

DEMANDING DRAMA: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN EARLY AMERICAN THEATRE

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(Resumen)

Desde hace un cuarto de siglo las estudiosas feministas han recuperado un enorme corpus de obras literarias pertenecientes a mujeres que fueron silenciadas por las autoridades patriarcales. Esto, a su vez, ha llevado a una reestructuración casi completa del canon. Mientras que se presta mucha atención a la narrativa y la poesía, el teatro está tardando en despertar el mismo interés. Esta lamentable situación se intensifica aún más por el hecho de que el teatro norteamericano del siglo XIX, en general, se ha descartado bajo epítetos de farsa y melodrama de poco interés. Y lo que es peor, en su momento se percibían los teatros como lugares pecaminosos. El objetivo de este artículo, por lo tanto, es de exponer los motivos políticos y culturales tras tanto el verdadero estado del arte como sus valoraciones negativas, a menudo atribuidas al Puritanismo. Primero, se manifiesta que la exclusión de mujeres como profesionales incidía directamente en la distancia que parece existir entre la calidad del teatro norteamericano antes de O'Neill y sus equivalentes europeos. A continuación se centra en la dramaturga Anna Cora Mowatt (1819-70), escritora y actriz que escribió lo que la mayoría de los críticos opinan fue la mejor obra del siglo, *Fashion* (1845). Mowatt jugó un papel decisivo en convertir el teatro en un lugar respetable para la participación de la mujer en todas las facetas: como espectadora, como actriz y como dramaturga.

"And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?"

Glaspell, Trifles

The study of American drama almost inevitably begins with the experimental theatre groups surrounding the rise of Eugene O'Neill in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. The literary histories are quick to explain that serious theatre took some time to get started and that this is usually attributed to the Puritan dominance of culture in the colonies. It is only recently that a serious attempt is being made to recover the actual state of dramatic affairs in the New World, an attempt which, strangely, has arisen, in great part, as a result of the general recovery of literature by women which is presently being undertaken by feminist scholars. Observe the reassurance John Gassner offers the curious reader who happens to open the last addition, *Best Plays of the Early American Theatre: 1714-1916*,¹ to an extensive multi-volume set of "Best American Plays,"

1. This volume contains sixteen plays in chronological order, beginning with *The Contrast* by Royall Tyler and ending with *The Scarecrow* by Percy MacKaye. The only play by a woman is the fourth entry, *Fashion*, by Anna Cora Mowatt (1845).

[T]he general reader is not being deprived by us of masterpieces. He is, instead, being spared some embarrassment, since much of our early dramatic literature, regardless of its apparent vigor on the stage at one time, is almost subliterate. Quite often the dialogue, especially when it reproduces dialect, would be found downright painful to read. We have tried to spare the reader the most traumatic examples. (ix)

Perhaps surprisingly, the United States could boast of an early tradition in this genre, but even more surprising is the fact that many of the best playwrights were women. Thus, the exclusion of women in the canon is multiplied by a genre that not only excluded women's writing but also excluded their performance. Michael T. Gilmore states, "The most 'residual' of the arts, the theater was the closest to oratory and the world of men; it lagged behind the novel's identification with print and its receptivity to feminization" (573). Honor Moore states, "Western theatre has mostly been a man's world in which women are violated or adulated, depending on the historical moment, but never allowed to express their whole selves" (xiv). The bond between actor and playwright is a historical reality and the same holds true for the actress and female playwright as will be borne out by the following discussion. The object, then, of this paper is to demonstrate how the prevailing image of women held by American society well into the first half of the twentieth century was the direct impediment to the development and growth of a native drama. It was not until women gained a measure of social equality that American drama became interesting universally for what it is, art. The exclusion of women in the theatre, as both creators and interpreters—let alone critics—was in itself, the overriding obstacle to a respectable drama. The reality that actresses carried the stigma of fallen women, playing to the erotic fantasies of the gentlemen spectators, and that the theatres catered to special seating for prostitutes, necessarily influenced the type of plays written and by whom. And it was up to women playwrights as well as women writers of fiction in general to transform the negative image surrounding women and the theatre.

It is true that many of the Puritan pilgrims who laid the foundations of American culture had taken part in or at least heartily condoned the closing of the theatres in England during Cromwell's government in the seventeenth century (1642-1660). The Puritans condemned the theatre for a number of reasons: they saw it as a waste of time which would encourage idleness, a waste of money, and a relaxation of morals. Each of these reasons reflected the basic tenets underlying the three basic principles of Puritan creed: industry, frugality and prudence—the same basic tenets would become the pillars of capitalism and the accompanying myth of the American Dream. Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820), the first native-born American female playwright to have her plays professionally produced, directly countered each one of these charges against the theatre in an essay in the *The Gleaner* (Schofield 262-65). To simplify, suffice it to say that in general "the theatre" was sinful.² But why was it really so sinful? A close examination of the actual development of American drama reveals a

2. But of course this stigma of sin was attached to the theatre, originally, only in New England, not in the Southern colonies where Anglican or Roman Catholic worshippers settled in the New World motivated by economic interests rather than religious ones.

hidden motive embedded in the Puritan mind, one which is much more troubling than the superficial “wastes” mentioned above. More than anything else, the Puritan resistance to the theatre had to do with women’s role in it. Judith Barlow states, “As the supposed moral guardians of society, women could scarcely be allowed to participate—on any level—in so unacceptable an activity” (ix-x). Women, just like men, could be either players or spectators, but both of these roles for women were closely associated with prostitution, while male actors were seen as gentlemen with only a “slight taint of [their] vagabond status” (Hodge 7). The actresses were seen as prostitutes largely because of the necessity of travelling unescorted; while the notorious “third tier” of the theatre was reserved for real prostitutes and their clients. Claudia Johnson relates the fact that this third tier had a separate entrance so that “respectable” citizens would not have to rub elbows with them and also so that these women could discreetly exit into nearby hotels and brothels with their clients (112). Gassner recounts the “public” chastisement in the early nineteenth century of a respectable woman spectator by her own father in church:

“Eliza Spring, having recently visited one of those profane and sinful places of carnal recreation, commonly called theatres, is hereby cut off from the communion of the Church of Christ.” (xviii)

The phrase “public woman” itself was synonymous with prostitute. Actresses who attempted to guard their reputation would be forced to marry an actor in the company and use the “Mrs.” title, or as single women restrict their dramatic roles to passive virgin characters. The “star system,” which also grew up with the American drama was a double-edged sword. While it guarded the reputation of a select few of the actresses as professionals, above and beyond any suspicion of immorality, being a star also forced the actress to lay bare her private life before the public. The spectators become more interested in the private woman (or man) on stage than in the role she or he is playing (Burke 15). Naturally, this is an aspect that not all public figures reckon on and a price that not everyone has been willing to pay.

But to be fair to the Puritans, one must distinguish between the theatre, or “the stage,” and “the drama,” two completely separate spheres. It was not the drama that Puritans objected to. They recognized the fact that one could learn from drama, that Shakespeare as well as Greek and Roman classics could be used for a purpose, as is evident by the inclusion of these classical works in the University curriculum. Men attending school were encouraged to read drama. Not surprisingly then, turning dramatic entertainment into lessons in morality in nineteenth-century America was a way of justifying the theatre. However, there is a certain irony to the fact that the actors and especially the actresses were perceived as the most immoral private people but were accepted to give public lessons in morality in the lecture halls of America. But it was the representation on stage and the attendance in theatres that led to no good, according to the doctrine. The reopening of the English theatres during the Restoration logically led to the association of the stage with royalty, so that the fierce Republican sentiment which permeated eighteenth-century America was in opposition. Gilmore cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s classic republican attack (1758), “Rousseau saw the drama as an enemy of freedom because it brought a train of evils—idleness, luxury, dissipation—that destroyed

the civic virtue essential to a republic. He thought the theater dangerous in its very nature because it rewarded the person who made a profession of deceiving others" (577). Thus, women's participation in the theatre would be especially threatening to patriarchal societies where women are considered to be liars by nature.³ These intense feelings against the drama drove the Continental Congress (1778) to pass a resolution banning the stage along with every other "species of extravagance and dissipation" (Gilmore 577), making American opposition to the theatre for a time both religious and political. On the other hand, ironically, the theatre was seen as a bastion of popular culture, a lowbrow entertainment that attracted people of all types, an aspect which persists into present-day cinema. The theatre was at once one of the most universal experiences of the "arts," far so more than literature, yet it was also highly discriminatory. The price differences for various seating areas in the theatre reflects clearly the early segregation: the pit in front of the stage accommodated single men, unmarried women with escorts, and critics; the gallery in the rear of the theatre was for apprentices, servants, slaves and others of lower income, some cities segregating this area further as to race; the first tier lining the sides of the theatre held fashionable society; the second tier was reserved for middle class families; and finally the notorious third tier welcomed fallen women and their clients (Richards xvi).⁴

However, a second motive for the rejection of the theatre on moral grounds existed: the constitution of the actors. It is general knowledge that women did not go out, except in rare cases, on the public stage during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, the Golden Age of drama, just prior to the Puritan closing of the theatres. But with the Restoration, the participation of actresses became increasingly more frequent. This was, therefore, an added irritant to the Puritan, who considered all single women Eve, the temptress and corrupter of man, as destined to become the property of men, confined to the domestic sphere. Having prostitutes in the theatre as audience, and actresses that many would regard as prostitutes because of the fact that they worked outside the home, kept respectable society from fully accepting drama as art, less as entertainment. Women in theatres worked in a man's world, a man's profession (perhaps comparable to a truck driver these days) and they often traveled on a circuit, so sleeping arrangements were left to Puritan society's imagination.

This association between theatres and sin was probably why the first rate works of Mercy Otis Warren were never produced, never performed. She had, beyond doubt, written them to be read, and read by a nearly exclusive male readership. This does not mean that they were not performable, well constructed, or witty. It is obvious that

3. See Ann Jones's *Women Who Kill* (1996): 7-8, where she cites Otto Pollak in his 1980 criminology classic, *The Criminality of Women*: "Women who cleverly hide monthly menstruation and routinely fake orgasm . . . can lie about anything; and all women are vengeful—ready to lie, cheat, connive, manipulate and kill—because all have suffered the trauma of first menstruation which blasted forever 'their hope ever to become a man.'"

4. A similar class segregation takes place in the 1960s due to price differences in Broadway, off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway theatres. The Broadway audiences were much more conservative than the off-Broadway audiences who paid less for their tickets. See Kolin and Kullman: 86.

Warren was aware of the resistance to women in the playhouse when she wrote her first play, *The Adulateur* (1773), with an all male cast. This play and the others she wrote were political satire, placing Warren in an exclusive niche as a radical writer of the revolution and certainly an inspiration to women writers to come. However, be it her radical politics or her intellectual approach (which included the “romanizing” of plays), her plays have, until recently, been categorized as theatrically uninteresting. The popular theatre audience was/is interested in private relationships, not just political. This increasing interest in private relationships on stage, a seemingly natural product of the domestication of the theatre in general by women’s participation, made way for the later focus on social drama and the film industry, stemming also from the desire for realism. The most popular subject matter for the “private” focus in drama was/is the same as in the popular novel, Marriage: obtaining it in comedy and melodrama or surviving it in the later naturalistic plays. Thus, women’s participation at all levels was inevitable.

And society, meaning men in the majority, was also interested in the “spectacle” of the theatre, that of watching beautiful women on the stage as well as in the audience. By making the body sinful, Christianity, especially Protestantism, turned the theatre into an opportunity for voyeuristic eroticism. Society was forced then, because of this paradox of aspiring to keep women in the private home but also yearning to be able to gaze at women in the public theatre, into accepting women on the stage and, finally accepting women’s overall participation in the writing and producing of the drama. Men were forced to accept a professional woman in the public sphere.

Although there were a number of serious and important contributions to a native drama, it was not until the mid nineteenth century that the American theatre achieved any kind of dignified acceptance by society at large (Burke 1). The necessary step to this new respectability, ironically, was to reunite the serious drama with the stage. That is, to end the distinction once and for all between drama as literature and drama as performance. This step obligatorily involved women: the stage (actors), as well as the theatre (audience), could not be dignified until women who participated as both actresses and spectators were no longer seen as prostitutes or “loose” women. Vena Field cites Judith Sargent Murray as “one of the earliest to patronize the theatre, thereby championing an art branded by many of her contemporaries as an influence for evil” (32). Women like Susanna Rowson (1762-1824) and Charlotte Barnes (1818-1863) also broke new ground as both actresses and playwrights: Rowson in her only extant play, *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), which clearly links women and slavery; Barnes in *The Forest Princess*, a dramatization of Pocahontas’s significant life. Rowson continued in the radical tradition begun by Warren, but through a much lighter comedy which focuses on strong active women, while her own performance in it spoke volumes.

I. ANNA CORA MOWATT

Nevertheless, the woman who was most instrumental in this sense, “the woman who had the greatest impact on early American drama” (Barlow xi), after Susanna Rowson’s initial example, was Anna Cora Mowatt (Ritchie). In a reversal of Rowson’s trajectory from actress to playwright, Mowatt began as a playwright and went onto the stage from the prestigious vantage of her elite social background. She was able to travel because she had no children, a fact eerily paralleled by the majority of the successful

women playwrights of the Modern era. She first took to the stage out of financial necessity, easing her way in with public "readings" of poetry, an example of the Calvinistic opposition to the theatre which turned plays into "lectures" or lessons of morality. For a respectable "lady" to go on stage was one of the most daring acts a woman could commit, since "actresses were social outcasts, drawn either from the lowest classes or from the sons and daughters of those already in the profession" (Barlow xi). After eight years, Mowatt retired from the theatre and dedicated herself to writing her *Autobiography of an Actress*, which is at times an entertaining account of the various influences on her life and at other times a passionate plea for a respectable theatre and women's place within it; she followed it by a considerable amount of fiction: sketches, novellas and novels, several of which describe the life of an actress in a more indirect but certainly not less effective vindication of the theatre and actresses. This turn from playwriting to fiction is also a common factor among twentieth-century women dramatists, Susan Glaspell is a notable example. From her first hand experience, Mowatt reiterated her concern for working women, especially spotlighting the drudgery of an actress:

Unless the actress in anticipation is willing to encounter disappointment in myriad unlooked-for shapes; to study incessantly, and find that her closest study is insufficient; to endure an amount and kind of fatigue which she never dreamed of before . . . I would bid her shun the stage. (427)

She later describes the preparations for her *début* in *Lady of Lyons*:

I had three weeks only for preparation. Incessant study, training, —discipline of a kind which the actor-student alone can appreciate,— were indispensable to perfect success. I took fencing lessons, to gain firmness of position and freedom of limb. I used dumb bells, to overcome the constitutional weakness of my arms and chest. I exercised my voice during four hours every day, to increase its power. I wore a voluminous train for as many hours daily, to learn the graceful management of queenly or classic robes . . . (219)

It was through her writing of plays and especially fiction, as well as her example on the stage, that she consciously worked at dignifying the stage, an activity that benefited American drama in general and without which the twentieth-century explosion of social drama, often seen as the only drama worthy of attention, could never have taken place. The last chapter of her *Autobiography* is devoted entirely to a defense of the stage in which she first asserts her right to defend the theatre based on her knowledge and personal experience, and then points out her particular neutrality as she was not "bred to the stage" and that she was leaving it of her own free choice before her star status had taken a downward bent. She then goes on to present a history of the stage as well as a list of its various roles, deliberately taking aim at her Puritan readers: "In the sacred Scriptures there is not a single passage which, by any fair inference, can be distorted into a condemnation of theatrical entertainments. And yet how many sincere and truth-loving Christians believe it to be their duty to raise a hue and cry against the stage!" (432). But her fiercest defense lies in the prologue to *Fashion* (repeated in her

Autobiography), written by Epes Sargent, a humorous vindication of the play's various attributes: that it was a "native play" about American manners (or lack of), that it was written by a woman (unheard of); then begging the enemies of the stage for mercy:

And now, come forth, thou man of sanctity!
 How shall I venture a reply to thee?
 The Stage—what is it, though beneath thy ban,
 But a daguerreotype of life and man?
 Arraign poor human nature, if you will,
 But let the Drama gave her mission still;
 Let her, with honest purpose, still reflect
 The faults which keeneyed Satire may detect. (207-08).

The type of writing Mowatt turned to after leaving the stage—and which later advocates of the stage also resorted to—serves as an excellent example of the strategies that many women writers felt forced to employ to avoid the direct creation of drama. These included, on the one hand, dramatic technique through dialogue and staged scenes, as well as tableaux vivants or parlor theatricals embedded in novels; or on the other hand, the pseudonymous publication of plays.⁵ *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen is a well-known example of a novel built around a parlor theatrical; Edith Wharton is unsurpassed at fusing dramatic technique and narrative. Writing drama to be performed before the concept of the professional stage director had come into being, implied the writer as director, a step most nineteenth-century women refused to take, as Mowatt points out, "It is an author's privilege to attend the rehearsals of his own production, his acknowledged seat being at the manager's table, upon the stage" (205). Novels could be written at home where no fingers would be pointed at a woman neglecting her domestic duties, besides eluding damage to her chaste reputation. Mowatt's abandoning the stage was a result of physical exhaustion, indicating that breaking into a male-dominated "free" world was extremely strenuous. The realistic focus on the hard work of acting, rather than the romantic glamour usually surrounding actresses, was undeniably Mowatt's greatest contribution, a contribution which would change the image of the actress. And Mowatt not only transformed the image of the actress, but that of the theatre itself, by attracting many of the desirable "respectable" spectators who had previously condemned it: "[T]he opening-night audience [for *Fashion*] was composed of a class of spectators seldom seen at the Park. The cream of New York society, headed by the John Jacob Astors, turned out to appraise Mrs. Mowatt's efforts. Even the third tier, usually the province of prostitutes, was populated instead by more respectable auditors—students and stockbrokers" (Vaughn 82).

Mowatt is also identified with the emergence of the "star system." It was this "aristocratic" actress, by performing roles of sweet young women, who in essence established what roles a proper woman could play. However, though she played sweet

5. Louisa May Alcott and Rebecca Harding Davis are two writers not usually associated with the theatre but who either wrote anonymous/pseudonymous plays as in the case of Alcott or as in the case of both, presented realistic images of theatres and actresses as well as employing dramatic technique in their fiction. See Stoner for a detailed account.

young women, she refused to perform the conventional “fainting, shrieking or hand-wringing passivity” expected of women, redirecting “the audience’s attention to a woman’s real strength rather than playacted weakness” (Richards xxiii). Jack A. Vaughn recounts how while rehearsing for her London debut as Julia in Sheridan Knowles’s *The Hunchback*, the other actors criticized her, endeavoring to get her to copy the London actresses’ style. An infuriated Mowatt finally retorted: “Sir, when I have made up my mind to become the mere imitator of Mrs. Butler, or of Miss Faucit, or of Mrs. Kean, I shall come to *you* for instruction. At present it is for the public to decide upon the faultiness of my conception” (83). Writing in her autobiography, Mowatt conceived of two distinct schools of actors: those that have to abandon their individuality, their personal emotions, to the part being played and those who can easily divorce themselves from the character yet sway the emotions of the public. Although the latter type is commonly identified as the perfection of dramatic art, Mowatt claimed membership in the former school: “No amount of study or discipline could have enabled me to belong to the grand and passionless school” (244). What was termed, then, her “natural” style was remarked upon by Edgar Allan Poe, “so pleasantly removed from the customary rant and cant” (Wilmeth and Miller 328).

Since the theatre was dominated by the “star system” which in turn depended on the “point system,”⁶ the writer of drama placed him/herself in a secondary role from the start (Richards xxi-xxiv), another reason why a playwright’s career was unattractive. The writer would adapt his ideas to a particular actor/actress and include scenes in which the actor could step to front and center and pronounce a speech that would assure his success with the audience and for which they would applaud mid-scene. This strategy, a carry-over from the rhetorical drama of the renaissance, would lead the writer to include scenes, phrases and even words that he/she knew would “sell” to the audience, the public, therefore defining the “art,” turning art into a business on the same par as popular magazine fiction, and anticipating the advertising frame and canned laughter of modern television. This placed an untold restriction on playwrights and created an “artistic dilemma that an art governed by its appeal to mass taste,” its lowbrow popularity, implied. This leads us then to question whether the theatre pandered to an existing low taste or whether the theatre actually created the low taste (Richards xxv-xxvi). Gassner ascribes this “drama as commodity” mentality as responsible for repressing any attempts at a drama of ideas—that nineteenth-century American theatre was a drama of the heart, a “stage” drama, and only in the twentieth century did a drama of the mind, a social drama in which the playwright would be the star, fully come into existence (xxiv).

The marketplace mentality also affected theatre owners, who would not accept plays that might be controversial, meaning that political satire had to be clothed in fantasy, romance or the “romanized” plays of which Mercy Otis Warren is a prime example. In fact, Richards describes Mowatt’s mild *Fashion*, “a gentle tweak at the parvenu class” as at the limit of accepted controversy. Thus, the hierarchy of power in the theatre business started with star actors at the top, the owners or managers of theatres in second place, followed by the audience, and last of all, the playwright. And this

6. The point system meant the success of an actor depended on the number of points received during a performance. A point would be earned each time an individual elocution provoked applause, interrupting the natural flow of the play.

system allows literary historians to excuse the “inferior drama” which is often rendered as an embarrassment to American letters. So, in a sense, Mowatt’s move from writer to actress can be interpreted as a step up the power ladder, rather than a step down taken because of the economic failure of her husband.

Born in France in 1819 to one of the prominent families of New York, Anna and her family returned to the United States when she was six years old. Although the Ogdens shared some of the popular prejudice against the theatre, their Episcopalian origins permitted the family to take pleasure in parlor theatricals in which little Anna first started acting at the age of four. An avid reader of Shakespeare, Anna began rewriting plays for the sisters to perform, along with weekly tableaux and burlesques, for friends and family. Married at fifteen, Anna continued to study with the wealthy James Mowatt, writing poetry, some of which was published.⁷

At seventeen, the young Mrs. Mowatt wrote her first original play, “The Gypsy Wanderer; Or The Stolen Child, an Operetta.” Because of poor health she soon sailed to Europe for a two year tour with her sister. It was from her last stop in France that she wrote her next play, “Gulzara; Or The Persian Slave” (1840) and elaborated the scenery and costumes for a quite sophisticated representation. Set within a harem with a nearly all female cast, of which she was the star, “Gulzara,” published and favorably reviewed in *The New World*, was unquestionably inspired by Susanna Rowson’s *Slaves in Algiers*. Mrs. Mowatt continued to write (under the pseudonym of Helen Berkeley) articles, novels and poetry for popular magazines, publishing a prize-winning novel in 1842, *The Fortune Hunter* and a romance, *Evelyn; or a Heart Unmasked* (1844). It was about this time that Mr. Mowatt’s health began a steady decline and bad luck was compounded by his total loss of fortune. Anna decided to begin public readings for the needed income and was very successful at it. In 1845 she wrote her masterpiece, *Fashion; Or Life in New York*, which was an overnight success at the Park Theatre in New York. Through the urging of friends and due to the precarious financial situation of the Mowatts, Anna, after her initial horror at the idea, made the move from playwright to actress, debuting at the Park Theatre in *Lady of Lyons*. She carried on her star success for eight years, playing throughout the United States and Europe. During this time she wrote a second play, *Armand, the Child of the People* (1847), a romantic prose and verse drama, to the acclaim of the same New York audience of the Park Theatre and later in Puritan Boston.

In 1851, Mrs. Mowatt received news of the death of her husband while playing in Scotland. She returned to the U. S. and continued acting until her voluntary retirement in 1854, at which time she married William F. Ritchie, a wealthy Virginian. The following year she published her *Autobiography* (1855) and followed that with a collection of three novellas in which she continued to share her observations of the theatre, titled *Mimic Life; or Before and Behind the Curtain* (1856) and a novel, *Twin Roses* (1857). She continued to write narrative until her death in 1870.

7. The young Mrs. Mowatt wrote an epic poem titled *Pelayo, or the Cavern of Covadonga* published by Harper’s, 66, which is mistakenly described as “her first play” by Wilmeth and Miller, 1993. 328.

2. FASHION

This first published play (in book form) by Mowatt is described by most literary historians as the best American play in the entire nineteenth century.⁸ It received at least two reviews by Edgar Allan Poe, who, although generally wary of comedy, attended the performance every night for a week (Barlow xii).⁹ It sparked a series of imitations, all inferior;¹⁰ and *Fashion* has been revived consistently ever since, although not always in its original form. Barlow considers the 1924 performance of *Fashion* by the Provincetown Players one of the most successful (xii), as the entry in Gerald Bordman's *American Theatre* corroborates:

Although it was not a novelty, February's first entry might well have been considered one, for it was Anna Cora Mowatt's 1845 success, *Fashion*, revived by the new order at the Provincetown Playhouse on the 3rd. The story of how Mrs. Tiffany (Clare Eames) is taught the virtues of a simple life, thanks in good measure to a sensible Yankee, Adam Trueman (Perry Ivins), was rearranged, played as a spoof, and larded with period songs touched up by Deems Taylor. Joyously welcomed, it ran for 235 performances—more than ten times the run of the original (226).

Although the earliest American plays had been vehicles for political commentary or satire, skillfully exemplified by the first American female playwright, Mercy Otis Warren with a series of three linked satiric dramas, *The Adulateur* (1773), *The Defeat* (1774), and *The Group* (1775), when the theatres reopened after the Revolution the old Puritan demand for a didactic theatre was firmly in place. The two most common types of plays at this time were the comedy of manners coming from the English influence and melodrama from the French. Mowatt's *Fashion* is, without doubt, the climax of the first type. Because the play criticizes the American desire to acquire European manners, Gassner describes it as fulfilling a common need that Americans have always had to be reassured, "that the attractions of Europe are a snare and a delusion" (xi). Gassner cites such modern successors to this genre as Elmer Rice's *The*

8. The most popular nineteenth-century play was unquestionably *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which was rewritten and produced hundreds of times, the best known version being that of George L. Aiken (1852). Based on the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, it was neither written nor authorized by her nor did she ever receive any royalties from any of the performances (Barlow xiii).

9. Poe's first review (*Broadway Journal* 29 Mar 1845) was a negative one which Mowatt recounts in her *Autobiography*: "Edgar A. Poe, one of my sternest critics, wrote of *Fashion*, that it resembled the *School of Scandal* in the same degree that the shell of a locust resembles the living locust" (213). Poe's second review (*Broadway Journal* 5 April 1845) was highly favorable.

10. Judith Barlow cites Mrs. Sidney Bateman's *Self* (1856) as one of the best copies, but still inferior and also points out the similarity in the subject of Clare Boothe's *The Women* (1936) almost a century later (xiii). Langdon Mitchell also had a Broadway hit with *The New York Idea* (1906), said to be a rewriting of *Fashion*.

Left Bank and Sidney Howard's dramatization of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Dodsworth*, besides the more direct descendant comedy of manners, *The New York Idea* (1906) by Langdon Mitchell. However, Gassner's interpretation of Mowatt's play is off target, as *Fashion* censures only the social vanities and lack of values in the American "nouveaux riches," not European manners. On the contrary, the Paris-educated heroine, Gertrude, proves that it is imitation, not the manners themselves, that is the vice. And it is "imitation," as dishonesty, that constituted one of the early Puritan objections to the theatre in general. The Old World parasite, Count Jolimaitre, stereotypes European corruption, but focuses on the urban trickster element over the foreigner, comparable to Mark Twain's "King and Duke." Although *Fashion*, at least superficially, takes a turn away from the "republican" forms of drama, and therefore the more "serious," of the earlier women playwrights, it does signify a profoundly patriotic theatre, declaring national pride through the native virtue of the hero, Trueman and his granddaughter: "plain living, forthright speaking, unvarnished manliness, incorruptible womanliness, and innocent, though occasionally deluded maidenliness." (Gassner xvi)

What made Mowatt's play better than the others of the period? One crucial element is the fact that Mowatt was conscious of the difference between writing and performance, as she states "There were not attempts in *Fashion* at fine writing. I designed the play wholly as an *acting* comedy. A *dramatic*, not a literary, success was what I desired to achieve" (203) (italics Mowatt's). Gassner might take note.¹¹

Richards, in a comparison of the characters in the major early plays, finds that Mowatt's characters are unusually more complex than the majority of those found in nineteenth-century drama: "the French maid Millinette, both schemes to deceive her employers and is a victim of the false count's scheming. One of the more problematic characters in that play, Tiffany, commits forgery in the name of domestic felicity, but is saved in the eyes of the audience by himself being the object of a more hateful crime, blackmail" (xxx). Anna visited France for extended periods after her marriage to Mowatt, giving her the insight for the international theme of *Fashion*. While travelling in France before writing *Fashion*, Mowatt was discovering her subject:

The customs and fashions which we imitate as *Parisian* are not [u]nfrequently mere caricatures of those that exist in Paris. [. . .] As yet we only *follow* the fashions; we do not conceive the spirit which dictated them. [. . .] So in our mode of dressing. Expensive materials, worn here only at balls, are imported by American merchants and pronounced to be 'very fashionable in Paris.' They are universally bought by our belles, who, instead of wearing them at proper seasons, parade the streets in what is meant exclusively for evening costume (125).

One of the most important dimensions underlying the success of *Fashion* is Mowatt's use of comic dialogue as social satire. The main character, Mrs. Tiffany, in an attempt at imitating the latest Parisian style, uses malaprop French, appalling puns and other scandalous expressions while her black servant Zeke also tries to imitate a cultured butler, employing dialect, double entendre and mispronunciation to great comic effect.

11. See Gassner's quote on the *subliterary* nature, in his opinion, of early drama.

Although a certain amount of stereotyping of the merry Plantation Slave comes through, Mowatt places Zeke within the nouveau-riche family so he is conscious of his ridiculous imitation, while Mrs. Tiffany, the real fool, thinks she can deceive the public with her imitation. Thus, Mowatt's use of dialect, a staple in American comedy, was truly innovative in that it was not ascribed to the stock rustic yokel from the lower classes, but instead given to the fashionable set, making the play all the more attractive to the lower-cum-middle-class patrons—a patent display of Sheridan's influence.

Barlow also points out that "Unfortunately, revivals [of *Fashion*] in this century have often used inane songs and stage tricks to make fun of the play instead of asking audiences to laugh *with* the play" (xii) (italics Barlow's). Jim Wise, in 1977 wrote an adaptation of Mowatt's play titled *Yankee Ingenuity*. The title alone shifts the focus of Mowatt's satire of an American woman onto the male role of Adam Trueman. Critics have deemed Trueman the stereotyped comic "Yankee" figure which was probably the most common comedy character invented for nineteenth-century audiences, consistently portrayed with the use of a low dialect, full of "yankeeisms." Nevertheless, Francis Hodge, in a very rare impartial analysis of Mowatt's play disagrees with this, arguing that her city types (the Tiffanies) are caricatured but that her Yankee character is very different from the stereotype:

Trueman is a gentleman farmer and a man of strong character. No marked dialect or Yankeeisms color his speech in the published text. We see him as an epitome of all that is simple, unpretentious, straight-forward, and direct, for he provides a sharp contrast to the city silliness of Mrs. Tiffany and the others. He has a sturdiness and a definition about him which declares a genuine reality. (260)

Barlow comments that Trueman is actually closer to the "American mythic hero," symbol of the American dream, than to the stock Yankee (xii). Hodge argues that Mowatt was the one playwright responsible for diverting the direction of American theatre towards realism: "Mrs. Mowatt has discovered the middle ground, and with this discovery a new life for the Yankee on the stage is declared. . . . The country type has not disappeared; he has merely changed his clothes and improved his speech" (260), and Mowatt herself explains that while "The character of Mrs. Tiffany was not drawn from any one individual, but was intended as the type of a certain class," she clarifies that "the only character in the play which was sketched from life was that of the blunt, warmhearted old farmer" (203). Thus the very character which later critics (mostly male) would regard as the classic stereotype, was the only character which was a duplicate of a flesh and blood friend of Mowatt's and which she goes on to explain was discovered in the audience "vociferously applauding" his own likeness.

That Mowatt looked at the upper classes as food for low comedy was strikingly original for her times, assuredly an angle that only she could dare to do from her social position and inside knowledge, paving the path for later writers such as Henry James and Edith Wharton. In fact, Mowatt's Trueman is a closer likeness to James's Lord Warburton than to the Yankee caricature, although it is interesting that Mowatt's character is American while James could only attribute such redeeming features to an Englishman. In any case, by mocking the nouveaux-riche instead of the country bumpkin, Mowatt exactly met the needs of the mid-century rising middle-class who

were streaming from the country into the cities and who were thereby able to attend the theatre not only because of the proximity but because of the new respectability Mowatt herself was providing.

Fashion can simplistically be analyzed as Mowatt's criticism of frivolous women, women who have nothing better to do than spend their husbands' money, centering on Mrs. Tiffany. The problem here is with the critic, not the play—a deeper reading reveals Mrs. Tiffany a product of capitalism and the work ethic framed within Puritan morality. She is confined to her home, the only place for decent women, her *duty* is to adorn herself and decorate the house to match the financial success of her husband. And she must hand her legacy, that of conspicuous consumption and marriage as the sole object in life, to her daughter. What must not be forgotten is that this frivolous role for women is perpetuated, not by the women, but by the dominant power, patriarchy. Capitalism and patriarchy are symbolized by Mr. Tiffany, who can only be financially successful through dishonesty. He has committed forgery in order to indulge his wife's whims, brilliantly illustrating the tangled alliance behind the American Dream. Patriarchy cannot contain the monster it has created. Trueman is a hero because he sends his granddaughter to be raised by a poor French family, avoiding the lessons of materialism. His granddaughter Gertrude, governess for the Tiffanys, has learned the lessons of hard work in a setting of equality, where women have a profession (like Mowatt herself). Here Mowatt clearly differentiates between a criticism of European manners and the evils of patriarchy and capitalism. Mowatt places a woman, Mrs. Tiffany, as the target of ridicule, but at the same time reveals the final hope for the future, not in the character of Trueman, but in that of the true star (the role Mowatt herself interpreted), Gertrude.

In the introduction to *Plays by American Women: The Early Years* Judith Barlow contends that a feminist drama did not develop in the United States as did the novel and poetry simply because the drama “tends to be a conservative medium” and that “American drama has tended to be particularly cautious” (xiii). She argues that the patriarchal nature of American society was not receptive to socially significant plays, not to mention pro-suffrage plays, citing Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) opposite Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov. However, the superficiality of Barlow's “argument” turns it into little more than a description of the situation. She avoids digging down into the true motivation behind the almost total lack of involvement by women in drama in the early years, which in turn is unalterably intertwined with the inferior quality of drama in general before the twentieth century. The reason drama was uninteresting was the lack of participation by women in all facets of drama, as writers, as actresses, as spectators—creators, interpreters and critics,—and this lack of participation was contingent on nothing other than the Puritan concept of women's role in society. Anna Cora Mowatt was distinctly aware of the situation when she described her first interview with the Stage Manager of the Park Theatre immediately after *Fashion* was accepted for production:

[I] listened with seeming attention to his laying down of dramatic law; but I was in a state of agreeable bewilderment through the whole interview. When I rose to leave, and received his very patronizing congratulations on having written a “remarkable play,” I could not help fancying that he was saying to

himself, "What a silly little soul it is!" Indeed, I half expected that he was going to pat me on the head and commend me for my "smartness" (204).

Thus it is that the early feminist writers were forced to devote their time and effort to changing the image of women in the theatre, as a necessary liberating phase, for all American drama. This change was manifested by the personal example of reputable actresses, and through the writing, be it autobiography or fiction, which depicted the realistic image of working women on stage. Recognition and appreciation must be given to the direct and active examples, among others, of Susanna Rowson, inspired by Murray and Warren, of Anna Cora Mowatt, inspired by Rowson, and to the hundreds of female novelists, such as Rebecca Harding Davis and Louisa May Alcott, emotionally unable to leave their homes, but who, through serial publication in magazines, were able to embed their message into the consciousness of America, opening the door to Martha Morton, Rachel Crothers, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Susan Glaspell, Djuna Barnes, Edna Ferber, Zona Gale, Sophie Treadwell and hundreds of other women playwrights.

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