirely mistaken (38). Elizabeth Sloan Chesser’s 1913 book on women, marriage, and motherhood is one of several feminist works that champion women’s altruism and maternal instinct in marriage. Believing that
emancipation will be won only through the elevation of the work and duties that have always belonged to women, Chesser endorses the women’s movement for recognizing mothers’ rights, and describes it as “an expression of the wider outlook, the developing altruism of modern woman” (255). She supports feminist demands for women’s education, but only for the sake of “efficient motherhood”: “Biologically, the mother is paramount. Socially, the mother is the basis of racial progress. Ethically, intelligent mother love is the strongest force in the world. The higher the type, the greater need of good motherhood if it is to survive” (17). Several early-twentieth-century feminists make the same link Chesser does between improvements in women’s conditions and racial progress. Such racial arguments were frequently used to support biological essentialism and idealized conceptions of motherhood.

Dr. Marie Stopes likewise glorifies motherhood in her writings, possibly in part to placate birth-control opponents. In her best-selling work *Married Love*, Stopes melds the rapture of sex into the rapture of conception in highly melodramatic terms: “From their mutual penetration into the realms of supreme joy the two lovers bring back with them a spark of that light which we call life. And unto them a child is born” (104). In *The First Five Thousand*, she argues that mothers who can control conception are more likely to produce healthier, stronger children who will contribute to racial progress: “Here [in the birth-control clinic] mothers are considered not only as the producers of mere babies, but as the creators of splendid babies. Only motherhood which is in control of the mother can now truly advance our race” (4). Stopes’s clinic was explicitly aimed at mothers; it would serve married women without children only if they had sufficient reason to remain childless, such as insanity in the family or the husband’s unemployment. While Stopes effected radical advances for women in the availability of contraception and information about sex, her veneration of motherhood aligns her with more conservative feminists, as
well as anti-feminists such as Ludovici, who believe woman’s role as mother to be paramount.

In their positions on motherhood, Stopes and Chesser met with opposition from such feminists as Bernard Shaw and Lady Rhondda. Stopes and Shaw engaged in a long-standing battle about women’s vocation as mother. While Stopes remained convinced that motherhood was the ultimate vocation for women, Shaw upheld the view that not all women were fit to be mothers. In a 1934 letter to Stopes, Shaw writes:

On reflection, you will see the importance of insisting on the fact that motherhood is not every woman’s vocation. As far as I have been able to make a guess founded on the experience of welfare workers, mothers may be divided roughly into three classes. The first class consists of naturally good mothers who know better than the welfare workers how to handle their own children and everybody else’s as well. The second class, the largest, consists of women who can bring up their own children quite well enough with good guidance. The third class is so completely hopeless that even the worst institution could hardly be more mischievous to children than maternal care. (Hall 209)

Shaw’s objection to Stopes’s endorsement of motherhood pales in comparison to Lady Rhondda’s stern criticism of the married woman’s life of leisure. Writing particularly about the higher classes, Rhondda argues that the mothers of small families are too idle, and that their idleness breeds decay. She contends that, unlike large Victorian families, small modern families with one or two children do not constitute a full-time job, particularly for those women who can afford to get help (31). She criticizes the social system for teaching girls and women that their first duty is to the home and not the community, that their main function in life is to become mothers, and that the maternal instinct is sacred (35-36). The narrowness of this outlook, she argues, results in women not only neglecting their important duty to the community, but also raising their children
without a social conscience (39-40). Beneath Rhondda's harsh critique of leisured wives lies a plea for society's acceptance of careers for married women.

Women's right to work after marriage was an issue of concern to many inter-war feminists. Although legislation in 1919 ensured that women could no longer be disqualified from professions on the basis of sex, they could still be dismissed for getting married. As late as the 1940s, the teaching profession and the civil service habitually dismissed women upon marriage. Hamilton notes that the rationale for their dismissal was not capability, but economics: a married woman, it was argued, should be supported by her husband, and therefore does not need a paid appointment as a single woman does (Englishwoman 24). Whether or not they were forced to do so, many women quit their jobs upon marriage (Strachey 144; Lang 19). Even conservative feminist Elsie Lang admits that the risk of marriage prevented women's equality with men in the labour market, since the risk that women might quit their jobs upon marriage often became an excuse for withholding women from more advanced training opportunities (19-20). Marriage also became an excuse for the discrepancy between men's and women's salaries, since women were assumed to have other means through relations or husbands (Farr 28). Consequently, feminists were concerned about married women's dependence on their husbands' goodwill, as husbands had no legal obligation to share their salaries with their wives (Farr 28).

In her discussion of marriage and family in The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture (1911), Charlotte Perkins Gilman offers a feminist reconciliation between woman's biological role as mother and her work outside the home. Gilman argues that, just as woman's natural work as female is that of the mother, man's work as male is that of the father. Human work, however, belongs exclusively to neither sex. She defines "Androcentric Culture" as that which has allowed one sex to monopolize all human activities by calling them men's work (25). Likewise, androcentrism has
converted the family from serving the child to serving the husband’s “comfort, power and pride” (27). This man-made family, in which the man holds the woman for his satisfaction and service, is effectively a despotism, and as such leaves the child unprepared for a democratic society (40). Gilman proposes that the “androcentric” or proprietary model be superseded by a new, nobler type of family based on love and the comradeship of equals in marriage. In this model, wives would no longer be limited to unpaid domestic work, and motherhood would no longer be subjected to men’s dominance, but the best energies of both parents would be bent on raising the standard of life for all children (245-47). This new arrangement, she contends, would benefit man, woman, and child, and would promote general social and racial progress (43). Gilman’s work bridges both ends of the feminist spectrum, that which celebrates women’s vocation as mother and that which supports women’s right to independent means.

The feminist critique of marriage in the early twentieth century carried over to the question of divorce. Before the 1923 reforms to the divorce laws, many feminists drew attention to the double standard inherent in them. Bernard Shaw, for instance, criticized the laws for their basis in the “sex slavery” inherent in the tenth commandment, which classes women with a man’s house, his ox, his ass, and his purchased chattels: “In this morality female adultery is malversation by the woman and theft by the man, whilst male adultery with an unmarried woman is not an offence at all” (Getting 17-18). Feminists triumphed when the 1923 divorce bill placed women on the same footing as men; Clemence Dane went so far as to claim that this was one of the most important advances in women’s history, since it conceded to women for the first time the absolute right to enjoy the same law and the same justice as men (Women’s 106-07).

Early-twentieth-century discussions of marriage and divorce were often supported by rather subjective pronouncements for and against the ideal of monogamy. Ethel Colquhoun opposed changes to the divorce law on the grounds that women were
instinctively monogamous, whereas men were instinctively polygamous. She explicitly supports the double standard embedded in the law, insisting that, "for obvious reasons," men and women could not be penalized in the same way (93). Colquhoun makes no attempt to reconcile her position on women’s essential monogamy with her main argument that the monogamous ideal is threatened by the feminist conception of marriage (321). From a less conservative perspective, Malthusian Norman Haire\textsuperscript{2} argues in \textit{Hymen, or the Future of Marriage} (1927) that the ideal of lifelong monogamy is presently suitable to, and attainable by, a very small minority. He claims that most men are polygamous, at least in their desires, whereas women are not usually polygamous, though their monogamous tendency may stem from long ages of repression and convention rather than biological difference (59-60). Ultimately, Haire proposes that legalized polygamy would offer many advantages for those who are not naturally happy in monogamous marriage. Braby playfully considers polyandry, polygamy, and "duogamy" in \textit{Modern Marriage and How to Bear It}, but in the end advocates a comparatively conservative three-month marriage contract, at the end of which husband and wife would decide either to dissolve the marriage or to make it permanently binding. Such flirtations with polygamy also emerge in pre-war drama. Playwrights such as Bernard Shaw and Harley Granville-Barker had certain characters endorse polygamy in order to jolt their audiences from a placid acceptance of the monogamous ideal. The Bishop in Shaw’s \textit{Getting Married}, for instance, maintains that one should not speak disrespectfully of polygamy, since it is practised by the great majority of the British Empire. In \textit{The Madras House}, Granville-Barker holds up a Mohammedan convert and polygamist, Constantine Madras,

\textsuperscript{2}Norman Haire ran a birth-control clinic for the Malthusian League that opened in 1921, a few months after Marie Stopes’s (Hall, 198). Apparently he also performed vasectomies, claiming they enhanced men’s creativity and sex life, as he did on W. B. Yeats (conversation with Ann Saddlemyer).
as a misogynist and yet a worthwhile opponent to the austerity of British feminism.

The general questioning of monogamy and the purpose of marriage extended the debate about divorce beyond objections to the double standard. Many feminists argued that divorce should be made easier for both parties, while others were alarmed by this possibility. Both Shaw and Hartley argued that easier divorce, far from destroying marriage, was necessary to its continuance. According to Shaw, “[d]ivorce only re-assorts the couples: a very desirable thing when they are ill-assorted” (Getting 82). He advocates that divorce be made as easy, cheap, and private as marriage, and that it be granted at the request of either party, with or without the other’s consent (Getting 102). Hartley, positing a direct correlation between the difficulty of obtaining divorce and the inferior position of women, agrees with Shaw that consent should be the only condition of divorce (356). Along with Clemence Dane after her, Hartley argues that children do not benefit from living with parents who are unhappily married (Hartley 353; Dane, Women’s 103). Elsie Lang, on the other hand, attributes the feminist appeal for easier divorce to the fact that women of her day (i.e. 1929) lack the patience of their Victorian grandmothers (169). Lang asserts emphatically that couples should use their strength of character to avoid divorce at all costs. Supporting her claim with flimsy anecdotal evidence, Lang contends that girls who choose to marry should stand by their decision, since most men are open to management, and most marriages will succeed with a wife’s good temper, sense of humour, and tact (170-71). Though she considers herself a feminist, Lang echoes anti-feminist positions that support a double standard in marriage and insist upon women’s inherent acquiescence.

These debates over women’s role in marriage and their right to divorce emerge in Githa Sowerby’s Sheila (1917) and Elizabeth Baker’s Penelope Forgive (1930). While Baker’s play focuses on divorce and Sowerby’s on marriage, both concern themselves with women’s renegotiation of their role in marriage. The plays’ protagonists have
difficulty coming to terms with aspects of marriage that were being questioned in the inter-war period, Sheila with the primacy of motherhood, and Penelope with tolerance of men’s infidelity and her economic dependence on her husband. Githa Sowerby, like Gordon Daviot in her plays discussed in the last two chapters, is primarily interested in the psychological repercussions of sex inequality, whereas Baker places more emphasis on its material consequences. Both playwrights advance feminist positions on women’s role in marriage from the personal perspectives of their female protagonists.

**Githa Sowerby, Sheila (1917)**

Katherine Githa Sowerby was born in 1876 at Gateshead, Northumberland. She came from an artistic family: her father, John Sowerby, in addition to running a glass-manufacturing company, was an artist, illustrator, and writer; her sister, Millicent, illustrated children’s books and painted. Githa began her own literary career by writing short stories for magazines and children’s books with illustrations by Millicent. She moved to London around 1905, where she became a member of the Fabian Society. The story of Sowerby’s own marriage is more fanciful than that of any of her characters. Before she ever met her husband, John Kendall, Sowerby saw his picture in a newspaper, and told her cousin she would marry him if he asked her (National Theatre 2). Kendall had begun his career in the Indian army, but went on to write articles and verse for *Punch* under the pseudonym Dum-dum. In addition to his collections of humorous verse, he wrote several plays between 1908 and 1922. Sowerby met Kendall a year after she wrote her first play, *Rutherford and Son*, which dramatized the tension between an aging, tyrannical father, consumed by his business, and his children, who desert him one by one.3 The play caused a sensation when it was first produced at the Court Theatre in

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3For a detailed critical analysis of *Rutherford and Son*, see Sheila Stowell’s chapter on Githa Sowerby in *A Stage of Their Own*. 
1912, where it ran for 133 performances to resounding critical acclaim. Despite this encouraging beginning, Sowerby seems to have written only four full-length plays after *Rutherford and Son*, none of which reached publication: *A Man and Some Women* (1914), *Sheila* (1917), *The Stepmother* (1924), and *The Policeman's Whistle* (1934).4

With the tremendous success of *Rutherford and Son* Sowerby joined the ranks of Britain’s foremost dramatists, if only temporarily. Contemporary critics were quick to recognize her talent. Barrett H. Clark described *Rutherford and Son* as one of the most powerful works of the generation (154). Emma Goldman praised Sowerby’s “dramatic power, realistic grasp and artistic penetration,” labelling her a genius and the first woman dramatist of note in any country (236). More than ten years after the play’s initial success, A. E. Morgan still assigned Sowerby a notable place in early-twentieth-century drama (195). He commended the play for its dark, ruthless realism, and for its subtle and effective use of the inhospitable moorland setting. Sowerby’s success with *Rutherford and Son* was all the more surprising since her only prior experience of theatre was as playgoer; she was drawn to the drama as an experiment because she found prose and verse “difficult and irksome” (B. Clark 155). She almost gave up after writing the first two acts, believing that the play was no good, but finished it with the encouragement of an actor friend, Thyrza Norman, who played the lead female role in the first production (National Theatre 4). By 1914, *Rutherford and Son* had been translated into several European languages, and would have been produced across the Continent had the War not prevented it (B. Clark 154). In 1994, the play was revived in an excellent production at London’s National Theatre, directed by Katie Mitchell.

Sowerby’s third play, *Sheila*, produced at the St. James Theatre in 1917, did not

4The typescripts of *A Man and Some Women* and *Sheila* are available in the Lord Chamberlain’s collection at the British Library. I was unable to locate a copy of *The Stepmother*. 
repeat the success of *Rutherford and Son*; it ran for only three weeks. Fay Compton, who played the lead, explains that the daylight air raids that started soon after its opening decimated theatre audiences. In her autobiography, Compton describes the play as one of her most pleasurable failures. In characteristically effusive tones, she avows that she loved the play, loved the leading man, Aubrey Smith (who for years afterward called her Sheila), and loved the atmosphere of courtesy and consideration at the St. James under the management of Sir George Alexander. Compton characterizes her own role as "a part full of emotional opportunity" (157). During production, she had the chance to meet and discuss the role with Githa Sowerby, the play's "clever authoress" (157). G. S. Street, the Joint Examiner of Plays for the Lord Chamberlain's office, recommended the play for licence in complimentary terms: "[Sheila] is marked by [Sowerby's] characteristics of thoughtfulness and sincerity. . . . The emotions are subtle -- too much so, I fear, for the ordinary critics and public. But the truth and fineness of the work ought to make an appeal to them." He adds, in his role as protector of public morals, that the author "does not shirk the nice issues of married life but deals with them with a delicacy and sincerity which could not possibly offend the most squeamish prude."

*Sheila* is a sensitive portrayal of a marriage between Mark Holdsworth, a wealthy and confident forty-year-old businessman, and Sheila, an insecure and naïve nineteen-year-old typist. When the play opens, Sheila is employed as Mark's junior typist, an occupation at which she does not excel. The audience learns rather suddenly that Mark wants to marry her. He confides this intent to his cousin Sybil, telling her that he would like a son, but implying that he is not very much in love with Sheila. Sowerby does not make much of the wedding itself: Mark proposes at the end of Act I, and Act II finds the couple already married for two months. Sheila has become unhappy and apprehensive in her anxiety that she is not living up to her husband's expectations. She behaves awkwardly with the older generation of Mark's family, believing that they disapprove of
her inferior class status. Oblivious to Sheila’s discomfort, Mark recruits investors for a copper mine venture in Peru that he expects will raise a fortune. Sheila’s situation becomes unbearable to her when Sybil, motivated by jealousy, reveals that Mark married her not for love, but only for a son. Sheila confronts Mark with Sybil’s accusation, and Mark is forced to admit its truth, though he insists that he has grown to love her for herself in the months since their wedding. Sheila refuses to believe Mark’s protestations, and their misunderstanding is exacerbated by Sheila’s secret knowledge that she is already pregnant. The couple have not resolved the issue when they agree to separate at the end of Act II, Sheila travelling to Italy, and Mark to Peru. In the last act, Mark returns from Peru and learns from his brother that Sheila gave birth to a child while she was in Italy, and that the child died soon after it was born. Though Mark is distressed about the child, he is more concerned about Sheila, but he interprets her silence about the child to mean that she does not love him. When Sheila returns at the end of the play, the couple comes to realize that their love is mutual and that their separation issued from a misunderstanding. The play ends on a bittersweet note, the tragedy of the child’s death having brought about the couple’s reconciliation.

Both Sheila and Sowerby’s earlier play Rutherford and Son feature older male characters with tyrannical dispositions who insist upon their paternalistic rights in the face of much resistance from the younger generation. In Rutherford and Son, Mr. Rutherford is a formidable and even tragic figure who stubbornly clings to his belief in an older style of family-run business in which the patriarch maintains absolute control. In his larger-than-life proportions, Mr. Rutherford is a man who must be reckoned with, and who presents an imposing obstacle to the younger generation. In Sheila, on the other hand, the figure of the patriarch is reduced to a caricature and the butt of much of the play’s humour. Sir James Carden’s ineffectual attempts to assert his authority over his nephews, and especially Mark, appear ridiculous and petty. Lady Carden, though she
professes to obey her husband with her mild-mannered “yes, dear”’s and “very well, dear”’s, uses these phrases merely to give Sir James the illusion of control. Mark challenges his uncle more overtly, deliberately defying Sir James’s command that he not leave for Peru. Sir James clings to his substantial estate as his last vestige of power over his nephews, who stand to inherit it upon his death. Even this pathetic form of control proves impotent, since Mark is in a position to make a great deal of money through his mining venture, not only for himself but also for his uncle. While Rutherford and Son focuses on the tenacity and the ultimate submission of the formidable patriarch, Sheila virtually dismisses the patriarch as a figure of fun, concentrating instead on relations between the sexes within the younger generation.

Sheila focuses on Mark and Sheila’s marriage. The couple’s marital difficulties are resolved only when both Mark and Sheila learn to accept marriage on a more equal footing, not for the sake of a child, but for themselves. In her treatment of marriage, Sowerby enters the contemporary feminist dialogue concerning the importance of woman’s role as mother and her economic dependence on her husband. Sowerby’s plays are consistently feminist, though her feminism is often subtle and indirect. At the end of Rutherford and Son, Mr. Rutherford is forced to yield a portion of his power to his quiet, unassuming daughter-in-law. In A Man and Some Women, Sowerby demonstrates the adverse effects on both men and women of the current economic system that makes women dependent on men. In Sheila, as in all of her plays, Sowerby presents feminism in personal rather than political or social terms. Mark and Sheila come to realize that marriage is more than a means of bringing a child into the world. In order to achieve reconciliation, they must learn to conceive of their relationship in more equal terms. Sowerby delicately proposes that marriages based on perceived inequality between husband and wife can lead to unhappiness and even separation. The problem, as Sowerby
construes it, is both men’s and women’s; both sexes must convince themselves of equality in marriage.

On the most basic level, Sowerby’s play constitutes a plea for communication between husbands and wives. Hugh, Mark’s surgeon brother and the play’s *raisonneur*, advises the couple near the end of the play, “You loved each other -- and you couldn’t speak! . . . Oh, that silence! Half the marriages in the world come to shipwreck on that -- just that!” (107). The interest of the play, however, lies in the reasons behind the silence and misunderstandings. Sowerby’s exploration of Mark and Sheila’s relationship suggests that their difficulties arise from a perceived imbalance in gender and class.

From the beginning of the play, Sowerby establishes a clear imbalance of power between Mark and Sheila. Mark, as Sheila’s employer and more than twenty years her senior, begins in a position of control. Subtler indications of Mark’s sense of superiority infiltrate the first act. Sheila comments to Miss Bradley, for instance, that Mr. Holdsworth makes her very uncomfortable by watching her and laughing at her whenever he has a chance: “. . . only this morning when I was taking down his letters, I happened to look up when he paused, and there he was looking at me with that queer smile on his face” (13-14). Although Mark’s gaze is evidently intended as an expression of affection, Sheila interprets its meaning as hostile, a criticism of her stupidity.

Laura Mulvey’s cinematic theory may help to underscore the significance of Mark’s look and its effect on Sheila. Mulvey points out in her well-known essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (366). Traditionally, women are the ones looked at, and men are the ones who look. In conventional narrative cinema, the gaze of the male characters merges seamlessly with the gaze of the spectator, thereby making the woman spectacle for both (366). Although Mulvey is writing about early Hollywood films, her argument has been applied to other artistic media including the visual arts and theatre.
Sowerby, by representing Mark’s gaze from Sheila’s point of view and focusing on her response to it, draws attention to much the same dynamic as Mulvey describes. Inviting the spectator to sympathize with Sheila’s discomfort, Sowerby aligns the spectator with the woman who is looked at rather than with the man who looks. Although she does not overturn the traditional split between active/male and passive/female, she does undermine it somewhat by allowing the female character to respond to the controlling male gaze.

Mark’s stance of superiority is most evident when he proposes to Sheila. Mark knows very little about Sheila when he makes up his mind to marry her, describing her to his cousin as “very inexperienced” (31) and mistakenly assuming that she would not require her husband to take much interest in her. Before approaching Sheila, Mark announces to Sybil: “I get what I want. And I hope to get this” (33). He phrases his proposal in such a way as to place himself firmly in a position of power: “I would like to give you what you wish for. I would like to take you away from everything that’s dull and hard and solemn -- to smash your typewriter and throw your pens out of the window -- and give you all the sunshine in the world to play in . . . do you think you like me well enough to let me?” (37). A self-styled romantic hero, Mark clearly believes that he is doing Sheila a favour by asking her to marry him. His proposal suggests that he has magical powers that will make her every wish come true. Sheila’s instinct is to resist: she turns him down, though she cannot give her reasons. Mark refuses to accept her rejection, but insists that she give it more thought. His tactics during this scene border on coercion and are characterized by a patronizing tone that does not bode well for their marriage.

Boss-typist marriages not only were a social reality in Sowerby’s day, but formed the basis of many a romance novel. In The Good Soldier (1927), Ford Madox Ford alludes to this popular convention: “. . . poor dear Edward was a great reader -- he would pass hours lost in novels of a sentimental type -- novels in which typewriter girls married
marquises and governesses earls. And in his books, as a rule, the course of true love ran as smooth as buttered honey” (27). Sowerby’s play overtures, or perhaps looks beyond, this romantic convention by exploring the difficulties that can arise from marriages beginning with such an imbalance of power.

The fact that Mark begins as Sheila’s employer would also resonate with early-twentieth-century feminism, particularly Cicely Hamilton’s argument that men, in marriage, essentially act as women’s employers, and that for women marriage functions as a trade. In the structure of her play, Sowerby emphasizes the parallel between wife and employee. The break between the first two acts downplays Sheila’s transition from typist to wife. One moment she is Mr. Holdsworth’s typist, surprised and indignant at his sudden proposal; the next, she is the subject of discussion as Mark’s wife. By choosing not to dwell on Sheila’s change of heart, Sowerby virtually collapses one role into the other, emphasizing their similarity. The proposal scene already establishes a link between employee and wife when Sheila mistakes Mark’s questions about her satisfaction with her job for preliminaries to a dismissal rather than a proposal. Sheila cannot even distinguish between Mark’s tone as lover and his role as an employer exerting his power. The office setting reinforces this correspondence. In the second act, Sheila is as insecure about her role in marriage as she was about her ability as a typist; in both cases, Mark’s imagined disapproval causes anxiety. While in the first act she turns to Miss Bradley, Mark’s long-term secretary, for reassurance, in the second she turns to Mark’s younger brother, Geoffrey. The similarity extends to the details: in both acts, we find Sheila touching her hair in the mirror, and hoping to get tickets to a show that will offer a temporary escape from her discomfort. Despite Mark’s grand promises, Sheila’s position has not perceptibly altered since their marriage, except in rate of pay.

Sowerby is careful not to blame Mark alone for the power imbalance in his relations with Sheila. Sheila hardly represents the feminist ideal of the independent
woman, though she does work for a living. The stage directions at the beginning of the play designate: "Your first thought of her is to wonder how on earth she is a typist at twenty-five shillings a week -- she is so obviously unbusiness-like" (6). Later, as Miss Bradley helps Sheila straighten her hat, she gently chastises Sheila for thinking more of her appearance than of her work. Sheila openly admits she hates her job: "I grind, and grind, and in return I get enough to eat and a room to live in, and these! [Her holland sleeves]\(^5\) . . . They make me desperate. When do I get any pleasure? It's the same thing day after day, week after week, and nothing nice ever happens, nothing, nothing!" (12). Sheila's outburst, triggered by work's preventing her from going to the movies, is motivated not by desire for a more responsible position, but by frustration at having to work at all. No doubt influenced by the romantic movies of which she is so fond, Sheila fantasizes about a life of leisure: "I'd like to have a home of my own, with big rooms and lots of flowers and wardrobes full of frocks. Just think! To wake up in the morning and have a maid to bring me tea and all my invitations in a pile on the tray -- to feel there's no work to do, nothing but just to be happy all day long" (15). Sheila is no adventuress; her dreams of leisured life do not translate into any active pursuit of wealth through marriage. But her fantasies, alongside her discontent with the everyday grind, do leave her vulnerable to Mark's arrogant proposal that he will make all of her wishes come true by marrying her. Though she resists his proposal at first, Sheila's yearnings for a better life make her change of heart no great surprise.

Mark's proposal contains an assumption that Sheila would naturally benefit from marrying into his higher class, and he uses his stature to lure her into marriage. Once they are married, however, Mark's superior class becomes more of an obstacle than an advantage to Sheila. At the end of the play, Sheila explains the problem clearly: "I was

\(^5\)Holland sleeves were worn by typists to protect their clothing from ink.
such a little nobody — and I was so proud you’d chosen me! . . . I wasn’t fit to be your wife” (110). Sheila’s self-consciousness at being surrounded by people of a higher class leads her to alienate herself more than her situation warrants. She rightly takes offence at the Cardens’ not having called on her soon after her marriage, but her resentment at their negligence and her anxiety about being a social impediment to Mark cause her to react in such a way as to exaggerate her own lack of refinement. At a dinner party, Sheila almost wilfully misreads Lady Carden’s sympathetic courtesies as condescension, and reacts by deliberately overstaying her welcome. The following day, she further retaliates by inviting a brash, pretentious friend to tea with the Cardens in hopes of shocking them. Sheila’s weak attempts at resistance invariably work against her. At tea, her friend’s crass social climbing embarrasses Sheila far more than it does the Cardens, and she is overcome with guilt for humiliating Mark in this way. The reality of Sheila’s situation is as far from her dream of having nothing to do but be happy all day long as it is from Mark’s promise to take her away from all of her cares.

While Sheila reinforces her own inferior position through her self-consciousness and oversensitivity, Mark perpetuates her condition by treating her like a child. As he did before their marriage, Mark laughs at Sheila’s social blunders, impervious to his effect of making Sheila all the more self-conscious. Sheila painfully recalls her discomfort at the Cardens’: “I suppose I talked too much at dinner, anyway towards the end I found half the table listening to me and looking amused — and Mark was laughing. That finished me —” (49). The initial imbalance of their relationship is exacerbated by a series of misunderstandings fastened onto incidental details such as the flowers Mark gives Sheila. Sheila’s resentment of Mark’s sense of superiority is projected on these flowers: “Do you know what [these flowers] say to me? [...] ‘You were foolish last night, but you’re an ignorant little thing, and we’ll say no more about it’” (52). In her apprehension, Sheila exaggerates Mark’s stance, but there is some truth to her accusations. Mark does look on
her as young and naïve, and compares her to a child. Near the end of the play, Mark’s brother Hugh chastises Mark for his attitude: “She was a child when you married her and you looked on her as child, a little slight creature to be made happy with pretty things. So she was: but she was infinitely more than that. No shallow nature could have done what she’s done” (107). Mark’s objection to Sheila’s joining him in Peru, though perhaps realistic, exemplifies his protectiveness of her in defiance of her insistence that she is stronger than he thinks:

MARK: My dear -- I couldn’t take you with me -- it’s impossible. Do you know what happens when a thing like this is started? They get their men together — scores of the roughest sort you can find anywhere — and they run up a little colony of huts for them to live in. You’re right away from everywhere, there are no comforts, scarcely the necessaries of life -- I’d never forgive myself if I took you to such a place. (61)

Mark, ironically believing that he is protecting Sheila from the world’s harshness, ends up leaving her to bear the birth and death of a child completely on her own. Sheila thereby proves she is not so much of a child as Mark takes her to be.

The issue of the child becomes the crux of the problem between Mark and Sheila, and eventually divides them completely. In a climactic quarrel at the end of Act II, the combination of Sheila’s oversensitivity and Mark’s patronizing distance all but terminates their marriage. The trouble begins when Sybil, resentful that Mark has married Sheila and not herself, discloses to Sheila her conversation with Mark on the eve of his proposal. In the most incriminating light possible, Sybil informs Sheila that Mark never loved her: “He wants a thing and he gets it, that’s all. He wanted this money and he’s got it -- he wanted you and he’s got you. . . . And before you knew, he told me he meant to make you his wife. He knew he only had to ask you. . . . Mark married you because he wanted a son, and for no other reason in the world” (79-80). Sybil’s stark representation of Mark’s
sense of control is not far from the truth, as his proposal indicates. Sybil does, however, omit parts of the conversation suggesting that Mark’s position stems from his ignorance of love and that his desire for a son is impulsive. Sheila, devastated that Mark would marry her just to have a son, refuses to believe that he might have grown to love her for herself. To make matters worse, Mark retreats to the patronizing tone of his proposal: “Oh, my dear, when have I not been good to you? Has it been easy for me always to remember your youth, your ignorance of what marriage means? [...] You take this one fact — that I didn’t love you at first as I love you now — and you’re talking as if all we’ve been to each other were to end on that!” (84). He still seems to expect Sheila to be grateful for his marrying her: “Ashamed! I’ve made you my wife — and you talk of shame” (85). Mark’s pride widens the gap between them, and the act ends with Sheila and Mark agreeing that they cannot live together as husband and wife while Sheila feels as she does.

Sheila, despite a flagrant lack of feminist consciousness, instinctively balks against a marriage in which she is nothing more than a mother to her husband’s child. The fact that she knows she is pregnant makes their decision to separate all the more disturbing for the audience. In her sympathy with Sheila’s position, Sowerby aligns herself with feminists such as Hamilton, Rhondda and Shaw who believed that women’s main purpose in life need not be motherhood. Her play suggests that women require more from marriage than motherhood, and that women are more than just means to that end. Sheila implicitly counters the biologically-based feminism of Stopes and Chesser, who virtually sanctify motherhood in their writing, as well as the anti-feminism of Ludovici and Colquhoun, who advocate women’s return to their separate sphere of domestic and familial concerns. In the play, Sowerby maps out these separate spheres physically through Mark’s and Sheila’s separate journeys: while Mark goes to work and make money in Peru, Sheila leaves to have a child in Italy. Their separation, as Sowerby
presents it, is neither necessary nor desired, but stems from a misunderstanding between husband and wife, aggravated by gender and class inequalities. Sowerby further suggests that these separate spheres must come together in order to achieve understanding and happiness in marriage.

The end of the third act brings the couple back together, physically and emotionally, in a tentative reunion. Sowerby’s stage directions describe a difference in Mark when he returns from Peru: “MARK comes straight in, his face tense and eager. In a moment you realise how much he is changed. He is more alive, more natural, less coolly master of himself” (94). He is anxious about Sheila, all the more so when he learns that she had been carrying his child. While the child was the reason for the couple’s separation, it is also the means of their reconciliation. The very child that made Sheila doubt Mark’s love now makes Mark doubt Sheila’s. When Mark learns that she kept her pregnancy from him, his self-worth is completely shaken: “Love! she never loved me! . . . if she had, she must have spoken . . . Oh, I’m not blaming her. God knows there’s little enough in me to care for . . .” (105). By withholding information about their child, Sheila inadvertently places Mark in the same position in which he placed her earlier: she makes him feel secondary to the child, merely a means to an end rather than an end in himself. Through Mark, Sowerby shows men in personal terms how distressing it is to be nothing more to one’s spouse than a means of reproduction.

The play’s construction ensures that the baby’s birth and death remain secondary to the working out of Mark and Sheila’s marriage. The birth of Sheila’s child, its illness and its death all take place off-stage in the space between Acts II and III. They are removed from the audience by time and space, and reported second-hand by Mark’s brother. Although both Mark and Sheila are visibly shaken by the circumstances surrounding the baby’s death, Sowerby’s immediate concern is the couple’s reconciliation, which unfolds before the audience. Nevertheless, the image of a dead
child haunts the end of the play, forming a jarring backdrop to Mark and Sheila’s reunion. This disturbing juxtaposition of images, however, is strangely appropriate to Sowerby’s message that fertility is not necessary for the renewal of marriage.

The play ends on a note of ambiguity that underscores the precarious nature of Mark and Sheila’s reconciliation. Sowerby offers no definitive solution to the couple’s problems, instead suggesting that they have barely begun a much longer process:

SHEILA: Mark, if it could all come over again. If I could come here as I did at the beginning in -- in my holland sleeves, so little and foolish --

MARK: Don’t, don’t -- I can’t bear to think of that --

SHEILA: Or -- if you could just think of me as myself -- if you could forget all I’d done, and just believe that somehow, somehow I’d loved you all the time --

(He looks at her)

MARK: Sheila!

(A moment’s silence.)

SHEILA: Oh, can’t you see? (112)

Sheila’s final question carries in it a reminder of Mark’s and her earlier blindness to each other’s feelings. The play, literally and figuratively, ends with a question mark, though it does offer hope for the future.

In Sheila, Sowerby makes social and feminist issues in marriage intensely personal. Her play draws attention to the mechanisms of gender imbalance, showing that both men and women perpetuate it. Sheila dramatizes a reconstitution of marriage; a rejection of the old, imbalanced model in favour of a new, more equal partnership. Both men and women must learn to recognize woman’s strength and independence; both must learn that her role as a wife extends far beyond motherhood. Sowerby’s feminist position on motherhood is all the more controversial given its immediate context. The sharp fall in birth rates during the War elevated motherhood and child-rearing to a national duty
Sowerby’s position that motherhood is not the primary aim of marriage would have been even more contentious in 1917 than it was either before or after the War, when other feminists were espousing similar views. The contemporary feminist debates concerning women’s role in marriage and the importance of motherhood help to illuminate Sowerby’s subtle feminism.

**Elizabeth Baker, *Penelope Forgive* (1930)**

While Sowerby renegotiates sex roles in marriage, Baker renegotiates divorce. A more overtly feminist play than *Sheila*, *Penelope Forgives* takes a strong stance on married women’s adverse economic position. Baker surrounds the predicament of the central couple with a variety of good and bad marriages, through which she comments on many aspects of the institution. Her commentary on marriage is informed by contemporary feminist ideas concerning the economics of marriage and the double standard inherent in traditional conceptions of women’s role.

Elizabeth Baker was born in London in the same year as Sowerby, 1876. After working as a cashier, she became a private secretary and began to write plays in her spare time (B. Clark 160). Baker was active in the suffrage movement; her one-act play *Edith* was performed as part of a fund-raising event organized by the Women Writers’ Suffrage League in 1912 (Stowell, *Stage* 102). Her first full-length play, *Chains*, was produced in 1909 by the Play Actors and then travelled with Charles Frohman’s Repertory Theatre. Although Baker attracted some positive critical attention in her early years as a playwright, she had difficulty finding audiences after the war. As the fashion in theatre turned toward glamour and sophistication, her simple depictions of lower-middle-class life became more and more out of place (Bishop 77). *Penelope Forgives* opened at the Century Theatre on 21 February 1930. This play was an unusual choice for the Century, which most often housed revues and musical comedies. The play seems to have attracted
little attention from reviewers, and could not have run for very long, since the Century
was torn down and reopened as the Adelphi, under the management of Charles B.
Cochran, in December of the same year (Mander 8-9). Baker seems to have stopped
writing plays shortly thereafter; her last known drama was One of the Spicers, published
in 1933.6

Early-twentieth-century critics often compared Elizabeth Baker to Githa Sowerby.
A. E. Morgan places both within his category of “drama of revolt,” which he defines as
drama “representative of the new spirit of revolt, especially the revolt of youth against the
tyannical ideals of age” (197). Barrett Clark couples the two playwrights through their
use of everyday life and ordinary people for material (160-61). More recently, Allardyce
Nicoll has linked the two playwrights in his sceptical claim that their social dramas were
well-written within their own limits and of some importance in their own time but are
now dead (1900-1930 276-77).7 He exempts from this obsolescence Baker’s The Price of
Thomas Scott, which he claims to be one of the few serious plays of its kind to preserve
some vitality today, since “the playwright was forced, almost against her will, to admire
the strength of character which kept an old, prejudiced and bigoted father true to his
principles” (1900-1930 277). What Nicoll means by “its kind” is not entirely clear: he
seems to refer to his category of British social drama, a subset of which is minority or
feminist drama. His criticism certainly would seem to imply that Baker’s The Price of
Thomas Scott succeeds despite its feminism.

Baker often drew on her own lower-middle-class background for the subject
material of her plays (Stowell, Stage 103). Her class difference may be at the root of A.

6Rudolf Weiss’s article provides a complete list of Baker’s plays, and summarizes many
of them.

7The positive response to the 1994 revival of Sowerby’s Rutherford and Son at the
National Theatre in London would seem to prove Nicoll wrong on at least this count.
E. Morgan's criticism of her work. Though he praises Baker for her accuracy of detail in depicting suburban life, Morgan claims:

... Miss Baker fails to reveal that greatness of human nature which is not necessary for clever and even effective stage-plays but which is essential for the creation of great drama. Except perhaps in the character of Thomas Scott she has not succeeded in raising life above mediocrity. Like Stanley Houghton and most of the realistic dramatists of middle-class life, she gives pictures of remarkable verisimilitude and spares no detail of the trivial circumstances, the petty thoughts and the dull expression which only too truly represent the cramped life of the majority. (190)

Barrett Clark praises her work for many of the same reasons that Morgan condemns it, commending Baker's penetration and power of analysis in her "simple picture of the clerk class" in Chains, which along with her other plays "entitle[s] her to a place among the very few writers in England to-day whose work is sincere and significant" (160-61).

Penelope Forgives is Baker's most cynical treatment of marriage. The play opened a few months before Noel Coward's more irreverent and arguably even more cynical treatment of marriage and divorce, Private Lives. Many of Baker's earlier plays dealt with the theme of marriage, most notably Chains (1909) and Partnership (1917). In Chains, marriage plays an ambivalent role: rightly or wrongly, it represents the chain that holds the male protagonist back from his dream of a better life in the colonies.

Partnership is a brighter comedy in which the heroine, a sharp businesswoman, decides to follow her emotions rather than her business sense in accepting a proposal of marriage. Penelope Forgives, though it has humorous moments, is generally a serious and ironic depiction of an unhappy marriage ending in divorce. For most of the play, Penelope, its unhappy heroine, agonizes over the difficulty of leaving her husband, Jack Gibbs. She discovers in Act I that Jack has spent the Easter holiday weekend with another woman,
and this is not the first time he has been unfaithful. Jack's infidelity is exposed before his brothers and parents, all of whom chastise him for his actions, but none of whom support Penelope's desire to leave him. Penelope wants a divorce, but soon discovers that it is virtually impossible for a divorced woman with children to find a job. She is on the verge of capitulating by forgiving Jack when her Aunt Edie, who suffered for years in a bad marriage herself, suddenly dies and leaves Penelope a house that will grant her the economic independence she requires. Contrary to the expectation contained in the play's title, Penelope does not forgive her husband. Though she does indicate that she may return to him if he learns his lesson, the play ends with Penelope's decision to leave. Unlike Odysseus's wife, this modern-day Penelope will not stand by while her husband has his adventures at sea.

A comic sub-plot provides an ironic contrast to the main divorce plot. Fairy and Dum-Dum, a young couple as amusing and silly as their names would imply, plan to marry and to hold their wedding reception in Penelope's and Jack's home. Much of the play's humour arises out of the confusion surrounding their wedding. Moments before the event, Fairy decides that she cannot follow through with a marriage when Penelope is so obviously miserable in hers. Just as Penelope is reconciling herself to the fact that she cannot survive on her own and therefore must stay with Jack, Fairy turns to her for advice on the question of marriage. Baker handles Penelope's response skilfully, with a mixture of irony and true sentiment:

PENELOPE: ... What have you to be afraid of? Marriage means being always with one you love best in the world ... and that is Dum-Dum, isn't it? Think how he loves you -- think what a sad thing it would be for him if you didn't go with him after all -- think how lonely you'd be if you didn't have him with you always, to look after you, to be always with you -- ... And now listen, dear, whatever anyone tells you, I do like being married and I would like every girl to
be married. The best thing that can happen to any woman, Fairy dear, is to be loved. (70-71)

Penelope’s sincerity ensures that the irony in her being the spokesperson for marriage does not become ridiculous. Baker sustains the ironic juxtaposition of the two plots until the end of the play, when the marriage off-stage and divorce on-stage come to fruition simultaneously. While Dum-Dum and Fairy are at church getting married, Penelope decides once and for all to leave Jack. In the last moments of the play, the wedding march plays on the gramophone to welcome the new couple, while Penelope backs away from Jack’s attempt at reconciliation. Baker underscores the irony in her stage directions just before the final curtain: “The wedding party come in, the bridal pair stage side of curtains followed by SUSIE and HARRY [and] others beyond, all laughing, talking. The wedding march shouts its way triumphantly on” (84). The marriage and divorce plots complement each other. While the wedding’s cheer intensifies the pathos of Penelope’s divorce, the divorce adds a cynical note to the wedding. As the noise of the wedding ceremony drowns out the divorce negotiations at the end of the play, Baker reminds audiences that couples will continue to marry despite adverse prognostications about the failure of marriage and increasing divorce.

Baker does not allow her sympathetic portrayal of Penelope to be taken as a stance against marriage itself. In her play, she presents good marriages to counterbalance the bad. Fairy and Dum-Dum, though humorously naïve, are a sweet, affectionate couple whose marriage would seem to have every chance of success. Penelope’s words of encouragement to Fairy are not entirely misplaced. Even more than Fairy and Dum-Dum, Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs, Jack’s parents, present a thoroughly positive model of marriage. Their one fault is that their good marriage makes divorce virtually inconceivable to them,

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8I have restored apostrophes and corrected obvious typographical errors in my transcriptions of Baker’s typescript.
so that they find Penelope’s decision impossible to accept. Chastising his son for his wayward behaviour, Mr. Gibbs demonstrates his own unquestioning loyalty to his wife: “I’ve been married to your dear mother over thirty years and I’ve never looked at another woman since she did me the honour to take me for her husband. I never wanted to, sir – I never thought of other women” (52). His son’s behaviour brings tears to his eyes on more than one occasion. When Fairy has doubts about getting married, the Gibbses step in to help:

MRS GIBBS: (Pulling chair forward) And all of us here have been married, dear, and we all like it very much, don’t we, John?

GIBBS: (Clasping her hand fondly, speaking solemnly) We’ve been married over thirty years and we’d do it again to-morrow, if we had the chance. (71)

The couple’s actions underline their sincerity. Amidst the generally discouraging picture of marriage presented in Penelope Forgives, the Gibbses offer some hope.

Whereas the Gibbses present a positive model of marriage within the older generation, Aunt Edie presents a negative one. Through Aunt Edie, Baker criticizes the pre-1923 divorce laws that made escape from a bad marriage so difficult for women. Though Edie’s husband is dead, she still suffers the effects of his mistreatment of her. From Edie’s first appearance on stage in the opening scene, Baker emphasizes her meekness and deference through her small, frail appearance and her fearful movements. The stage directions read, “She comes in very softly, closing door behind her as if afraid to make any noise, and comes tip-toeing Down R[ight]” (2). Edie proceeds to take the most uncomfortable seat in the room, and sits on the edge of her chair. She continually worries that she is imposing on Penelope’s hospitality. The connection between her nervousness and her former marriage unfolds gradually. In that last scene, Baker confirms what she has insinuated throughout, that Aunt Edie’s marriage caused her much pain. After Edie’s death in the third act, the family speaks more openly about her
husband’s adultery and neglect. Mr. Gibbs points out that, despite his faults, her husband did not beat her or drink. These qualifications are important because they confirm that Aunt Edie would have had no grounds for divorce under the old laws; she was trapped legally as well as psychologically. Mr. Gibbs gently suggests that Aunt Edie was too meek in her acceptance of her husband’s faults: “I’m all for a wife being gentle and dutiful and forgiving, but poor Edie, well, well, poor soul” (77). What Mr. Gibbs does not grasp is the connection between her meekness and her legal position: Aunt Edie in effect had no choice but to be meek. Baker draws this connection between disposition and choice even more clearly with Penelope, whose temporary forgiveness and submission to her husband are a direct consequence of her having no other recourse. Even after her husband’s death, Aunt Edie worries that she is going against her husband’s wishes by keeping a house that he had intended to will to a rich relative. When she dies, Edie finally asserts her own will in one final act of rebellion by willing this house to Penelope so that she can leave Jack if she chooses. Though she could never bring herself to defy her husband in life, Aunt Edie does so in death. Through her will, Edie shows her determination that Penelope not suffer as she did under the double standard that requires women to endure behaviour in men that men would never tolerate in women.

Unlike Aunt Edie, Penelope’s mother, Mrs. Frazer, rejoices in the old-fashioned values that insist a woman stay with her husband. Mrs. Frazer believes she is a great success in marriage, and Penelope affirms that her mother has indeed been fortunate. Mrs. Frazer, who has been married three times, prides herself on getting along famously with men, and overflows with unwanted advice to young women on how to keep their husbands happy. Baker satirizes Mrs. Frazer’s position by suggesting that her cheery attitude arises from obliviousness and blatant lack of feminist consciousness. Early in the play, Mrs. Frazer casually announces that she will marry her employer. Her easy movement from housekeeper to wife suggests little distinction in her mind between the
two. Parrot-like, Mrs. Frazer returns repeatedly to the old adage that the key to marital success is good cooking. She supports the double standard inherent in earlier divorce laws, suggesting to Mrs. Gibbs that Penelope has no right to leave Jack over adultery alone: “Jack doesn’t what you might say drink; and he doesn’t bet -- nothing to speak of -- and he’s not violent even when he’s had a drop. It’s only just this one thing -- women. And between you and I, it’s more their fault than his” (51). She takes a stand against divorce, whatever its causes, and insists that her daughter must “remember her duty” (47). Rather than divorce, Mrs. Frazer recommends that her daughter do as she did and turn a blind eye to any suspicious behaviour. She blames all marital problems on women alone, as in her analysis of her daughter’s and Aunt Edie’s difficulties: “Some women never seem to learn how to treat men. I never had any trouble of that sort and I’ve had a lot to do with gentlemen” (77). Mrs. Frazer’s views echo anti-feminist tracts such as Wieth-Knudsen’s that charge women with all of the problems of modern marriage. Her rhetoric even more closely reflects that of conservative women such as Ethel Colquhoun in her lectures on women’s duty, and Elsie Lang in her insistence that modern girls lack the character of their Victorian grandmothers. Through Mrs. Frazer, Baker satirizes anti-feminist positions that uphold the double standard in marriage.

Baker further intimates that such old-fashioned ideas may not die out with the younger generation, despite indications to the contrary. Susie Smith, Fairy’s sister, loudly proclaims her intention never to marry because men are not worth the trouble:

SUSIE: (Violently) . . . I did the best I could to keep [Fairy and Dum-Dum] from it, didn’t I, Mrs. Gibbs? I said to Dum-Dum, I said -- You think she’s an angel now and in a month you’ll think her a little devil. You think she’s pretty now because she’s all eyes and hair and cuddles, and in six months you’ll wonder what on earth you saw in her and tell her to shut her eyes and comb her hair back. The way men go on!! It’s disgusting -- I hate them!!
Susie’s modern, feminist views are little more than fashionable rhetoric, however. By the end of the play, she has decided to marry Jack’s brother Hugh, who in private moments reveals himself to be dangerously sympathetic to Jack’s shortcomings. Rudolph Weiss identifies Susie as a recurring type in Baker’s plays: the young girl who spouts feminist slogans but then throws herself at some man or other at the first opportunity (314). Hugh plays along with Susie’s feminist rhetoric, but their light banter has very little substance:

SUSIE: . . . If I marry you I’m to keep on my own work as long as I like.

(HARRY ticks off the conditions on his fingers)

HARRY: Right -- 1.

SUSIE: I -- I shan’t have children unless I want them.

HARRY: Right -- 2.

SUSIE: If you stay away at clubs and places I’ll do the same.

HARRY: Right -- 3.

SUSIE: I shall leave you directly I’m tired of you.

HARRY: Right -- 4. (74)

Although on the surface Susie and Hugh seem to be negotiating a thoroughly modern marriage contract on Susie’s terms, their flippancy suggests that neither one of them takes Susie’s feminist demands very seriously. Through Susie, Baker lightly cautions that the feminist rhetoric of the younger generation may not translate into more equitable marriages.

On the men’s side, the generational conflict over double standards is reversed. While Jack enacts the double standard, his father is its main opponent:
GIBBS: ... I tell you what, sir, I'm old-fashioned and I can't take these things so easy as you young chaps do. I knew, of course, there was something wrong last night, but that it should be this! What made you do it -- were you drunk?

JACK: No.

GIBBS: Not even drunk -- there might have been some sort of excuse if you had been. Not that I'd make it for any man. Your mother and I have led decent lives, we've given you a decent home, we've been proud of you. And now we who brought you up to be upright, clean living -- we live to be ashamed of you.

MRS G: Oh John, don't be hard.

GIBBS: I'm not hard -- I'm only ashamed -- a son of mine -- our child -- (his voice breaks; he turns to mantel; blowing his nose, wiping his eyes).

JACK: Look here dad, I can't say any more than I'm sorry. If I can only get Pen to stop I'll swear I'll do everything I can do to make her happy. (52-53)

Mr. Gibbs, truly dismayed by his son's attitude, almost regrets that Penelope has no choice but to stay with him. He shows far more genuine regret for his son's behaviour than Jack himself does. Jack never really believes that Penelope will leave him, although he is embarrassed at having been caught, and willing to ask her for forgiveness. He tries to excuse himself by falling back on the double standard that allows men to cheat while their wives turn a blind eye: "I've made a slip now and then -- other men do it and think nothing of it, or their wives either if they hear of it" (83). His views mirror Mrs. Frazer's, though his culpability makes them more objectionable. Baker's inversion of the generational conflict suggests that the younger generation of men is more apt than the elder to treat adultery lightly, despite the change in divorce laws. Her position may be influenced by the increasing numbers of male theorists, from conservatives like Ludovici to radicals like Haire, who believed that men were naturally polygamous, and advocated tolerance accordingly.
In its critique of the double standard, *Penelope Forgives* presents an interesting analogue to Henry Arthur Jones’s play *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894). In Jones’s play, written well before the law allowed women to divorce on grounds of their husbands’ infidelity, the heroine decides she will avenge her husband’s affair by having an affair herself. She and her husband eventually achieve a tentative reconciliation, but only after she tells him she was never unfaithful. The play’s *raisonneur* figure, divorce-court judge Sir Richard, orchestrates the reconciliation from his position of authority through his years of experience with couples at court. In *Penelope Forgives*, by contrast, the entire decision lies in Penelope’s hands: she is her own authority. By demonstrating the inadequacy of the advice Penelope receives from all quarters, Baker points out the inadequacy of external authority in dealing with the real difficulties faced by divorced women. Though her relatives believe they know what is best for her, Penelope is the one who must decide whether the risk of leaving her husband is worth taking, given the harsh economic realities that faced the divorced woman of 1930. Baker places the power of decision in divorce not in the hands of the court, as Jones does, but in the hands of the injured woman.

While the double standard makes Penelope’s divorce controversial with her family, the economic situation makes it impossible. Baker’s stance on this issue is clearly feminist: she criticizes the economic conditions that make it difficult if not impossible for women to exercise their legal right to divorce on the same grounds as men. As long as divorced women do not have fair access to employment, their equal rights exist only in theory. In the play, Penelope’s first step when she decides to leave Jack is to look for work. Her first day of searching for a job reveals to her an unexpected bias: “[The registry office] told me if I had children it would be very difficult to get work. I found it true enough at the job I went after -- they turned lots of us down saying that no woman with children need wait” (38). Mrs. Frazer confirms that the situation is equally difficult
in housekeeping: "Gentlemen don't like having children about the house -- housekeepers' children, I mean... And they wouldn't like a housekeeper who'd left her husband or had a divorce or anything, Penny. It's very difficult to get situations with nice people. I had to show your poor father's death certificate at one place to prove I was a widow" (43). Furthermore, for women of Penelope's class, alimony is also problematic: "Jack hasn't much money -- people in our position can't arrange for alimony and allowances as the rich can" (38). While feminists such as Clemence Dane and Charlotte Gasquioine Hartley were celebrating women's legal rights in divorce, Baker points out the harsh realities for women of the lower classes. As long as divorced women could not earn a living, legal equality would make little difference.

Penelope's lack of marketable skills increases her difficulties in finding a job. Before she married, she did receive some millinery training, but, like so many women of Baker's day, she quit to get married before she gained any worthwhile experience. Ultimately, fear makes Penelope abandon her quest for independence: "I began to grow afraid; I hadn't the courage to go out and fight. As the days went on and I went to this place and that and saw people fighting to get work I grew more and more frightened. I felt safe here even if I was unhappy" (82). Through Penelope, Baker points to a link rarely made by feminists of her day between women's economic hardship in divorce and the social norm of women quitting their jobs to get married. She demonstrates how women who stopped working when they married in effect became trapped in marriage, since they did not gain enough experience to be of value on the job market. Baker extends Lady Rhondda's arguments in favour of women's continued employment during marriage to the lower classes. While Lady Rhondda prompts leisured women to work to benefit the community, Baker shows that lower-class wives may have to work simply to survive should their marriages end.
As long as divorce is so much less economically feasible for women than for men, marriage acts much like a prison. The men in the play accept Penelope’s inability to leave Jack almost as a matter of course:

LIONEL (To JACK): Hang it, old man, she can’t go -- where’s she to go to?
HARRY: That’s what I want to know.
JACK: How do I know: she just says she’s going.
LIONEL: She’ll find out she can’t in a day or two.

HARRY: She won’t find much in the papers.
LIONEL: You’re right.
JACK (Startled): I didn’t know she’d gone as far as that --
HARRY: She didn’t get anything, did she?
MRS GIBBS: No; it’s the children that make it difficult.
GIBBS: The children -- ?
HARRY: I thought so. (53)

The employment bar against divorced women comes as no surprise to these men. Jack’s certainty that Penelope cannot afford to leave him places him in a position of power over her. As long as Penelope is trapped, he has no reason to change his behaviour. His words to his mother imply that he sees Penelope’s threats to leave him as a power struggle that he has won: “Oh, I’ve been going into things properly this week, and take my word for it -- it was a bit of hard work at the start; women do take the bit between their teeth these days. But she had to give in at last; for one thing, she couldn’t get work” (66). Job market biases ensure that Jack maintains control over the situation. He finds security in her hopelessness: “I’d see her coming in, looking pretty miserable and down in the mouth, and then I knew another job had gone west. Oh, she hadn’t a chance. She’ll be all right now” (67). Jack seems oblivious to the irony in his suggestion that Penelope is
“all right” now that she has no hope. Her lack of power increases his cockiness, as he continues: “But the truth is, if you ask me, Pen realises where she’s best off -- with a home of her own and a husband to keep her” (67). Jack reasserts his power as Penelope’s keeper; his language suggests paternalism and dominance. The fallacy in his claim that Penelope, through him, has “a home of her own” emerges when she inherits a home that is truly hers, a home that gives her independence, not one that keeps her trapped.

According to Baker, marriage is a trap for women as long as they have no real choice but to remain in it. Her metaphor inverts that of anti-feminists such as Wieth-Knudson who suggest that men are trapped by conspiring feminists.

In the end, Baker grants Penelope the freedom to leave her husband. The improbability of the play’s resolution, however, stresses that women’s economic situation in divorce was far from settled. The sudden death of an aunt with property is not a solution upon which many women could rely. It is tempting to dismiss the miraculous timing of Aunt Edie’s death as a flaw in Baker’s play-writing. However, Baker may be deliberately using the improbability of the ending to draw attention to its fictionality. Within the economic conditions set out in the play, the only way that Penelope could achieve independence would be through an unlikely coincidence, since no realistic solution exists. Rather than place Penelope in a position of hopeless entrapment at the end of the play, forced into a life parallel to Aunt Edie’s, Baker offers her hope by allowing her to break free from her marriage, however unlikely this escape may be. Baker emphasizes Penelope’s emancipation, not her divorce, at the end of the play. The divorce is not necessarily final; Penelope indicates that she may return to Jack if he can prove that he has changed. Her willingness to reconsider marriage on her own terms constitutes an expression of her new-found independence, not its renunciation. The choice is now hers to make. In the final moments of the play, Penelope sheds the indecision and resignation that characterized her earlier behaviour. She self-assuredly
stands up to her mother -- "I'm seeing [things] in the right light, Mother" (83) -- and her last words tell Jack emphatically "No -- No!" (84) as he moves toward her. Of all the guests, she is the one who has enough presence of mind to take charge of the gramophone, and she throws open the curtains to display the wedding breakfast. Baker's ending takes the heroine beyond the cynical message about women's economic entrapment in marriage toward a position of independence and freedom.

In Penelope Forgive, Baker contrasts a variety of conceptions of marriage, showing particularly how the traditional double standard still lingers despite changes in the law. More pragmatically, the play demonstrates how married women's economic dependence on their husbands restricts their freedom of choice and can serve to trap them in unhappy marriages. While many feminists in Baker's day denounced the employment barriers facing married women, few extended that argument to divorced women with children to support. While Baker conceives of women's dependence on their husbands primarily in economic terms, the dependence is less tangible for Sowerby. In Sheila, Sowerby shows that the power imbalance between husbands and wives is sometimes less real than it is perceived, and often based on misconceptions. Penelope's empowerment comes from an external source of economic independence, whereas Sheila's arises from internal recognition. No longer believing that her husband values her only for her capacity to bear a child, Sheila can return to her marriage. Sowerby's feminism is more subtle than Baker's, yet she tackles an even more controversial issue among feminists: the importance of motherhood in marriage. Her play renegotiates marriage as a partnership between husband and wife, not as a means of bearing a child. In so doing, Sowerby aligns herself with feminists who insisted that married women's social role comprised more than motherhood. While Baker and Sowerby take up very different aspects of marriage and divorce in Penelope Forgive and Sheila, both reflect in their work the feminist concerns of their day.
The figurative battle of the sexes that has worked its way through the last three chapters becomes quite literal in the next, as feminist playwrights take on an issue of extreme importance in their immediate political context: war. While the plays covered in this chapter looked beyond the romance of marriage, exposing some of its delusions and hardships, the plays in the next scrutinize the romance of war, exposing the predominantly masculine values underlying militarism. The subject of married women’s employment addressed by Baker in *Penelope Forgives* emerges once again in Winifred Holtby’s *Take Back Your Freedom* (1935), this time with alarming political ramifications. Holtby’s play, along with Cicely Hamilton’s *The Old Adam* (1924), serve as an important reminder that women wrote not just domestic and historical drama, but also political and satirical, although their contributions in these areas are less often acknowledged.
Chapter Four:
War, Feminism, and Pacifism

in Cicely Hamilton's The Old Adam (1924)
and Winifred Holtby's Take Back Your Freedom (1935)

"'There have always been wars; there always will be wars.' That has ever been the creed, expressed or implied of the militarist, more devoutly held than ever in the face of threats to supersede war" (Conflict 42). Havelock Ellis, in his essay on the origins of war published in 1919, thus summarizes a position held by many of his contemporaries. The First World War gave rise to much discussion about the nature and causes of war, including the popular contention that an innate aggressive instinct made war an inescapable reality for humanity. Among the pacifists who challenged this viewpoint during the War and after were many British feminists who argued that, though war may be natural to man, it is not natural to woman. By the mid-1930s, Fascism became the anti-militarists' target, and both pacifists and feminists were forced to decide whether they could condone war in order to combat this violent, militarist movement sweeping Europe. Numerous British intellectuals wrote against Fascism, including many feminists concerned about Fascist states driving women back to the home. The Old Adam, written by Cicely Hamilton in 1924, and Take Back Your Freedom, written by Winifred Holtby in 1935, offer thoughtful perspectives on the question of militarism and its connection to ____________

1The Old Adam was written and first performed in 1924, but not published until 1925. I have used the performance date in the text of this thesis, whereas the Works Cited list gives the publication date.
gender. Well-known feminists in their time, Hamilton and Holtby critique men's readiness to take up arms for a national cause. Hamilton's play, working from the premise that England has found the technological means to circumvent war, contends that men's and women's war fervour prevails over armament and reason. Holtby's play recounts a Fascist dictator's rise to power in 1935 England, underscoring the ease with which he accomplishes this feat. These political dramas both reflect to some extent the feminist position against militarism, yet they resist drawing a clear line between women as pacifists and men as militarists by acknowledging women's complicity in war while emphasizing men's dominance. The Old Adam and Take Back Your Freedom are important not only for their feminist perspectives on militarism, but also as strong examples of women playwrights taking on one of the most important political issues of their day.

The First World War gave rise to a plethora of theoretical works on the subject of war in the 1920s and 1930s, many of which attempted to come to grips with the trauma Europe had just experienced by proclaiming the inevitability of war. John Carter, in a work melodramatically entitled Man Is War (1926), asserts that war will persist as long as the invigorating ideals of manhood and honour are held above the feeble ideals of service and self-effacement (6). He contends that war is inherent in the Atlantic races and necessary for the continuation of civilization (6). Similarly, psychiatrist William White suggests that conflict is necessary for evolution, and that the most intense living takes place amidst the death and destruction of war (6-7, 86). William I. Thomas is one of the few to include women explicitly in the fighting instinct: he argues that hostility is no less intense in women than in men, and that in primitive societies women prodded men to war (101). Even some pacifists agreed that man was naturally aggressive, and therefore proposed that he must discover the means to redirect his basic instincts through some substitute for war. Gilbert Murray, for instance, argues that pacifists must accept conflict
as necessary to life and moral growth. If war is to be circumvented, a moral equivalent in the formation and strengthening of character must be found (26-33). Pierre Bovet, a French educationist, likewise contends that the only way to avoid war is to divert man’s innate belligerence to a different moral equivalent. G. E. Partridge, in his study of the psychology of nations, claims that war rises from man’s craving for power and desire for ecstatic states of consciousness. He advocates that nations should learn to direct these impulses toward progress instead of violence. Though these pacifists arrive at antimilitarist conclusions, they share with their militarist opponents the premise that aggression is natural to humanity.

The intellectuals who made known their pacifist convictions at this time included such prominent figures as Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein. Alongside these men stood a number of British feminists who likewise contested militarist ideals. Certainly, not all feminists were pacifists. The First World War created a serious division in the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), the largest non-militant suffrage organization in England, led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, between liberal nationalists, who supported and encouraged women’s full participation in the war, and pacifists, who believed that women should promote international peace. Some of the feminists who decided to participate in the War did so with grave misgivings, as suffragist Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence suggests in her political autobiography:

The principles that had inspired our great struggle for women’s emancipation came back to remembrance. Had we not spoken and written of the solidarity of women whose main vocation in every nation was one and the same -- the guardianship and the nurture of the human race? Could the women of the world remain silent while men in the bloom of their youth were being offered up by many nations for sacrifice? Sacrifice for what? (307)
Even as she served in the Women’s Emergency Corps, Pethick-Lawrence struggled with her inclination towards pacifism.

Other feminists refused to allow nationalism to undermine their pacifist stance. Writing during the War, these women maintained that war was unnatural to women, whose fundamental role was to create life, not to destroy it. Helena Swanwick, a prominent suffragist who became a pacifist leader, produced two substantial wartime pamphlets, “Women and war” and “War in its effect upon women,” challenging the role women were forced to play in war. Her pamphlets describe war as a destructive force particular to men and opposed to women’s naturally constructive power. Drawing an analogy between the subjugation of small nations by large ones through physical force to the subjugation of women by men, Swanwick encourages feminists to work for pacifism, arguing that wars are made by men and motivated by a traditional, masculine conception of honour vindicated by force. Ellen Key goes much further than Swanwick in linking woman’s biological role to pacifism. Key claims that woman’s role as mother and bearer of life makes her particularly suited to peace work. Although she acknowledges that many women in the warring countries passionately support the war, she maintains that the warring woman is a contradiction in terms: woman’s very nature is to give and protect life, and her increased rights depend upon her reverence for this mission and her abhorrence of all destruction (117-18, 199). Key, seemingly oblivious to the laws restricting women’s military involvement, supports her claims by pointing out that most women’s participation in the War has been healing rather than killing (220). In her scathing review of Key’s book, Rebecca West objects strenuously to Key’s brand of feminism, which she labels “woman-worship.” Pronouncing the book a performance that the feminist would rather see signed by a man, West criticizes Key for idealizing women and for imagining that mere femaleness will put an end to war.
West would likely take less exception to those feminists who emphasized history and sociology instead of biology in their arguments against women’s participation in war. Mary Sargent Florence and C. K. Ogden, in “Militarism versus feminism” (1915), argue from history to encourage women to speak out against war at a time when men dare not (57, 135). Their stance is uncompromising: “For feminism history has only one message on the question of war, and it is this: [m]ilitarism has been the curse of women, as women, from the first dawn of social life” (56). The authors suggest that violence, more than any other influence, has prevented women from wielding political power and has kept them in perpetual subjection. In war, man alone rules, and when war is over he does not surrender his privileges. John Langdon-Davies shares Florence and Ogden’s perspective on history. In his history of women also discussed in Chapter Two, Langdon-Davies agrees that militarism is anti-feminist, and points out the irony of women assisting in the very activity which has been their curse. The more warfare is regarded as the highest form of male activity in a society, he argues, the more women’s position is degraded (9).

For years after the War, a number of British feminists continued their political work for peace and disarmament campaigns and for the League of Nations. Women organized several important public anti-war demonstrations during the twenties and thirties that helped to keep pacifist issues at the forefront of the politicians’ agenda. As the decade went on, some feminists lamented the waning enthusiasm for the pacifist movement. Winifred Holtby’s friend and fellow journalist, Vera Brittain, in her 1920s Armistice Day pieces, expresses concern at the failure of ceremonies, war-books, and

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2For a thorough discussion of pacifist feminist activity of this time, see Chapter Seven of Jill Liddington’s The Long Road to Greenham. For American feminists’ political activities supporting peace in the inter-war years, particularly in New York, see Chapter Four of Harnet Hyman Alonso, Peace as a Women’s Issue.
peace propaganda to keep succeeding generations from the temptation offered by the glamour and glory of war. She goes so far as to blame women specifically for doing nothing to prevent war, accusing them of lethargy and selfishness in their non-committal stance (Testament 210, 218). She contends that women, as producers of life, have a particular interest in peace and should not accept death with resignation, and calls upon women of her day "to explore every method by which the heroism and resourcefulness that respond so swiftly and tragically to war can be dedicated instead to the service of peace and of life" (Testament 219-20). Brittain, along with Elizabeth Robins, revived arguments for women’s pacifism based on her naturally creative role. Robins’s Ancilla’s Share (1924) begins and ends on the subject of war. She voices her concern at Europe’s movement toward the conditions that created World War I, with small nations building up great armies and developing sophisticated machinery for destruction. Robins looks to women to put an end to male-dominated militarist politics, using the Wembley and Washington women’s conferences to illustrate what she calls “woman’s manifest will-to-peace,” or an indestructible life force in women (278, 301). While Robins does acknowledge that not all women are pacifists, any more than all men are warmongers, she nevertheless envisions that there will be no more wars once women’s will-to-peace achieves the public recognition and authority afforded men’s will-to-war (308).

H. G. Wells’s caustic review of Ancilla’s Share belittles Robins’s contention that women might have prevented the war by dismissing her conception of women’s nobility in politics as “sheer nonsense” (255). Using Robins’s book as an excuse to pronounce judgement on the women’s movement as a whole, Wells accuses women of becoming a "new sex of little aggressive pseudo-men" (258), and encourages them to acknowledge their material dependence on men’s strength and their power over resources, just as men should acknowledge their dependence on women’s gifts of peace and encouragement (257). Ironically, in his anti-feminist stance, Wells proposes the same gender distinction
between male aggression and female pacifism advanced by the very feminists he criticizes.

Debates about militarism changed considerably with the rise of Fascism in the 1930s. Pacifists were now forced to decide whether war was preferable to life under a militarist dictatorship (Liddington 54). Anti-Fascism was strong in the 1930s, particularly among communist and socialist writers who denounced the militarist aims of Fascist powers. John Strachey's *The Menace of Fascism* (1933), for example, strongly condemns the Fascist movement and its terrorist methods. Strachey attacks Fascism for promoting the position that war is inevitable and man’s sacred duty for the purpose of eradicating all hope of peace. The Fascist state, he observes, does not actually declare war, but prepares for it invisibly, and begins it without formalities (68). In *Fascism and Social Revolution* (1934), R. Palme Dutt criticizes the hypocrisy of peace speeches delivered by Fascist leaders for the benefit of foreign countries, noting the glaring contradiction between peace and the main tenets of Fascism: chauvinism, national exclusion, aggression and domination. He argues that Fascism, in its methods and policies, already reproduces the conditions of a country at war (213).

Dutt is one of the few anti-Fascist men to include a short segment on the question of women, in which he emphatically rebukes Fascism for driving women out of industry in order to “solve” unemployment: “Back to the home! Back to economic dependence on marriage as the sole career for women! Cut down women’s education! Expel women from employment and give the jobs to men! Back to pots and pans! Produce more cannon-fodder for war! Back to kitchen-slavery! This is the line of Fascism on the woman’s question” (221). Calvin Hoover's *Germany Enters the Third Reich* (1933) also addresses the question of women briefly in its proposition that Nazis want to return to a pre-industrial system of life for both men and women (165). He points out the irony that
the Nazi conception of women as wives and mothers has been met with fanatical support among many German women (166).

As Maroula Joannou has recently pointed out, even anti-Fascist women did not tend to focus on gender issues (170). While this is true of most women’s writing on the subject of Fascism, several feminists of the 1930s did address the question of women in Fascist regimes within the wider context of women and politics. As early as 1931, Mary Beard was drawing attention to the German Fascists’ campaigns against ambitious women and the Italian Fascists’ pressure on women to nurture and make sacrifices to produce an enormous population (Understanding 29). Three years later, Beard furthered her criticism of Fascism and gender by arguing that the movement was “essentially a dynamic of unmarried males” (Sourcebook 228). She disparages Nazi leaders as men of sadistic temperament, many of whom have records of sex perversions as well as military daring, who have been supported in their rise to power by poor, unemployed, restless and resentful male adolescents on the verge of manhood (Sourcebook 228-29). Beard extends her analysis to German women who, unmarried and lacking occupations and homes, turn to the Nazi movement to be uplifted by a cause. She postulates that these women, like their leader Guida Diehl, are belligerent hero-worshippers (Sourcebook 230). Beard’s sexual analysis of Nazi militarism demonstrates that biologically-based arguments about militarist propensities can work against women as well as men.

Less contentious are the women who criticize Nazi social policy. Like many other feminists of the 1930s, communist Ethel Mannin denounces the five K’s of women’s life under Hitler: Küche, Keller, Kinderstube, Krankenstube, Kirche (Kitchen, Cellar, Nursery, Sick-room, Church) (196). She leaves no room for dissent in her emphatic statement: “Fascism is anti-feminist” (196, italics hers). Several feminist critics of Fascism, including Sylvia Pankhurst, Ellen Wilkinson and Dorothy McConnell focus particularly on the Nazis’ dismissal of women from paid employment, likely because
employment had become one of the main feminist issues in inter-war Britain. Dorothy McConnell draws a provocative analogy between the British government using women as cheap labour in munitions factories to facilitate the Great War, and German Fascists using women as scapegoats to reduce the unemployment rate in white-collar jobs and to disrupt workers' unity in blue-collar jobs in order to facilitate their rise to power.

The authors of the two plays covered in this chapter also wrote against Fascism and its treatment of women. In her 1935 autobiography, Cicely Hamilton states only half-facetiously that she would rather be shot than suffocate mentally under the anti-feminist atmosphere of a Fascist regime (226). As early as 1931, Hamilton's travel writings record her concern about Germany's emphasis on the ideal of a unified German race and its policy of combative action particularly evident in its youth movement (Germany 1931-52; Austria 10). The 1933 edition of her German travels includes a postscript on Naziism in which she criticizes their campaign against women's employment and their incentives for marriage and childbearing, predicting that these policies will only result in increased prostitution and "kept womanhood" (265-67). The new edition also reinforces her apprehensiveness about German youth and its militaristic propensities. Winifred Holtby likewise critiques Fascism in her book, Women and a Changing Civilisation (1934). Here, Holtby connects fashionable intellectual theory to events in contemporary Germany in their mutual enthusiasm for nationalism, contempt for democracy, and outcry for a strong leader. A committed feminist, Holtby contends that women would be doomed to subordination in this cult of hero-worship, since society, impressed by virility, combativeness, and power, will see to it that the leader is masculine (Women 158-60).

She does not restrict her concerns to Germany, but turns to the Fascist movement in England, where Sir Oswald Mosley and his proto-military organization were gradually gaining support. Holtby criticizes the intolerance inherent in the movement's national and racial distinctions, and draws attention to Mosley's statements that the early stages of
organization are a man's job, and that his party wants "men who are men and women who are women" (Women 172). She concludes that militarism and nationalism in general, and Fascism in particular, are antagonistic to the status of women, whether in England or abroad (Women 190).

Another group of feminists continued to focus on preventing war despite the waning support for the pacifist movement in the 1930s. These feminists explicitly reproached women for their complicity in the past war and their lack of resistance in the present. In her 1933 autobiography, novelist Storm Jameson contemplates another war with consternation and condemns those women who accept it: "Why do not women know that in any war the enemy is not on the other side? Their enemy is war itself — which robs them of their identity. . . . Naively enough, some women have concluded that this natural inferiority, of women in war-time, would be removed if they were allowed to drop bombs on one another" (255). Jameson goes so far as to suggest that women are better off without their independence if they intend to do no more with it than imitate men by killing (277-78). As part of a 1935 collection of essays written by women addressing the question "why war must cease," Carrie Chapman Catt criticizes women for facilitating the First World War by participating in it, and insists that this time women should oppose the war while it merely threatens instead of surrendering helplessly to it as they traditionally have done. Helena Swanwick, still committed to pacifism in 1937, also denounces women's apathy on the issue of disarmament, since the next war is bound to take place as much at home as on the front lines (Collective 243). As a second European war drew nearer, these feminists stood by their pacifist principles in spite of the threat Fascism posed to women and the world at large.

Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas, published in 1938, offers a particularly rich and suggestive exploration of women's pacifism in the face of Fascist threats. Having linked war with patriarchy in much of her earlier fiction, Woolf accentuates the machismo of
Fascist militarism in her representation of the new threat to peace:

... another picture has imposed itself upon the foreground. It is the figure of a man; some say, others deny, that he is Man himself, the quintessence of virility, the perfect type of which all the others are imperfect adumbrations. He is a man certainly. His eyes are glazed; his eyes glare. His body, which is braced in an unnatural position, is tightly casèd in a uniform. Upon the breast of that uniform are sewn several medals and other mystic symbols. His hand is upon a sword.

(257-58)

Despite the threat to women posed by this virile image, Woolf argues that women have no cause to feel patriotic about a country that throughout the greater part of history has treated her as a slave, and denied her education and property. According to Woolf, women in effect have no country, and want no country.³

Woolf’s refusal to acknowledge anti-Fascism’s incompatibility with feminist pacifism leads Jill Liddington to propose that Woolf was unaware of the political struggles within the women’s peace movement of her day (170). Woolf does, however, address this seeming inconsistency with her contention that women cannot effectively use men’s means to combat Fascism since women have not shared in the creation of these means. She agrees that men and women must both work to destroy the immediate threat of Fascism, but she believes they must use different methods and these methods need not include war. From Woolf’s feminist perspective, pacifism and anti-Fascism are perfectly consistent: war and Fascism arise from the same patriarchal institutions — educational, professional, economic, and military. To make any headway, we must reform the institutions themselves, not their end results. Liddington also accuses Woolf of

³For a more extensive treatment of Woolf’s anti-Fascism, see Maroula Joannou, ‘Ladies, Please Don’t Smash These Windows’: Women’s Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38.
anachronism, stating that her attack on male militarism better reflects pre-war feminism than feminism of the 1930s, though she admits that Woolf also anticipates feminist pacifism of the 1980s (169). But Woolf’s emphasis on the patriarchal structures that create war is far from anachronistic, and her analysis of these institutions far more penetrating than any earlier feminist writer’s. *Three Guineas* masterfully brings together many of the earlier feminist, pacifist and anti-Fascist arguments against war and militarism, offering a point of convergence between those who believe that women do not share in men’s inherent will to war, and those who believe that women historically have been oppressed by men’s militarism. Woolf’s criticisms of the attitudes toward force, competition, and hierarchy sanctioned in institutions created by and for men hold whether the differences between men and women with respect to war are biological, social, or historical. Furthermore, Woolf is able to reconcile feminist anti-militarism with anti-Fascism by acknowledging woman’s position as outsider in the country in which she lives. Women must destroy Fascism, not as nationalists protecting their country’s freedom from a foreign power, but as women creating and supporting institutions that do not, directly or indirectly, endorse militarism.

Cicely Hamilton’s *The Old Adam* and Winifred Holtby’s *Take Back Your Freedom* demonstrate more overtly than Woolf their familiarity with contemporary politics. Hamilton, writing in the mid-1920s when feminist pacifism was still relatively strong, agrees with her contemporaries that war is predominantly masculine, but shows that women are not immune to men’s militarist impulses. Holtby, writing a decade later when pacifists were forced to contend with the growing menace of Fascism, admits that violence may be necessary to prevent Fascism from taking hold of Europe. Although she characterizes Fascism as a masculine movement and draws attention to its anti-feminist policies, Holtby does not accept that violence itself is essentially masculine, and demonstrates that women will use violence if they must for freedom’s sake.
Cicely Hamilton, *The Old Adam*, 1924

Cicely Hamilton’s 1924 war drama, *The Old Adam*, explores the idea that war is inherent to humanity. Although she writes from a feminist perspective, Hamilton does not make as plain a division between men and women on the issue of war as many of her feminist contemporaries. The women in her play are caught up in the pre-war enthusiasm as much as the men, though it is clear that the men control the political decisions about war. In the form of a political satire, *The Old Adam* questions what might happen if a country found the means to end technological warfare. Set in Paphlagonia, a thinly-veiled front for Britain, the drama opens with a private discussion among the country’s leaders about their ill-preparedness for impending war with Ruritania. The Chief of Staff proudly presents the negative Hertz ray, a scientific invention that can debilitate the enemy’s technological powers with the push of a button. Optimistic that the weapon signifies victory, Paphlagonia goes to war, only to find the same technology used against itself. The expected surrender without bloodshed turns into a deadlock; the deadlock, into war. Guns, airplanes, and submarines are not serviceable, yet the will to fight persists, and the battle proceeds with fishing boats, scythes and billhooks. The plot supports the idea that war, though devastating, is an undeniable aspect of the human condition. Hamilton nevertheless questions the factors that sustain the combative instinct, particularly men’s and women’s vulnerability to the ritual and ceremony accompanying war, and war’s foundation in the predominantly male values of heroism and chivalry.

Cicely Hamilton, actor and playwright, had been an energetic suffragist in the years before World War I. She wrote several suffrage plays, and even assembled a suffrage waxworks show satirizing arguments against women’s suffrage (Thomas 100, 107). Her influential feminist critique of the institution of marriage, *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), was discussed in Chapter Three. Hamilton’s support for women’s causes extended through the inter-war years as she campaigned for such causes as birth control.
and the increased representation of women in politics in such forums as Lady Rhondda's feminist weekly, *Time and Tide*. During the First World War, Hamilton worked as an administrator in a military hospital, and in 1917 she joined Lena Ashwell’s Concerts at the Front, which teamed up with the YMCA to stage concerts and theatrical productions for the troops. Hamilton states in her autobiography that the suffrage effort constituted her first practical experience with politics, a subject that continued to interest her for the rest of her life (*Life* 68). This link between her suffrage experiences and her later political interests is evident in *The Old Adam*. The play’s political satire centres on the Prime Minister, a fairly obvious caricature of Herbert Henry Asquith, who not only was Prime Minister at the beginning of the First World War, but also had been a vocal opponent of women’s suffrage in the years beforehand. The Prime Minister’s rhetoric in Hamilton’s play is quite similar to Asquith’s, and the actor playing the role, Fewlass Llewellyn, evidently emphasized the resemblance, as one reviewer suggests that he “should cause certain anti-suffrage statesmen to chuckle reminiscently” ([H. H.]). Perhaps the role even caused Asquith himself to chuckle. According to the *Times* journalist, he was rumoured to have gone to see the play three times (Obituary).

The 1925 London production of *The Old Adam* at the Kingsway Theatre in London marked somewhat of a comeback for Hamilton, who had not had such critical success in the theatre since her suffrage romance, *Diana of Dobson’s*, was produced by Lena Ashwell at the same venue in 1908. Originally produced at Birmingham in 1924 under the name *The Human Factor*, *The Old Adam* was brought to the Kingsway by Sir Barry Jackson the following year (Trewin, “Cicely” 212). Jackson’s biographer, G. W. Bishop, describes the play as Shavian in its treatment of a profound subject in a “light and fantastic manner,” and praises its wisdom and humour, as well as the acting (57). Many critics pronounced it the best play of Hamilton’s career. Unfortunately, commercial success did not ensue from the favourable reviews, and the play was withdrawn after
sixty-eight performances. In her autobiography, Hamilton recalls Barry Jackson's jest that only Cabinet Ministers came to see the play, and there were not enough of them in London to make a paying audience (Life 208). Hamilton offers a more serious explanation for her play's lack of commercial success, which she attributes to its unorthodox view of the causes of war (Life 208). She thought Jackson rash for producing a play with a war theme, since for several years following the War, agents and managers discouraged writers from dealing seriously with the subject of war, convinced that the public wanted to forget. While the War remained omnipresent on stage in the early 1920s, it did so only in light comic pieces that transformed the horrors of the battlefield into frivolities (Catsiapis 336-37). Most serious or critical literature of war was not published until after 1927 (Onions 1; B. I. Evans 124). According to Ernest Short, World War I plays did not become "a recognisable unit in theatrical history" until Maurice Browne produced R. C. Sherriff's Journey's End in 1929 (153). Even then, Sherriff experienced a great deal of difficulty in getting the play produced before it became a runaway success (Chothia 102). Virtually re-creating the initial stages of the war in The Old Adam, Hamilton emphatically defied popular caution.

Notwithstanding its humorous tone, The Old Adam treats the subject of war very seriously. Though the war in the play has a mythical setting and takes place in the future instead of the past, Hamilton's contemporary audience would certainly have recognized the abundance of references to the war they had experienced just a few years before. The Sketch reviewer comments that the last scenes, in which the Minister for War grieves the death of his son, triggered grave memories for the audience. The distribution of gas masks; the black-out, candles, and oil lamps reminiscent of air raids; the volunteer parades and bugle calls; the military band playing "It's a long way to Tipperary" in the background of the final scene: all would serve to remind the audience of the Great War. The Prime Minister's reference to this new war as "The War to End Wars" serves as an
ironic reminder of the way in which people spoke of the war that just ended (50). Much of the irony in Hamilton’s depiction of the initial excitement of war draws on her audience’s awareness that this delirium does not last. The War Minister reflects this foreknowledge in his observation: “Later, of course, we shall discover that the cutting of throats is tedious -- and disgusting -- and expensive, very expensive; but at present we are filled with that whole-hearted enthusiasm which is only aroused by the prospect of damaging our brethren” (95). The young men’s naïve eagerness to participate in war and the politicians’ endorsement of their initiative appear ominous when seen through the same eyes that witnessed four long years of devastation and suffering that began with that same enthusiasm.

Hamilton’s views on women’s involvement in war shifted with her experience of group politics. In 1909, she believed that women needed to learn the lesson of united effort and subordination of individual to communal interest that was taught to men by war (Marriage 94-95). By 1935, she had come to criticize the militant suffrage movement for this very same subordination of the individual to a common goal. Explaining that she was always more sympathetic with the constitutional suffragists than the militants, Hamilton represents the militant suffrage movement as an early sign of the dictatorships that were later to sweep the continent, going so far as to characterize the suffragists’ idolatry of their leader, Emmeline Pankhurst, as a small-scale precedent to Fascist leader-worship (Life 65-68). An Albert Hall suffrage meeting that broke out in violence was

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4Jane Marcus dismisses Hamilton’s earlier novel William, an Englishman (1919) as “a shameless example of the ideological repression of both socialism and feminism that was one of the major social achievements of World War I” (134). Marcus finds the novel’s view of feminism disturbing in that Hamilton contrasts her protagonists’ real suffering at war with their false suffering in the hunger strikes and forcible feedings for the suffrage cause (133). Marcus’s overly hasty dismissal of the novel may be attributed to her failure to recognize Hamilton’s distinction between militant suffragism, which Hamilton satirizes mercilessly, and constitutional suffragism, which Hamilton clearly supports.
the first incident to aggravate Hamilton's mistrust of large, organized groups which was later confirmed by war. From that day forward, she was convinced that collective standards were far lower than individuals': "We may hate, as members of a party or a nation, as we dare not hate for ourselves; as members of a class, evil-thinking — distortion of motive — may seem like a duty and a merit" (Life 74). Hamilton's experience as a suffragist made her believe that women as well as men were susceptible to the ills of organized humanity, not excepting the horrors of war. In her last published work, The Englishwoman (1940), Hamilton suggests that women now have no choice but to participate in war: "War in the twentieth century has returned to its primitive manner, the manner of the savage; it is waged against man, woman, and child and therefore is the business of us all. Women, like men, have their share in it; they are pressed into the making of guns and shells and may even be called on to enlist in their national armies" (35).

Hamilton's cynicism about group politics informs her position on the inevitability of war in The Old Adam. In her autobiography, Hamilton explains that while she desired peace and abhorred war's devastation, she could not support the comfortable, orthodox views of organized pacifists who believed that war was caused by patriotism, imperialist ambition and armament rather than human nature (Life 190). Neither a pacifist nor a supporter of war, Hamilton believed that the desire for war was deeply rooted in humanity, more so than in either nationalism or technology. The Old Adam became her vehicle for exploring the complex interrelationship between human nature, armament, and war. Like Hamilton herself, the Minister for War in her play struggles to understand the human instinct to fight. He reluctantly concludes that humanity suffers from "the love of strife and the need for it" (98). In the final scene, he theorizes that a passion for death flares up in every generation, and that something deeper than reason tells us that death, not life, brings glory and reward (98). The play encourages respect for the Minister's
position in its dramatization of the combative spirit as stronger than any technological capability. The play’s title, evoking man’s sinful condition unredeemed, affirms this bleak message. In promoting the view that war is a natural human instinct, Hamilton does not endorse the position that war is good or has some positive effect on moral character. Instead, her play examines the political techniques used to arouse and manipulate the combative instinct, and questions the chivalric code of honour and heroism that underlies the urge to war.

While the play purports to be about the consequences of a scientific discovery that could potentially end war by debilitating the enemy’s technological capabilities, this weapon for peace functions in much the same way as a weapon made for destructive purposes. The correspondence between the negative Hertz ray and a violent weapon becomes evident as the action unfolds. When the ray’s inventor is introduced as a man who will win the war for Paphlagonia, the politicians assume that he has a poison or an explosive (23). The scientist explains that he intended his invention simply as a means of bringing oncoming traffic to a stop in case of emergency and hesitated to make the discovery public once he realized its wider potential. The confidence the new weapon inspires causes the men to lose interest in preventing war, and they begin to rationalize their use of the weapon as though they expected violent results. The Prime Minister, for instance, cries: “In the cause of peace have we not a right to make use of the power which science has placed in our hands?” (51). At the appointed hour, the inventor gently presses the button to activate his weapon, only to discover that the enemy is using the same technology against Paphlagonia. Hamilton’s satire sharpens as the politicians incorporate the technology into their official wartime rhetoric. The Prime Minister’s grandiloquent speech about the ray’s widespread effects parodies political discourse justifying combat:
SHADLOCK. Every citizen has a personal share in this war — because it is waged against every citizen, not only against armies in the field. The negative ray strikes one and all. The wife and mother deprived of her domestic gas cooker — her husband bereft of his naps and doubles from the course — the child who gazes wistfully at the closed doors of the picture palace — the war has entered into their lives and filled them with resentment for a brutal and unprovoked attack. (77-78) The Ruritanian ambassador joins in, lamenting that he too has suffered deprivation of his new Rolls-Royce (78). Political propaganda, elsewhere described by Hamilton as “the weed of our civilization” (Life 74), can be used one moment to support the end of all war and the next to justify its continuance.

The late-twentieth-century reader cannot help but find in the gesture of pressing a button to begin a war an uncanny anticipation of atomic and nuclear weapons. Not only does Hamilton recognize the tendency toward dehumanized warfare, but she foresees the mutual paralysis created by this powerful technology. The Minister of War draws attention to the depersonalization of war through technology: “Outbreak of war, old style — the warrior girds on his suit of mail and draws his thumb along his battleaxe. Outbreak of war, new style — Mr. Lilley, in spectacles, sits down to a writing table, and presses his finger on a button” (53). The dehumanization is further emphasized by the fact that Lilley’s button itself merely signals a lab sixty miles away to put the ray into action. Moments after the button is pressed, the stage goes completely dark. In the resultant panic, Lilley is accused of misfiring his weapon, and then of being a Ruritanian spy. The act ends with the whole party realizing that Ruritania has the same technology they do, and the curtain lowers on the men staring at one another in utter amazement. Lilley’s revelation — “We’re holding them — they’re holding us” (66) — succinctly describes the basic tenet of the Cold War. Hamilton’s dramatization of the idea that weapons, whether peaceful or destructive, ultimately act on the aggressor just as they do on the victim, is
arguably even more pertinent since the advent of nuclear technology than it was in her
day.\(^5\)

What Lilley’s weapon fails to provide is a satisfactory aesthetic: as the Minister of
War predicts, the negative Hertz ray does not deter the people’s will to fight to the
death for a heroic cause. Technology does not overcome humanity’s craving for the ritual
and romance of war: “I doubt if musicians of the future will sing with quite the same
verve of the British operators of the Negative Ray. Just as I doubt if any painter will
desire to immortalize our friend [Lilley] in the guise of a conquering hero” (54). As
Hamilton states in her autobiography, it is the man who fires the gun, not the gun who
fires the man (Life 191). Despite the deep mistrust of science and technology evident in
her autobiography, Hamilton believes it is humanity’s use of science, not science in itself,
that destroys. Behind such myths as Prometheus and the forbidden fruit of knowledge in
Eden, Hamilton proposes there lies “the deadly truth that scientific knowledge is a power
of destruction, illimitable destruction, placed in the hands of a fallible, emotional
humanity, liable to outbursts of passion” (Life 150). The play’s Hertz ray, in its dual
position as weapon of war and weapon of peace and its ultimate inconsequence to the
human instinct to fight, demonstrates the flaw in the pacifist position that technology is
responsible for war. At the same time, however, Hamilton aligns herself with pacifists in
denouncing politicians’ elaborate justifications for the use of destructive technology in
wartime, and points out that these weapons have a dehumanizing or paralysing effect on
those who use them.

Hamilton betrays her mistrust of pacifism in her portrayal of the politicians who
lead Paphlagonia into war. Hamilton’s analysis of pre-war pacifism may have been
influenced by J. Ramsay MacDonald’s critique of militarism, National Defence (1917), in

\(^5\)It would be an interesting project to produce this play in such a way as to make the most of these parallels with nuclear warfare.
which he argues that Britain was lulled into a false sense of security by "a kind of pious pacifism . . . which refused to face the truth, which allowed it to drift into war whilst it was preaching peace, and which, when the war broke out, chirped about this being the last of the wars . . ." (12). Hamilton's Prime Minister is, in effect, an incarnation of precisely this phenomenon. Elected on a pacifist platform, Prime Minister Shadlock rationalizes the country's ill-preparedness for war at the beginning of the play:

SHADLOCK. Of course we're not ready -- no peace-loving people ever is ready for war. It is only militarism, bent on aggression, that stands always with its hand on the sword. [During this speech he talks and gesticulates as if he were addressing a meeting.] . . . History will have to admit that I have done my utmost to avert the catastrophe -- that my efforts have been directed towards a lessening of the insane competition in armaments which is the curse of our civilization. . . . (14)

He and his associates are elated at the discovery of the negative Hertz ray, ostensibly because it will protect their country from attack and allow them to end the war without bloodshed. The language surrounding their decision to go to war, however, betrays the aggression underlying their peace rhetoric; their dream is not for peace so much as for revenge and victory. The Minister of Foreign Affairs expresses his pleasure at being able to turn tables on Ruritania: "When I came here I was a beaten hound. It'll be his [the Ruritanian Ambassador's] turn in a day or two. He'll be a beaten hound by the time his Government has done with him" (33-34). All of the politicians anticipate the celebrity afforded heroes. Even the Minister of War, Barton, a largely sympathetic character in the play, fantasizes about a grateful democracy that insists his name go down in history. The Prime Minister, blissfully oblivious to the irony echoing through his words, pontificates about the possibility of world peace: "Never again will a people stand as our people stands to-night -- ready to slaughter and be slaughtered. Here, in this room, we make
history indeed; because here, in this room, we inaugurate the final struggle between nation armed against nation. The War to End War -- at last!" (50) Once the Prime Minister discovers war's popularity with the masses, he abandons his pacifist stance. Evidently pacifism is no more than election rhetoric to these men far more interested in their own glory.

Whereas the politicians' pacifism lasts only as long as this position remains desirable, the Bishop of Stephensbury is more earnestly committed to the cause. He, too, is satirized by Hamilton. The Bishop writes a scathing newspaper article against the war, about which Barton observes: "he's on the warpath, like everybody else . . . there may be a twinge of disappointment when the Bishop discovers he has wasted all that excellent abuse" (47). At the very end of the play, the Bishop appeals to Barton to use his power of influence over the Prime Minister to save lives. The timing of his visit is significant: Barton, having just learned of his son's death, draws the audience's sympathy, whereas the Bishop, intruding on Barton's grief, appears naïve and idealistic. Though he puts up a good fight, the Bishop ultimately must accept the truth of Barton's observation that people, against all reason, are eager to sacrifice themselves to a cause. The Bishop punctuates his pacifist arguments by striking the table with his fist, causing a china candlestick to break. The violence of his gesture only confirms Barton's earlier remark that even pacifists share the craving to fight for a righteous cause. As the curtain falls to the sound of the Tipperary tune, the Bishop capitulates to the inevitability of war, and offers the troops his blessing.

Much of The Old Adam centres on men's -- and women's -- enthusiasm for war in its early stages. Although Hamilton suggests that this desire is natural to humanity, her humorous and satirical representation of their heroics has a depreciating effect. Hamilton further relies on the audience's foreknowledge of the devastating effects of war to deflate the romantic views of the eager volunteers. Adams, Secretary to the Chief of the General
Staff, is terribly upset that government employees are forbidden to serve, and is jealous of his younger seventeen-year-old brother’s acceptance to the air force. Barton’s son, in his enthusiasm, manages to enlist in the navy despite being under-age and inexperienced. His father and friends commend his “stoutness” (46). The country has more recruits than it can deal with, and the politicians are full of admiration, calling them “gallant fellows” and praising their courage (75). Romance, chivalry and dreams of heroism engulf the men who eagerly volunteer to fight. Hamilton gives the two countries names with strong romantic connotations, Paphlagonia having mythical associations with Antiquity, and Ruritania being the setting for novelist Anthony Hope’s popular adventure romances such as The Prisoner of Zenda (1894). The fact that the soldiers fight with swords and horses rather than submarines and machine guns only heightens their romantic notions of heroism. Hamilton’s examination of youthful enthusiasm for war centres on Wilbraham, a young soldier courting the Chief of Staff’s daughter, Betty. Wilbraham tells Betty’s father that he has postponed their engagement since he does not think it right to bind her under the circumstances. His attitude is thoroughly chivalrous; he does not wish to bind her should he have to go to war, and he wants to protect her from enemy attack by sending her to the country. When the time comes for Wilbraham to leave, he rushes in to Betty as she fills the lamps with oil, seizes and kisses her, telling her that the smell of paraffin will always remind him of her. He is very enthusiastic about this new form of war without guns and gadgets, and asks her to see him off at the window. In her earlier treatise on marriage, Hamilton criticizes chivalry as a form of condescension that serves to keep women in subjection. In this play, Wilbraham attempts to protect Betty through his chivalry, both physically and emotionally, though she has no need or desire for protection. Chivalry, with its vision of women who need to be protected by men and therefore must be kept away from dangerous wartime duties, also lies behind Betty’s frustration at being unable to do anything more important than office work for her father.
Although women in The Old Adam do not share the men's protective instincts, they do share their desire for heroism. The only two women in the play represent the two main forms of women's involvement in war: those who participate themselves, and those who encourage men to do so. The flurry of excitement moments before the war breaks out is represented by the numerous groups requesting appointments with Barton, from the Society for Improving the Morals of Young Men to the Secretary of the League for the Diffusion of Non-Alcoholic Principles in the Army, Navy and Air Force. None is more intrusive than Miss Hildegarde Jones, who barges into Barton's office and demands the right to form a hospital in the fighting area, no less eager than the men to join the ranks of war heroes. She is finally got rid of, only to return in the midst of a crisis to insist that her case be heard and her hospital not be relegated to the rear simply because of her sex. Her self-importance and extreme tactlessness are portrayed as ridiculous. Hamilton, herself a supporter and even an example of women's participation during the First World War, willingly satirizes her own former position in her greater aim of deflating all forms of wartime heroism. She even belittles women's contributions on the home front by means of the Prime Minister's patronizing praise for two female clerks who, taking the place of enlisted men, spent the whole night hanging a bell wire. His praise ceases when he tugs at the bell rope and it comes off in his hand.

"When have you seen so many shining morning faces -- the faces of men who are crowding to kill and be killed! And when have you seen more pride than in their women? The women who are sending them [...] [He shrugs.] [...] Their sons and their lovers [...]" (94). Betty proves a perfect example of the women to whom Barton here refers. She betrays as much enthusiasm and romanticism as her fiancé, Wilbraham, about his resolve to go to war. Proudly, she tells him that if he were not eager to go to war, she would give him back his ring. Although her eyes are red from crying, Betty encourages Wilbraham to go, and promises to watch him from the window. As Betty watches her fiancé march
off with his regiment, Barton muses: “... the protective feminine instinct -- how curiously absent it is at a time like this” (81). Always wary of seeing women in terms of their roles as wives and mothers, Hamilton cannot resist inserting a refutation of a motherly quality traditionally considered to be innate in women despite this comment’s inconsistency with the sentimental tone of this scene. Her consistent refusal to see women as fundamentally different from men is reinforced by her contention in The Old Adam that they share men’s desire for heroism. If there is a difference between men and women with respect to war, it is not essential, but acquired and dispensable, such as chivalry.

While Hamilton acknowledges women’s participation in the warring instinct, she does suggest that, in practice, war is dominated by men. Women are noticeably absent from this play, especially by contrast to their centrality in all of her other work. The play itself calls attention to women’s absence. Before the men can discuss war, the Chief of Staff must send away his daughter and insist that his servant tell her nothing that passes that evening. The moment Betty exits, the drama shifts from light romantic comedy to trenchant political satire. The act began with light-hearted banter between father and daughter, and even the politicians’ conversation centred on the love plot between Betty and Wilbraham; when she leaves, it turns to a deadly serious and secretive discussion among the country’s most important politicians about the imminent war. The only other female character, Miss Hildegarde Jones, twice intrudes during a political crisis, and twice is ushered, forcibly and conspicuously, off the stage. The first time, the Chief of Staff shakes her hand and keeps hold of it as he draws her through the door and into the hall. The second, Hamilton directs the Chief of Staff to seize Miss Jones by the shoulders, run her out of the room, bang the door on her and lock it (61). The message underlying Hamilton’s humour is clear: women do not take part in the private, back-room discussions at which men decide to go to war.
The men’s language reinforces an implicit link between war and masculinity. When the politicians discuss surrender, the Prime Minister objects: “The country won’t permit it -- the nation will rise as one man --” (21). Later, the Prime Minister’s words draw even more attention to gender: “The manhood of the country is surging to the colours -- surging!” (73) As he comes to his sad conclusion that humanity thrives on conflict, Barton states: “What you ask me to control is a love that passes the love of women” (96). This love, he claims, is not love of country, but love of strife. Here, more than anywhere, Hamilton suggests that the desire to make war is primarily male. Barton continues:

BARTON. . . . Did you never think there are any gifts that only an enemy can give us? The desire to prove ourselves, to wrestle to the utmost of our strength -- who can gratify that but an enemy striking his hardest? Look round and you will see that desire made manifest -- and look into your own heart, my lord. You have put the love of women out of your life; but have you put the other love, the greater? (96-97)

The suggested parallel between conflict and sexual desire does not explicitly exclude women, but Barton’s male-oriented phrasing does indicate women’s marginality in these discussions concerning men’s love of strife. Hamilton’s play reflects the feminist pacifist views that man’s destructive force is stronger than his creative capacity. The converse argument that woman’s will-to-peace is stronger than her will-to-war is, however, absent from her play. Though war is based on a love of strife and heroism that is predominantly male, women do share in the romance and excitement surrounding the ritual of war, and they too long to be heroes.

Hamilton’s sharp and sometimes bitter satire does not allow for easy answers to difficult questions of gender. In a piece written in honour of Woman’s Theatre Inaugural Week at the Coronet Theatre in 1913, Hamilton playfully addresses the irony in their
selection of two male dramatists, Brieux and Bjornson, to fulfil the mandate of presenting woman’s point of view on stage:

For downright unadulterated feminism, always give me a man! All really slashing attacks upon man are made by his own sex. When he goes for it, he goes for it bald-headed, and with a ruthlessness which we may admire but dare not imitate.

... Perhaps because we are more aware than he is of our own defects and deficiencies. (16-17)

Hamilton’s implication that women are their own harshest critics is borne out in The Old Adam, as indeed it is in many of the plays covered in this thesis. Hamilton mercilessly satirizes all forms of women’s wartime involvement, at home and on the front. The very fact that she can so easily dismiss them, however, confirms women’s marginality in Hamilton’s conception of the human proclivity to war. Her play must focus on men, their decisions and conclusions, because men are the ones who go to war and control it.

Hamilton’s play effectively enacts the same situation Virginia Woolf later delineates in Three Guineas: the reality that women have very little to do with men’s wars, and are in fact deliberately and systematically excluded from having any influence on them. Though Woolf, writing well after the advent of Fascism, expresses her point of view more forcefully and explicitly, one can discern a hint of her ideas in Hamilton’s The Old Adam.

The second play discussed in this chapter, Winifred Holtby’s Take Back Your Freedom, further explores the connection between militarism and masculinity in relation to Fascism.

Winifred Holtby’s drama *Take Back Your Freedom* constitutes a forceful political statement against the Fascist movements sweeping Europe in the 1930s. Holtby, dramatizing the rapid rise of a Fascist dictatorship in England in the immediate future, contends that Britain is not immune to the persuasive power of such an image. Like Hamilton in *The Old Adam*, Holtby admits to women’s complicity in militarist attitudes that lead to war, but unlike Hamilton she links militarism to patriarchal distinctions between men’s and women’s roles. Her play cautions against the appeal of a virile, masculine leader similar to the one Woolf evokes three years later in *Three Guineas*. Writing on the eve of the Second World War, Holtby expresses her views with urgency, satirizing the irresponsibility of Fascist supporters, both male and female, and deflating the masculine values that underlie militarism.

A successful journalist and novelist, Winifred Holtby had difficulty finding a producer for her play, *Take Back Your Freedom*, completed in 1935 just months before her untimely death at the age of thirty-seven. After the Liverpool Playhouse rejected the play because it was too violent, Tyrone Guthrie took out an option on it, and requested revisions for its complete adaptation to the stage. Guthrie appears to have considered the play during his brief foray into commercial West End theatre before he returned to the Old Vic in 1936. Holtby unfortunately took ill and died before she could revise the play, and so the script never reached production. Four years later, her friend and literary executor, Vera Brittain, decided to publish the play with minor revisions by playwright Norman Ginsbury, whose *Viceroy Sarah* had been produced by Guthrie in 1934. According to Brittain’s introduction to the published drama, Holtby’s aspirations in theatre rivalled those in fiction, but although Holtby had been an avid theatre-goer all her life and served a year as dramatic critic for *Time and Tide*, *Take Back Your Freedom* represents her only venture as playwright. Before her death, Holtby had already
published six novels, including the popular *South Riding*, and two volumes of short stories. She was also very active as a journalist, and took on a number of causes in her articles, most particularly women's equal right to work, and the rights of blacks in South Africa ("Holtby" 332-33).

The protagonist of Holtby's drama, Arnold Clayton, begins as an idealistic academic reputed for brilliance who has recently turned to politics. The play opens in the chaos and excitement that have resulted from his impromptu speech against the folly of his own government. Clayton, under pressure to take back his words, resigns from his position as Under-Secretary. Immediately, three of his supporters -- Lord Lennox, a Jewish newspaperman; Major Dick Lawrence, an old childhood friend; and Clayton's mother -- encourage him to form his own party. Clayton initially develops the British Planning Party to put into practice his theoretical ideals of action, isolation, and order. Increasingly intoxicated with his own power, Clayton discards all rational and democratic principles as he launches on a reckless campaign involving racial hatred, censorship, and terror. He sacrifices one principle after another until he becomes a ruthless and inhuman tyrant, dispensing assassination orders as though they were parking tickets. The play is punctuated by several acts of violence, most of which take place off stage. First, a Jewish man, Levi, dies after guards assault him at one of Clayton's rallies. Next, an unnamed woman, frustrated by Clayton's prohibition on women's work, attempts to assassinate him and fails. The audience then learns that Lord Lennox and Dick Lawrence, the men who brought him into power, have been executed. Finally, when she learns that Clayton has given an order that would instigate war, his own mother shoots him in order to prevent the attack and to free him from his own destructive cause.

As academic don turned politician, Arnold Clayton embodies an idea expressed in Holtby's aforementioned prose work, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (1934), that intellectuals paved the way for Fascist dictatorships by posing challenges to liberal
rationalism. Holtby also draws out the similarities between Clayton and English Fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley to bring the dangers of military dictatorships closer to home for her contemporary British audience. Mosley, like Clayton, resigned his seat as MP to form his own party when his government refused to implement any of the measures he suggested to revive the economy. His party, the British Union of Fascists, emphasized planning, order, and the control of one central regulatory body over the nation. Anti-liberal and strongly militarist, Mosley began to assemble an army, along with armoured cars and an air force, ostensibly as a protective measure to deal with potential civil disorder. Like Clayton’s British Planning Party, Mosley’s party was not at first overtly anti-Semitic, but anti-Semitism within its ranks grew steadily, including incidents of assaults on Jews, and Mosley himself began to make anti-Semitic insinuations in his speeches. Holtby traces a parallel duplicity in Clayton that will be detailed later in this chapter. Finally, both Clayton and Mosley also draw strong distinctions between men’s and women’s roles in their party propaganda. Although Vera Brittain claims in her introduction to the play that Holtby’s dictator is a very different type from Mosley, there are enough similarities between Clayton and Mosley to suggest that Holtby wanted her audience to recognize a likeness.

By comparing Clayton to Mosley, Holtby cautions that Fascism might conceivably take over Britain. In the mid-1930s, there was some disagreement over the question of whether or not Britain could fall prey to the same kind of Fascist dictatorships as Germany and Italy. Political theorist John Strachey thought that Fascism was a very real possibility for Britain, particularly if workers’ parties could not rise to the task before

6Mosley protests against these accusations in his autobiography. He insists that he was never anti-Semitic, complaining instead that his Fascists were victimized by Jews. He attempts to clarify that his party attacked Jews not because of their race, but because of their anti-Fascism. His protestations tend to confirm his opponents’ views.
them (153-76). Ellen Wilkinson emphasizes that similarities between England and Germany in organization and social life could lead to British Fascism (Terror 19). Like Strachey and Wilkinson, Holtby sees the danger in the complacent stance of many of her contemporaries that Britain could never become Fascist. She further resists complacency by staging the beginning of a war in Britain’s immediate future, thereby preying on her contemporary audience’s anxiety about and expectation of war. Written in the same year as the play, Bertrand Russell’s pacifist work, Which Way to Peace?, begins: “The governments of Europe disagree on many subjects, but on one point they are in perfect harmony: they all believe that a new Great War is imminent. Many signs, more convincing than mere words, show that this is their expectation” (7). To Holtby’s contemporary audience, the war barely averted by Mrs. Clayton would not have been an empty threat, but a very real possibility. Like Hamilton in The Old Adam, Holtby uses the contemporary political situation to heighten the urgency of her message.

One of the most alarming realities evoked in Holtby’s play is anti-Semitism. In the years immediately preceding Holtby’s play, Britain was becoming aware of the violence against Jews in Germany. The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag, published by the World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism in 1933, details the Nazis’ persecution of Communists and Jews, which included torture, murder, and imprisonment in concentration camps. The book calls attention to anti-Semitism as one of the foundations of the Nazi party and as a means of increasing the party’s popularity in Germany. Why Nazi?, also published in Britain in 1933 by an anonymous German author, confronts Germany’s widespread anti-Semitism and the Nazis’ exploitation of racist sentiments in the masses (176-202). Holtby’s portrayal of Lord Lennox, proprietor of Lennox press and possessor of a Scottish title, as “a slim, subtle, dandyfied Jew” (26) of questionable morals, might at first suggest to the reader that Holtby herself is anti-Semitic. Although her presentation of Lennox is somewhat
ambiguous, Holtby’s criticism of Clayton’s equivocation on the Jewish question is quite
definite. One of Clayton’s Grey Guards asks where the party stands on the “Yid
question,” evidently wanting and expecting Clayton to adopt an anti-Semitic position but
confused by his alliance with Lennox (52). Clayton does not oppose his guards’ desire to
hate Jews; he does not share their hatred, but he does believe that a great militant
movement thrives on enemies. Even when a Jewish man is assaulted by the Grey Guards
at a Manchester meeting and subsequently dies, Clayton refuses to take responsibility,
shifting the blame onto communist agents provocateurs. When Lennox requests that the
British Planning Party not follow Germany’s anti-Semitic policy of declaring “foreign”
finance illegal, Clayton has him assassinated. Clayton never once makes an anti-Semitic
comment, but his refusal to take a stand against anti-Semitism results directly in the
victimization and deaths of Jews. Holtby thereby implicates not only the overt anti-
Semitic but also those who wilfully ignore it in her criticism of the Fascist position on
race. She warns against such sentiments in Britain by exposing anti-Semitism as a means
by which a dictatorship can take hold of a people.

According to Holtby, the English are as susceptible as Germans or Italians to
Fascist propaganda. Like Hamilton before her, Holtby demonstrates the ease with which
the pomp and ceremony of militarism can manipulate both men and women, though
Holtby goes much further in expressing her contempt for such base methods. Holtby
ridicules the people’s fondness for inane songs celebrating Clayton and his party, songs
which even Clayton denigrates as puerile and contrived (88-89). Clayton’s followers
introduce a musician who claims to have composed a new marching song for the
Planning Party. The composer proceeds to play the piano and sing, to the tune of “Land
of Hope and Glory”: 
Clayton -- Britain's glory,
  Hero of the Free,
How can we extol thee,
  Who shall follow thee?
Wider still and wider
  Shall thy fame be set:
God who made thee mighty
  Make thee mightier yet.

We shall never falter,
  Fearless forth we go:
Where our leader orders
  Who shall dare say no?
One great hope unites us,
  One undaunted man
Calls us to fulfilment
  In his mighty plan. (48)

Lawrence's reaction -- "Good tune: haven't I heard it before somewhere?" -- deflates the banal efforts of the composer, who seems to be trying to pass off Elgar's well-known patriotic melody as his own creation. This march, along with another equally vulgar song to the tune of the Marseillaise, returns at key moments in the play, underscoring the deplorable lack of discrimination in those who are swept up by the Fascist movement and revealing the irony of Clayton's popular appeal.

On a more fundamental level, the people are attracted to the movement because of a deep-seated desire for strong leadership. At first, Clayton balks when Lord Lennox confesses his craving for leadership in the first scene: "[W]hen last night I heard you
stand up for order against anarchy, for unity against confusion, for vital and dedicated leadership -- then -- not only my brains, the brains of a good pressman looking for sensation -- but my bones, my blood, acknowledged you” (30). Clayton soon learns to play into the hands of the masses who want to worship him. Lennox attributes his desire for a Messiah to his Jewish blood, but Clayton’s success with the British populace demonstrates that the need for a godlike leader transcends race. People flock to Clayton’s meetings and offer him their undying allegiance, too ignorant to realize that his anti-democratic stance derives from a scorn for his followers as “gaping, worthless fools” (90), or as “a crowd of demonstrative dim-wits” (112). Clayton’s mother, in a comment reminiscent of Mary Beard’s indictment of Hitler’s followers as restless, resentful youth, observes that Clayton’s initial supporters are “impulsive and under-occupied young men who would persuade themselves that they were making history by marching round the city waving banners and interrupting decent shoppers” (40). Clayton himself points out the irony in the modern mob’s thinking itself too clever to worship a supernatural God, but instead worshipping him. Holtby reveals the dangers of this cult-like reverence for a leader by showing that this fanaticism culminates in war. First, the people are satisfied with violence, and flock to Clayton’s meetings hoping to see someone killed. Gradually, this urge becomes organized and militaristic. More and more of Clayton’s followers appear in the paramilitary uniforms of the Grey Guards, and flags and symbols of the Planning Party begin to cover the walls of the sets. Clayton’s Plan becomes a sort of Bible, and Holtby shows new recruits swearing their allegiance to the brotherhood with their hands on a T-square and ledger, the “Sacred Symbols of the Plan” (79). Clayton realizes that murder has become essential to his power over the people: “Murder seems to justify my claims to be the people’s Saviour. When they learn about Lawrence I shall no doubt be canonized” (111-12). The natural result of this progressive frenzy is nothing less than war. As Clayton’s mother remarks: “Look, the crowds are hailing him. They
want him to lead them to death and destruction — to poison gas and high explosives, to famine, fear, hatred and anarchy” (127). Holtby demonstrates that the people's craving for strong authority, discipline, and violence nourished by Fascist regimes leads directly and inevitably to war.

Holtby aims not so much to ridicule the blindness of the followers as to criticize the insidious methods of the leaders, who seek to indulge and to manipulate public opinion. Like many anti-Fascists of her day, Holtby refuses to accept Fascism's pretensions to pacifism. Arnold Clayton professes to be a pacifist; early in the play he states that one of his chief objectives is to cut clear of Continental entanglements likely to lead to war. He immediately qualifies his position, however, by conceding that force may be necessary in internal disputes, and that he can envision the necessity to strike first in order to avoid a greater upheaval. In another show of pacifism as misleading as it is ironic, Clayton shoots Dick Lawrence for attempting to force war on Russia. This act, which Clayton construes as an unfortunate but necessary measure to prevent war, in fact derives from his belief that Lawrence is attempting to undermine his power (104). Sir Oswald Mosley's similar pacific pretensions, as his critic Ellen Wilkinson points out, directly contradicted the declared imperialist aims of the Fascist movement, which in Germany and Italy used party propaganda to interest the nation, and particularly the youth, in the idea of war (Why 61, 86). Despite his professed pacifism, Clayton orchestrates grand, militaristic parades and ceremonies with guards dressed in uniform, "playing at soldiers" because "[r]itual satisfies one of the most profound and persistent of human appetites" (72). But merely playing at militarism does not satisfy the people or their leaders for long. Lawrence tries to provoke war with Russia because he cannot bear to remain inactive when his army has been kept for so long in a state of tension and readiness. Clayton himself points to the necessary link between peace-time militarism and war when he addresses one of his guards: “The peace-time part of a soldier's life
seems to suit you, Gosways. But don’t forget that we strengthen your bones and toughen your muscles and train your mind and body to quick response for a purpose which has little to do with your personal welfare” (121). Clayton further acknowledges that the mass emotions, parades, bands and banners must be nourished by a succession of enemies: pacifists, Jews, international bankers, and ultimately war. Holtby cautions that war will result from Fascism’s use of militaristic rituals and racial distinctions to promote unity in its ranks along with its reliance on emotional frenzy rather than reasoned conviction in its followers.

In Take Back Your Freedom, Holtby intimates that the urge to go to war is particularly masculine. Mrs. Clayton, musing that people should not be allowed the franchise if they have not witnessed one birth, claims: “If you young men knew the trouble it takes to produce a human body you’d be a little less airy in your disposal of it. . . . I don’t, of course, only mean bearing a child. I mean the business afterwards -- the feeding, watching, bathing, the measles and scarlet fever, the dosing, teaching, scolding” (50). Mrs. Clayton’s views are comparable to those of wartime feminists such as Helena Swanwick and Ellen Key who argue that woman’s role as mother and creator makes her inherently less predisposed to war. Her stipulation that she does not refer merely to the biological event of childbirth but to the process of raising a child implies that men could also share in this anti-militaristic experience, though they are currently less likely to do so. Holtby focuses on differences in experience rather than essential, biological differences when she refers to women’s lesser capacity for war. Whereas the men claim to be willing and even eager to go to war, none of the women want it, and Mrs. Clayton goes so far as to kill her son in order to prevent it. Mrs. Clayton’s maid, Mary, draws attention to another discrepancy between male and female attitudes when she expresses her concerns about the war. Mary describes her father’s willingness to go to war despite the enduring horrors of the last one: “my Dad, he still sometimes takes on terrible --
jumps about in bed and screams and tries to bayonet the enemy. My poor mother's had a terrible time. Black and blue she's sometimes been with it. Yet he says he'd go again if they asked him” (100). Holtby indirectly points out that women can suffer the violent effects of war long after it is over. She suggests that women's different experiences, as children's caregivers and as victims of men's violence, give them a different perspective on war.

Although Holtby intimates that men are primarily responsible for the impulse to go to war, she does criticize women for not doing enough to prevent them. Neither Miss Dorset (Clayton's secretary) nor Lady Carter (Clayton's admirer) wants to see the country go to war, yet neither will raise a finger against it because of misguided affection for Clayton. Like Hamilton in The Old Adam, Holtby satirizes women's support of militarism. As in other respects, Holtby is more blunt than Hamilton, particularly in her ridicule of Lady Carter. Affected and wealthy, Lady Carter makes a fool of herself by making love to Clayton right in front of her husband. Clayton's interest in the Carters is purely financial; he requires Sir Maurice Carter's money to back his party. Lady Carter fawns over Clayton like a star-struck adolescent: “I said 'Maurice, if I die tonight -- if I violate every code of your marvellous new party, I must, I must, I must see Arnold Clayton'” (45). Lady Carter is just one of many young women who support Clayton, not so much for his politics as for his sexual attraction. His mother disapprovingly refers to him as “the matinée idol among politicians” who “[p]acks his meetings with hysterical women because he has four straight limbs and a good complexion” (41). By emphasizing Clayton's sex appeal, Holtby suggests that Fascism's female supporters are responding instinctively and foolishly to the charm of their leader, not to the party's political beliefs.

In spite of his popularity with women, Clayton appears to be quite insecure about his masculinity. Mrs. Clayton suggests that her son has been trying to force himself into the role of a man of action to prove himself to his friend Dick Lawrence, whom he always
admired for his foolhardiness and for going to fight in France (42). The character of Dick Lawrence, in his manliness and military aptitude, is likely based on T. E. Lawrence, whose legendary adventures in Arabia made him a cult hero in Holtby’s age. Lawrence hints at Clayton’s physical and psychological frailty when he pressures Clayton to mount an exercise bicycle for the sake of his health: “What’s the use of getting yourself worshipped as a god if you go and crack up like a girl?” (85) Lawrence’s dismay at Clayton’s poor cycling suggests that Clayton is very awkward and slow. This humiliating scene serves to undermine Clayton’s manly appeal and to suggest that the brawn and muscle evident in his militarist spectacles are based on weakness, not on strength. Holtby similarly undermines the manly appeal of the Grey Guards. Upon being questioned about his recruiting tactics, one soldier replies: “What I say is -- it’s a man’s life. Wearing a uniform, under orders, in a camp, subject to discipline -- you know where you are, Sir. You belong somewhere. Every day there’s a job to be done and someone to tell you how to do it. . . . You can respect yourself. You’re a soldier” (120). Holtby draws attention to the submissiveness underlying Fascist militarism with the Guard’s unwitting assertion that men thrive in subjection to authority.

Holtby uses insinuations that Clayton’s urge to dominate stems from latent homosexuality and an unnatural attachment to his mother further to undermine Fascist machismo. Although the theories she advances now seem homophobic and perhaps even anti-feminist, Holtby was employing psychological theories that were popularly accepted in her day. Strangely, Clayton himself offers this insight into his personality by citing a psychologist who suggests that “the urge to power is a symptom of belated adolescence usually associated with homosexuality and the mother fixation” (67). The play would seem to corroborate Clayton’s self-analysis: his political aspirations do derive from his mother, and she does have an unusually strong influence on him. Moreover, there is an obvious homosexual attraction between Clayton and Dick Lawrence, his childhood friend
and rival. Evidently Sir Oswald Mosley faced similar accusations in the press. His autobiographical protestations that he did not suffer from a lack of male influence betray his sensitivity on this point: “A broken home certainly did not result in my becoming a mother’s boy, deep as was my devotion to her. The wiseacres of psychological science may ascribe to this background some political tendencies in my later life which they dislike, but after a considerable study of the subject I am convinced they are talking nonsense” (21). Holtby’s link between the Fascist personality and latent homosexuality probably stems from Adler or his adherents. Adler explained homosexuality as an attempt to compensate for a distinct inferiority feeling through use of a vice (Individual 425). He believed that inordinate ambition was one of the most salient traits of homosexuals, and that a domineering mother was one possible origin of the kind of inferiority complex that leads to homosexuality (Practice 187; Co-operation 163). Even Havelock Ellis, one of the early-twentieth-century’s more sympathetic advocates of homosexual rights, spoke of homosexuality as a congenital abnormality or deviancy. In his essay “What is Fascism?” Ellis attributes Fascism’s success to an Adlerian inferiority complex manifested in masculine protest on a national scale, though he does not specify that this inferiority complex arises from latent homosexuality (Questions 162). It is perhaps worth noting that homophobic explications of Fascist psychology similar to Holtby’s survive in feminist writing as recent as 1979, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in Between Men.7

Take Back Your Freedom contains a strong suggestion that Arnold Clayton’s rivalrous friendship with Dick Lawrence springs from homosexual attraction, at least on

7 In Between Men, Sedgwick cites as an example of homophobia in feminist criticism Jane Caplan’s use of Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi’s formulation, “the Nazi community is made by homosexual brothers who exclude the woman and valorize the mother,” in a 1979 article in Feminist Review (220n27).
Clayton's side. With Lawrence, Clayton's language often takes on a lover's inflection, such as, "Does this mean that you believe in me [...] though you know what I am?" (37) or "We? -- Yes -- with you -- I might" (37). When Clayton suspects that Lawrence may have helped his assassin gain entry, Clayton cries out: "No. Not that. Not that. Swear you'll never betray me, Dick. You'll stand by me whatever happens? Sometimes I think -- I must go mad. Swear! Swear!" (96). The press also intimates that Clayton is homosexual. His political opponents launch a counter-campaign with posters declaring, "'Pansy's Paper says "Plan or Perish"'" (43), and an American newspaper hints that Lawrence has an unnatural influence on Clayton (105). Lady Carter, with characteristic lack of subtlety, sees Lawrence's death as an opportunity for herself and Mrs. Clayton: "And I knew that while Arnold had Lawrence there'd be no room for me, nor you either, nor any woman. . . Oh, I could never get near Arnold. Lawrence was always there" (104). While Holtby does intimate that Clayton has a latent homosexual attraction to Lawrence, and thereby apparently endorses the connection between homosexuality and the will to power, she also satirizes the childishness of his opponents' homophobic propaganda, and ridicules Lady Carter's apparent desire to convert him.

Holtby treats Clayton's supposed mother fixation somewhat differently, confronting the issue directly in all its complexity rather than resting with indirection and insinuation as she does with his homosexuality. It is clear from the opening scene that Clayton has an unusually close relationship with his mother. He gives orders for his mother's calls to be put through at any time, and shows more interest in his mother's call than the Prime Minister's. His unnatural attachment is matched by hers. When he announces his plan to form a new party, Mrs. Clayton virtually appropriates it with her repeated "our"s: "Are our theories to be put into practice? . . . All our beliefs, our hopes. Are they going to be realized?" (39). But when Clayton tries to shift the entire blame for his ruthless dictatorship on his mother, Holtby allows her to object. Conveniently,
Clayton begins to reproach his mother for her undue influence only when she disagrees with his undemocratic methods. He places more and more responsibility for his tyrannical actions on her shoulders, finally telling her that his Movement is nothing more than a means to take him beyond the reach of her "masterful ego" that has stifled his personality since his childhood (113). Mrs. Clayton responds, resolute and rational by contrast to Clayton's childish hysteria:

You've created your Movement out of your doubts and your frustrations, your inner misgivings about your efficacy, your beliefs about your own futility. You have manufactured a monster out of beliefs that are nothing but distortions, out of doubts and fears that your masculine pride should have strangled as long ago as your adolescence. Arnold, why should you continue to doubt yourself? Your fears are those of a child. You don't need this horrible Movement to prove your adequacy. You were finer and braver before you began to puff yourself into a gargantuan Napoleon. You are being carried beyond yourself, beyond Reason [...] (114)

Through Mrs. Clayton's reproaches, Holtby implies that Clayton must take adult responsibility for his psychological as well as his political failings.

In further support of Mrs. Clayton, Holtby provides a sympathetic explanation for her excessive influence on her son. Forced to leave her job upon marriage, Mrs. Clayton admits to living vicariously through her son and fixing all of her aspirations on him: "I put into looking after you all my ambition, all my energy, all my hunger for achievement. Don't you see -- you're not just yourself? You're me too -- all I might have been" (59). Like Elizabeth Baker in Penelope Forgives, discussed in the last chapter, Holtby criticizes the laws that restricted married women's employment. Holtby parallels Mrs. Clayton's position with that of Clayton's first assassin, who makes an attempt on his life in desperate frustration at having been forced to give up a fruitful career when Clayton
dismissed all women from paid employment. Clayton ironically has reinstituted the very same law that he believes to have caused his own unnatural upbringing, which in turn he maintains to have produced his disastrous will to power. His laws encouraging women to become wives and mothers directly parallel Hitler's. In this play, as in her prose, Holtby condemns Fascist policies that confine women to their homes, with no creative outlet. Intriguingly, Holtby virtually casts herself as Clayton's first assassin, a political journalist who espouses Holtby's well-known views on women's employment. She clearly identifies with this woman who resorts to murder when she cannot use her pen to write against Clayton's "creed of violence" (95). But while Holtby sympathizes with her assassin's attempt to use violence, she also demonstrates its futility. Clayton, unfazed by the attempt on his life, uses it to increase his popularity, and orders his assassin shot without a trial.

If Holtby shows the limitations of violence, she also demonstrates its necessity. At the end of the play, Mrs. Clayton kills her son with the same revolver the assassin first brought on stage. The actions are paralleled, as well as their significance. When she kills her son with this revolver, Mrs. Clayton symbolically kills the very policy that turned her away from her work in her youth. Her action successfully puts an end not only to Clayton's rigid patriarchal rule, but also to impending war. Maroula Joannou cites Mrs. Clayton's words as she kills her son -- "because I made him what he has become" -- as evidence that Holtby accuses women who bring up their sons to revere masculinity for sowing the seeds of Fascism (170). There is no evidence, however, that Mrs. Clayton has brought up her son to revere masculinity, and Holtby does not allow Clayton's accusations of his mother's culpability to go unchallenged. Mrs. Clayton does take responsibility for her son's actions before she shoots him, but Holtby ultimately suggests that the culpability lies elsewhere. Mrs. Clayton is the product of the patriarchal system that kept her from working after marriage, thereby forcing her to transfer all of her
political ambition to her son. Holtby does not seek to blame Fascism on motherhood, but rather to show its derivation from patriarchal policies that force mothers to live vicariously through their sons. In linking Fascism with traditional patriarchal systems that prevented women from working, Holtby anticipates Virginia Woolf’s position in Three Guineas. Woolf elaborates on this connection, pointing out that tyranny and militarist attitudes can be found in British institutions as well as in Hitler’s Nazi regime. Unlike Woolf, though, Holtby seems to justify the use of violence as a last resort in preventing a militarist dictatorship from producing war. Holtby’s play is one of very few works that examine the causes and consequences of Fascism from the perspective of gender (Joannou 170). Her condemnation of Fascist militarism strives to undermine the manly appeal of the movement by showing that neither men nor women are free under Fascist regimes.

Cicely Hamilton and Winifred Holtby both emphasize the predominance of masculinity in militarist campaigns, thus dramatizing the feminist contention that war is aligned with masculinity. Neither author accepts that war is exclusively masculine, however, and their plays illustrate women’s complicity in militaristic fervour. Having lived through World War I, both playwrights are interested in men’s and women’s susceptibility to the ritual and rhetoric of war. Hamilton, writing not long after the First World War, suggests that the proclivity to war arises from the people’s need for chivalry and heroism. Holby, writing not long before the Second, places more responsibility on the leader, while she satirizes the ease with which the masses can be manipulated by style and ceremony. Both plays suggest in different ways that masculinity constitutes a large part of war’s persuasive power, and together, they confront the probability of war in their male-dominated worlds. Both predict another war, and re-enact its beginning stages, drawing on fears and memories all too real to their contemporary audiences. Hamilton cautions against complacency about peace by pointing out the flaws inherent in pacifist
rhetoric and exposing the aggressive values it conceals. Hamilton's feminism emerges in her depiction of the will to fight as particularly masculine; the women in her play may share men's militarist propensity, but they do not share in the political decisions that lead to war. Holtby offers a devastating vision of life under a Fascist regime, not in Germany but at home in England. Like other feminists of her day, she criticizes Fascism's masculine appeal and its regressive policies on women. Whereas Hamilton looks back on the First World War, Holtby looks ahead to the Second, with her prophetic insistence that the manipulative tactics of militarist dictatorships necessarily lead to war.

In its anticipation of the Second World War, Holtby's play brings to an end the inter-war period, and thus brings us to the boundaries of this dissertation. The fact that her play was never produced somehow seems an appropriate conclusion to an era in which women's drama has been so long ignored. It also serves as a reminder of how much remains to be done with women's plays of the inter-war period in terms of production and publication, as well as research and criticism. One aim of this dissertation is simply to persuade the reader that such efforts would be well worthwhile.
Conclusion

The study of inter-war women playwrights has some implications for our critical understanding of the intersections between feminism and drama in this period. This thesis will conclude by returning to the issue raised in the introduction of women playwrights’ particular capacity to convey women’s experience on stage, and by considering some possible differences between men’s and women’s dramatic treatments of feminism. This project also has consequences for recent feminist criticism and its misgivings about realism. These women’s plays can serve to illustrate that realism and feminism, at least in the inter-war period, are not necessarily incompatible.

On 14th November, 1923, *Vectia* by Dr. Marie Stopes was scheduled to open at the Royal Court Theatre in London. The management was hopeful that the play would draw crowds, not so much for its intrinsic merit as for its author’s notoriety as proponent of the birth-control movement in Britain. Rehearsals had already begun when Stopes learned that the Lord Chamberlain had denied her play a licence because its subject was sexual impotence. Stopes was particularly dismayed by this decision because the situation she wrote about was based on her own life. Unable to persuade the censor to reverse his decision, Stopes wrote within twenty-four hours an overtly propagandistic birth-control play, *Our Ostriches*, to replace *Vectia* on opening night. Ironically, this politically contentious issue was deemed more acceptable for the stage. Stopes’s case illustrates just how political the personal can be. Staging her private experience posed more of a threat to accepted conventions than did a play criticizing religious and political opposition to birth control. Overt propaganda on a feminist issue was admissible where her personal experience was not. I bring up Stopes’s extreme and rather bizarre case to
indicate the revolutionary potential in bringing women's private lives into the public sphere of the stage. This potential, naturally, is not always realized, and certainly was not in Stopes's awkward and self-pitying treatment of her subject. Nonetheless, representing women's private experience on the public stage can be at least as important and perhaps even more unconventional than taking an overtly feminist stance.

The distinction between taking a feminist stance and truthfully representing women's experience on stage lies at the heart of much feminist criticism of early-twentieth-century male playwrights. Recently, several feminist critics have taken issue with the purported feminism of modern British dramatists. Catherine Wiley and Vivien Gardner critique the representation of the New Woman in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century English drama by men as inadequate and caricatured, never accorded three-dimensional reality (Wiley 120; Gardner 9). Jan McDonald similarly suggests that Hankin, Shaw and Granville-Barker create their own, separate creed of the New Woman by linking her to the idea that a woman can bear and rear a child without the father's support ("New Drama" 171-72). Janet Montefiore has pointed out the use of female types such as the devouring mother, the vengeful spinster, and the lovely vamp in the 1930s Group Theatre plays of Auden, Isherwood and Spender (84-94). Even when these plays first came out, feminists sometimes criticized their male-oriented presentation of feminism, as Winifred Holtby does with Somerset Maugham's play For Services Rendered (1932), for its "odd masculine illusion . . . that women can only climb out of prison by aid of a strong male arm" (Testament 78).

Bernard Shaw, now generally recognized as the major English dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century, has naturally attracted more feminist criticism than the other playwrights. Though many feminist critics acknowledge the power and independence of Shaw's women, they find fault with his inability to make them full human beings. Jill Davis suggests that Shaw's representations of the New Woman are
not representations of women at all, but “cyphers for a psychic strategy to achieve and protect masculinity” (31). J. Ellen Gainor argues that Shaw consistently uses his various representations of the New Woman as means to other dramatic ends (62). Katherine Kelly comments on Shaw’s “troubled relation to the suffrage movement” (67) in his prose and his plays, concluding that “while couched in flattery, Shaw’s reading of women in politics is finally damning” (79). These critics share a sense that Shaw’s women are not fully realized as three-dimensional human beings but remain subservient to Shaw’s overpowering authorial personality. They oppose those feminist critics who praise Shaw’s characterization of women, including Barbara Watson and Gail Finney. As early as 1914, Beatrice Hale recognized these contradictory elements in Shaw’s women when she praised Shaw because “he makes his women strong, often stronger than men, and he makes them persons” (106) but then added, “I think Mr. Shaw sees women as mothers and workers rather than as mates” (107). What many of Shaw’s feminist critics do not acknowledge, however, is that his men can be, and have been, criticized in much the same terms as his women. Raymond Williams, for instance, points to the “emotional inadequacy” of Shaw’s plays, despite his wit and skill: “He withered the tangible life of experience in the pursuit of a fantasy of pure intelligence and pure force, and even these, as we look back on them, seem no more than conventional gestures” (256). Nonetheless, these feminist criticisms point to something lacking in Shaw, as well as other male dramatists of the period, in their treatments of women and of feminism. What they seek can be found in many of the women’s plays covered in this dissertation, with their convincing representations of women and their ability to intertwine emotional and intellectual responses to feminism.

One must be cautious, however, in drawing any clear distinctions between men’s and women’s play-writing. Vivien Gardner, basing her argument on Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins’s powerful play about infanticide, Alan’s Wife (1893), maintains that a
difference exists (9). She draws attention to William Archer’s introduction to the first published edition of the play, in particular his statement that he would have made the play an intellectual defence of infanticide rather than a merely emotional drama. To be fair, Archer’s tone is somewhat self-deprecating, as we see when he states that his own play would have been “more academic, more of a mere experimental exercise” (Introduction xiv). Though he does find that Bell and Robins’ drama is overly simplified, and that it sacrifices plot to emotion, he suggests that this fault is “redeemed by a very genuine beauty and poignancy of emotional expression” (Introduction xv). Gardner suggests that many feminist plays written by men of this period reflect Archer’s rational and ideological inclination accompanied by a lack of comprehension about women’s reality, while women’s plays represent women’s emotional truth (9-10). Gardner, like Archer himself, comes uncomfortably close to endorsing the view that women are primarily emotional and men primarily rational, a dichotomy that traditionally has served to restrict women’s public role. Not all male dramatists are rational or intellectual in their feminism, just as not all women dramatists are primarily emotional. Of the plays covered in this thesis, for instance, Cicely Hamilton’s and Winifred Holtby’s war plays are firmly based in intellect rather than emotion. There is nonetheless some basis for Gardner’s argument, in that women playwrights tend to represent women’s personal or emotional reality more convincingly than men. For women, feminism tends to be less abstract, more immediate. In their women characters particularly, these playwrights are able to reconcile political feminism with private lives of women more convincingly than many male dramatists. Conversely, male dramatists may do so more convincingly through their male characters. Several of the reviews cited in this thesis suggest that contemporary critics found that the male characters in these women’s plays lacked vitality or three-dimensional reality, much the same problem that more recent feminist critics have found in men’s dramatic representations of women. Whatever may be lacking in their
depictions of men, however, these women playwrights make up for in their representations of women, in which they skilfully integrate feminist issues with women’s personal experience.

The desire to intellectualize expressed in Archer’s introduction to Alan’s Wife is a particularly English phenomenon that may not apply as well to women’s drama as it does to men’s. While avant-garde reactions against Naturalism were sweeping the Continent in the forms of Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Dada, British drama for the most part staunchly remained intellectual, rational, anti-illusionist, and social (Innes 2). Innes attributes this difference to Shaw, who “defined modernism in a way that became standard for mainstream British theatre” (2). In The Quintessence of Ibsenism, Shaw places a great deal of emphasis on discussion, crediting Ibsen for introducing plays “which begin with discussion and end with action, and others in which the discussion interpenetrates the action from beginning to end” (176). He further suggests that this element in Ibsenist realism and its English correlate, the discussion play, encouraged women to write plays: “When Ibsen invaded England discussion had vanished from the stage; and women could not write plays. Within twenty years women were writing better plays than men; and these plays were passionate arguments from beginning to end” (176). Although Ibsen may indeed have inspired women to write plays, the plays themselves do not indicate that the element of discussion upon which Shaw places so much emphasis was a precondition of their existence. Like the authors of Alan’s Wife, many inter-war women dramatists see no need to make explicit connections between the emotional and the intellectual levels of the drama. In Githa Sowerby’s and Gordon Daviot’s plays particularly, the political level remains implicit throughout, though it is certainly not absent. Interestingly, the most explicitly political and intellectual plays covered in this thesis, The Old Adam and Take Back Your Freedom, are war plays dominated by male characters, which emphasize the extent to which men control the political arena. Those
plays that foreground women do not tend to foreground intellectual or political
discussion, and thus do not quite fit with Shaw’s rational view of modern drama that was
so influential in England. Their implicit connection between emotional and intellectual
levels of the drama perhaps comes closer to Ibsen’s use of realism than to Shaw’s.

These women’s use of realism has implications not only for our perception of
modern British drama but also for the current feminist understanding of realism.
Recently, several feminist theatre critics have questioned the possibility of feminist
theatre in a realist form. Comments such as Lynda Hart’s that “the hegemony of realism
in the drama . . . effectively masks the re-creation al power of mimesis” (4, italics hers)
are not uncommon. In The Feminist Spectator as Critic, Jill Dolan delineates the
materialist feminist critique of realism, which suggests that realism reifies traditional
power relations between genders and classes and masks the ideology of the author in its
seemingly transparent text (84). Dolan takes this criticism further in her more recent
Presence and Desire, stating: “Materialist feminism’s critique of realism proposes that
. . . the form’s attempt to recreate reality through psychological identification processes
that objectify women renders it unable to frame subject positions that differ from
representation’s white, middle-class, heterosexual, male ideal spectator” (48). Basing her
argument on contemporary women’s theatre and performance art, Dolan implies that
realist plays cannot be truly feminist. Elin Diamond, in a more theoretically sophisticated
critique of realism, admits she arrives at her position through “Brechtian hindsight”
(“Mimesis” 60).2 She also admits that early realist texts such as Ibsen’s “provoked

2Brecht’s quarrel with naturalism upon which her argument rests is that “theatre as
we know it shows the structure of society (represented on the stage) as incapable of being
influenced by society (in the auditorium)” (189). Acknowledging realism’s faithful
representations of social ills and of individuals who revolt against the structure of society,
Brecht calls for a new means of arousing the spectator’s feelings instead of relying on “the
same old (magic) way” that tends to lull realist audiences into a hypnotic trance (188).
excitement when middle-class women found, for the first time, mimetic models that sparked and mollified both political and emotional desire” (“Mimesis” 60). Nevertheless, she maintains that realist drama’s insistence on its power to represent the reality of social experience or its ability to hold a mirror to real life “mystifies the process of theatrical signification” and “operates in concert with ideology” (“Mimesis” 60-61). Even if it ostensibly argues with the status quo, Diamond argues, realism in effect reinforces it.

Naturally, such criticisms raise serious concerns for feminist critics working on realist playwrights such as those discussed in this thesis. Several critics have noted the strong hold of realism on the British stage in the inter-war era, to the extent that, as Katharine J. Worth observes, non-realistic plays often did not get performed (2). Women playwrights were not immune to these pressures, and they took full advantage of this form to convey feminist ideas. Most of the works discussed in this thesis are realist dramas, though Cicely Hamilton’s The Old Adam is satirical and Clemence Dane’s Will Shakespeare verges on romance or fantasy. In her work on women’s realist drama of the suffrage era, Sheila Stowell takes issue with the feminist critique of realism for its assumption of a direct correlation between the reproduction of dominant cultural relations and their reinforcement, and points out that realism often challenges and condemns existing social and gender relations (Stage 100). She accuses these critics of “ahistorical thinking” in their anti-realist stances, and reasserts that “realist theatre does not necessarily present a coherent or unassailable view of society. It is rather a tool, or variety of tools, for shaping social perception” (“Rehabilitating” 81-82, italics hers). Noting that spectators often react differently to the same realist plays, Stowell insists that “the audience is not some sort of monolithic tabula rasa unwittingly acquiescing to its inscription” (“Rehabilitating” 82). She reminds us that realist theatre developed as a radical response to the idealized world of society drama and presented a means of
challenging the ideological assumptions embedded in melodrama and the well-made play ("Rehabilitating" 84).

In rehabilitating realism, Stowell responds not only to feminist theatre critics but to Catherine Belsey’s earlier critique of classic realism in Critical Practice. Although Stowell’s reminder of realism’s historical function is important, her defence of realism fails to address Belsey’s argument in its entirety. Belsey in fact concedes that realist texts do not completely control their readers’ responses and agrees that they often condemn society. She argues that the meaning constructed by the reader or spectator is not fixed, but limited to certain ranges of meaning within currently dominant ideology (69). In its movement toward closure, classic realism, according to Belsey, “precludes the possibility of leaving the reader simply to confront the contradictions which the text may have defined” and insists that “a transcendent level of knowledge ‘recognizes’ the contradictions in the world as tragic (inevitable) . . . or ironic . . . or resolved” (82). It is this aspect of Belsey’s argument that I want to take up in relation to the plays covered in this thesis. While these plays do contain elements of tragedy, irony, and resolution, they do not imply a transcendent level of knowledge that discourages the reader or spectator from confronting contradictions set out in the play. Rather, asking the spectator to confront these contradictions is the very reason for the plays’ existence, and the reason the playwrights chose the realist mode. As Raymond Williams suggests, realism is an inherently critical form that shows the world to be unacceptable by showing what it is really like (340).³ The plays discussed in this thesis use realism to reveal the inadequacy of the dominant ideology of their day with respect to gender. They represent to their

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³I have substituted the term “realism” for Williams’s term “naturalism” to avoid confusion, since he uses his term to describe the same conventions and the same plays that these feminists term “realist.”
audiences the problems inherent in the status quo in order to demonstrate the reality behind feminist positions that had come to be taken for granted in the inter-war years.

What Belsey and other critics of realism seem to mistrust most of all is the form's movement towards closure. Closure, to them, implies inevitability and glosses over contradictions within the text. The plays discussed in this thesis do not share this strong sense of closure, as I suspect is the case with many other realist texts. Their realism has the "tentative, muffled quality" combined with "interesting potentialities that haven't been quite realized" that Katharine J. Worth uses to describe inter-war realism as a whole (1). Gordon Daviot's The Laughing Woman ends on a tragic and ironic note in its juxtaposition of René's laughing sculpture with the despondent woman herself. Far from suggesting that this woman's fate is inevitable, however, the play draws attention to the potential that Frik never let herself fulfill, leading the audience to confront the societal and psychological barriers to her success. Clemence Dane's Will Shakespeare similarly asks us to consider the different ways in which women support men's artistic genius without fully reconciling the various positions she dramatizes. In Queen of Scots, Daviot again ends with deliberate ambiguity, leaving the spectator to decide whether Mary did the best that she could as Queen. Joan Temple, in Charles and Mary, does end her play with some sense of resolution, but the play rests on a model of companionship that clashes with the accepted model of her society. The resolution of Githa Sowerby's Sheila is so tentative and that of Elizabeth Baker's Penelope Forgives so incredible that each draws attention to its own lack of closure, thereby implying that the issues the plays confront are unresolved. Finally, both Cicely Hamilton's The Old Adam and Winifred Holtby's Take Back Your Freedom end with highly disturbing predictions of impending war, all the more disturbing in their immediate political contexts. The subjects of their plays are too real not to affect the audience beyond the plays' resolutions. All of these plays, far from discouraging their audiences from confronting the problems they raise, invite them to do so by showing in a
variety of ways that the problem remains unresolved at the end of the play. To the extent that they indicate a need for feminist resolution, they do not reinforce dominant ideology, but stand against it.

As the predominant mode of modern British theatre and of these playwrights, realism did not impede women playwrights, but offered them intriguing possibilities in terms of the intersection of the public and the private. In realism, the convention is to represent the fictional, private spaces of the play within the public space of the theatre. Raymond Williams remarks on the extraordinary nature of the realist convention, in which the actors represent people behaving naturally and usually privately before a large audience, all the time maintaining the illusion that they are unaware of the audience’s presence (334). The modern stage itself, then, forces a convergence between the private and the public. This convergence provides a distinct opportunity for women dramatists to represent in a public forum the private sphere to which they were traditionally restricted. Tracy Davis makes a similar point about actresses when she suggests that they are often exceptions to the “geographical implications of the public/private divide,” and that they have the power to bring the private to the public (“Private” 67-68). It is therefore unlikely that, as Gale suggests, women playwrights’ use of domestic stage spaces would have contributed to their neglect (7). Many critically acclaimed modern dramatists, including Ibsen and Strindberg, also made use of domestic stage spaces. English audiences and critics were quite receptive to the New Drama, which often represented ordinary people in domestic spaces going about their daily affairs. These earlier models for representing private or domestic spaces on stage, far from discouraging women playwrights, likely helped to legitimize women dramatists’ efforts to represent women’s experience on stage.

On stage, the relationship between public and private is dynamic. Not only does the stage translate the personal into the political, but it also translates the political into the
personal. The plays addressed in this thesis, in their treatment of feminist issues of their day, demonstrate this complex interrelationship between public and private, political and personal. The stage provides an opportunity to show the impact of political feminism, or lack thereof, on women's private lives. At the same time, feminist playwrights can use particular women's roles to comment on the larger political situation for women. The subtle and intricate ways in which these women playwrights address feminist concerns of their day warrant their inclusion in further critical studies of modern British drama.
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