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**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
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**The Madwoman in the Theatre:
A Re-evaluation of Canadian Women Playwrights and the English Canadian Dramatic Canon,
1966-1977**

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the English Canadian Dramatic Canon,
1966-1977**

Lia Marie Talia

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

Supervised by
Professor Cynthia Sugars

Department of English
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

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Canada

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Abstract

The period 1966-1977 saw the emergence of both the Canadian feminist movement and a new Canadian drama. This thesis explores how the work of four English Canadian female playwrights reflected both in their groundbreaking early work. Aviva Ravel, Beverley Simons, Carol Bolt, and Sharon Pollock were each concerned with women's roles and changing conventional perceptions of women. This may in part explain why critics view the early work of these four playwrights as proto-feminist rather than feminist. All four playwrights, although they often disavowed a feminist intent, wrote plays that reflected the ideological tenets of second-wave Anglo-American feminism. However, their plays also often depict a decidedly vexed feminist vision. They critiqued restrictions imposed on women, while simultaneously arguing for the importance of women's empowered contribution to society, but often their message is obscured by ambiguous characterizations, structures, and conclusions. In this way, these playwrights asserted a feminist vision and challenged authority and stereotypical depictions of women on stage, while attempting to evade the antipathy of audiences and critics.

The feminist reflections of these four female playwrights during the initial stages of the second-wave feminist movement in Canada provide a fascinating glimpse into how these writers were able to create a role for themselves in Canadian theatre against the backdrop of the women's liberation movement. They may have concealed their feminist sympathies to varying degrees; however, they nonetheless put women's concerns centre-stage and began an examination of identity politics and gender socialization, especially in relation to the notion of the performance of gender roles, that has continued for decades.

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I am most grateful for my daughter Annabelle, who anchors me in my real world by each day showing me the joy, depth, strength, and truth of love. More than any other role, it is motherhood that has transformed my soul and changed me for good, forever.

*In loving memory of my mother, Anna Blanche Lawson/Tagliamonte, 1930 – 2002,
and dedicated with love to my daughter, Annabelle Margaret McGrath, b. 2006.*

Introduction: Female Things

“[F]eminist” and “feminism” refer first and foremost to a politics which developed out of consciousness raising and political activism and has only latterly, with the establishment of women’s and gender studies within academia, been equated with a body of theory. Although it signifies an ideological movement and therefore a metanarrative, this movement has never had a single, clearly defined, common ideology or been constituted around a political party or central organisation or leaders or an agreed policy or manifesto, or even been based upon an agreed principle of collective action. As a result, feminism has always for the most part consisted of diverse individuals, addressing sexual political issues in different ways on the level of the local and the specific, coming together in loose coalitions to address particular issues. This diversity in feminist practice has always been reflected within emergent feminist theory, and, as with postmodernism, this generic term embraces a number of antagonistic positions.

Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity*

Appearances to the contrary, femininity was never about being some kind of delicate flower; it was tactical: a way of securing resources and positioning women as advantageously as possible on an uneven playing field, given the historical inequalities and anatomical disparities that make up the wonderful female condition. Femininity was the method for creatively transforming female disadvantages into advantages, basically by doing what it took to form strategic alliances with men: enhancing women’s appeal and sexual attractiveness with time-honored stratagems like ritual displays of female incompetence aimed at subtly propping up men’s (occasionally less than secure) sense of masculine prowess.

Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing*

What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal? If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster, sweet dumb Snow White and fierce mad Queen are major images literary tradition offers women, how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen?

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*

The title of this thesis, “The Madwoman in the Theatre: A Re-evaluation of Canadian Women Playwrights and the English Canadian Dramatic Canon, 1966-1977,” alludes to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s influential feminist literary critique, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). The image of the madwoman in the attic, drawn from *Jane Eyre*, suggested to the authors a “paradigm of many distinctively female anxieties and abilities” (xii). They noted that the writers they studied “were literally and figuratively confined” (xi) and that in response these nineteenth-century women expressed a coherent “female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (xii). Just as the writers in Gilbert and Gubar’s study reflected the curtailment of women’s freedom and expression in relationship to their specific social context, so too do the playwrights I am examining. The seeming madwomen that dominate what I label the early “feminist” plays of Aviva Ravel, Beverley Simons, Carol Bolt, and Sharon Pollock are poignant examples of individuals who refuse to be contained by the roles thrust on them by their culture and society, and whose rebellions make them appear “mad” as they act out in socially unacceptable ways. However, I argue that the depiction of these women on the Canadian stage during the period 1966-1977 is a compelling reflection of the feminist movement of their time and of the particular dilemma of women whose capacity for change and creative contribution was severely limited by their circumstances, but who nonetheless refused to be silenced or restrained.

In an article in the *Globe and Mail* written in December 2004, Kate Taylor acknowledged the continuing inequity of women’s representation in Canadian theatre:

When Toronto producer Naomi Campbell undertook a straw poll of all the sizable theatres in English Canada – by the simple expedient of studying their

season brochures – she came up with some depressing numbers: 22 of these 28 theatres were run by men and three-quarters of the scripts they programmed for the 2003-2004 season were written by men. Another 6 per cent were written by collectives, leaving only 17 per cent written by solo female playwrights. In the directors' chairs, men outnumbered women two to one.

Her sentiments echo those expressed by a number of other feminist theatre critics who have, since the 1960s, questioned the representation of women in the Canadian theatre and dramatic canon. In 1979, Lois Gottlieb observed, “Canadian Theatre has been male-dominated, and Canadian drama has been male-oriented, complacent about filtering the world through the characters and conflicts of men, and indifferent to the perpetuation of limited and foolish stereotypes of women” (213). In 1982, writing in the report *The Status of Women in Canadian Drama*, Rina Fraticelli found that “of 1,156 productions staged at 104 Canadian theatres between 1978 and 1981, only 10% of the plays were written by women, and only 13% of the directors were women; furthermore, only 11% of Canada’s artistic directors were women” (Benson and Conolly 107).¹ Aviva Ravel’s introduction to her doctoral thesis on Patricia Joudry in 1985² supported this: “Of 491 plays listed in the Playwrights Canada catalogue (1981), twenty-eight percent were written by women” (viii). In her 1989 entry, “Feminist Theatre,” in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre*, Louise H. Forsyth explains, “Despite the major role played by women in the development of

¹ As noted in Sherrill Grace’s 2008 biography of Sharon Pollock, more recent figures from a 2006 follow-up study by Nightwood Theatre, the Playwrights’ Guild of Canada, and PACT, found that women comprised 28% of produced playwrights, 34% of directors, and 33% of artistic directors.

² The doctoral thesis was entitled “The Dramatic World of Patricia Joudry” and was completed at McGill University.

professional theatre in Canada since the 1950s, mainstream professional theatre, which receives the major share of government funding, has had little room for women” (204).

The nature of the English-Canadian dramatic canon has become a subject of increasing critical interest, especially for feminist theatre critics. Most Canadian drama critics recognize the role of the alternative theatre produced after the late 1960s as defining a dominant literary tradition that countered hegemonic nationalism and focused on social issues. In his recent entry on “Drama in English” in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Richard Knowles lists plays by George Ryga, David French, David Fennario, David Freeman, and Michael Cook as defining this tradition. He also includes “the early work of Sharon Pollock” (308) among these influential works. The plays that Knowles and other anthologists consider milestones in the tradition of English-Canadian alternative drama are predominantly concerned with examining the relationship between individuals and Canadian society in ways that subvert overtly nationalist constructs; however, they nonetheless reflect a predominantly male aesthetic. According to Knowles, Pollock’s earliest plays are “neither feminist in theme nor adventurous in form” (105). It is my intention to examine this claim and investigate how Pollock and three other female playwrights writing during the 1960s and ’70s, Aviva Ravel, Beverley Simons, and Carol Bolt, engaged with second-wave feminist ideology and interrogated patriarchal authority and traditional theatrical and social norms during this critical period in Canadian nationalism, Canadian drama, and the women’s movement. They did so in a way that was not always readily acknowledged by critics, however, because their critique was masked, resulting in a vexed feminist voice.

The period 1966-1977 was one of tremendous growth for Canadian theatre for a number of reasons. Most importantly, perhaps, was the formation of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957, which funded theatre buildings, companies, and artists. The infusion of

money provided to artistic groups promoting the centennial celebrations in 1967 also led to the creation of a number of original Canadian plays.³ Other factors contributing to the increased interest and participation in Canadian theatre included economic expansion, the growth of educational institutions, the increased demand for cultural programs for television audiences, and a younger and better-educated work force (Schafer 24).

The Canada Council was created in 1957 with a mandate “to foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of, works in the arts, humanities and social sciences in Canada” (22). In *Culture and Politics in Canada: Towards a Culture for All Canadians*, Paul Schafer argues that the formation of the council confirmed that “public support for arts organizations and activities outside government was a legitimate political responsibility. With this came official recognition of the fact that artists and arts organizations deserve financial support from government due to the difficulty of making ends meet in the marketplace”(22). Due to the expanding funding for the arts, a number of theatres were built across the country including the Stratford Shakesporean Festival Theatre in 1957 (the theatre itself was founded in 1953 and operated out of a tent for a number of years) and the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1958, which was first of a number of regional theatres. Other regional theatres followed, such as “the Vancouver Playhouse and the Neptune Theatre in Halifax in 1963, the Citadel in Edmonton in 1965, Regina’s Globe in 1966, the Saidye Bronfman Centre in Montreal in 1967, Theatre Calgary and New Brunswick in 1968, Toronto’s St. Lawrence Centre in 1970,” and the National Arts Centre in 1969 (Benson & Conolly 73). Jerry Wasserman argues that the formation of the Canada Council was responsible for changing “the nature of theatre in Canada more than any other

³ The most famous of these are *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, which debuted at the Vancouver Playhouse, *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*, which was workshopped at Stratford in 1965, *Colours in the Dark*, which was mounted at Stratford, and *Lulu Street*, which was produced at the Manitoba Theatre Centre.

single development, providing a sudden massive influx of government funding for buildings, companies and individuals engaged in the arts” (qtd. in Benson and Connolly 71-72). In *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Richard Plant and L.W. Conolly write that “The regional movement added to the momentum engendered by a decade of public funding of the arts and combined with the Canadian Centennial to help create an unprecedented increase in the quantity and quality of drama in the late sixties – an increase that continued through the seventies” (“Drama in English 1953-1981” 195).

The Canadian Centennial celebrations of 1967, as noted, encouraged the creation and showcasing of original Canadian work. Schafer claims that “[f]or artists and arts organizations, Expo and the Centennial celebrations signaled the beginning of a new era in artistic development and maturity” (31). In terms of how these events affected the public, he writes,

Expo and the Centennial celebrations acted as a real watershed in public participation in the arts and culture. Prior to 1967, there was an elitist quality about the arts and arts audiences in Canada. Since 1967, the arts and arts audiences have been much more populist and broadly-based. (31)

Greig Dymond and Geoff Pevere, authors of *Mondo Canuck*, make a pointed if comic claim that Expo 67 was “an internationally transmitted symbol of Canadian federalism transcending internal discord” and it functioned as “potent propaganda” (51).

In response to the promotion of nationalism at this time, many theatre artists interrogated the notion of Canadian unity and created plays that depicted experiences at odds with what was being officially promoted in the 1960s and '70s as a harmonious Canadian mosaic. Wasserman argues that the plays produced during the decade following the Canadian Centennial marked a radical departure from previous theatrical forms: “Modern Canadian

drama was born out of an amalgam of the new consciousness of the age – social, political and aesthetic – with the new Canadian self-consciousness” (16). For example, in 1967 the appearance of John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*⁴ and George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* emphasized the sense of disenfranchisement of those living on the Canadian social and political margins. A new critical awareness inspired young Canadians to develop a new approach to theatre: “By the later sixties a generation of young people were seeking not only professional careers in the theatre, but their own drama” (160). The international alternative theatre and counter-culture movements inspired these emerging artists, as did the nationalist movement in Canada, which enabled them to achieve an unprecedented level of theatrical achievement.

While in some ways Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock are considered part of the alternative theatre movement, the plays referred to in this study do not conform to the characteristics associated with the alternative theatre movement, which Benson and Conolly in *English-Canadian Theatre* describe as seeking “to demythologize the dramatist, the director, and even the individual actors” (87). As Renate Usmiani in *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada* explains, “[a]lternative theatre is not necessarily based on the traditional author-director-script triangle; it often uses techniques of collective creation and improvisation, with or without co-operation by a writer” (2). The four female playwrights I am considering created dramas that reflect some counter-culture influences, such as the second-wave feminist movement, but unlike many plays that emerged out of the alternative theatre movement, their “feminist” plays emphasize these playwrights’ own

⁴ *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* was originally workshopped at the Stratford Festival in 1965, but it debuted in New York on February 23, 1967.

artistic contributions as individual artists.⁵ In effect, they were asserting a strong feminist message simply by going against the grain of the current theatrical trend. However, they are not often credited with doing so. For example, many critical studies and encyclopedic entries on English-Canadian drama reject the characterization of these playwrights as “directly” feminist and downplay their engagement with the tenets of women’s liberation.

Certainly, the feminist aspects of these playwrights’ work are not always straightforward. Although these women were clearly interested in establishing themselves as playwrights, it seems that they often did not want to draw attention to their feminist sympathies because they believed that an association with feminist politics might limit their credibility. However, this in itself is important, as it suggests that they had to strategize in order to realize their own ambitions and assert a critique of dominant culture without arousing their audience’s antipathy. This type of strategizing is also noted by Gilbert and Gubar in relation to female writers in their study who expressed distinctly female concerns:

From Austen to Dickinson, these female artists all dealt with central female experiences from a specifically female perspective. But this distinctively feminine aspect of their art has been generally ignored by critics because the most successful women writers often seem to have channelled their female concerns into secret or at least obscure corners. In effect, such women have created submerged meanings, meaning hidden within or behind the more accessible, “public” content of their works, so that their literature could be read and appreciated even when its vital concern with female dispossession and disease was ignored. (72)

⁵ However, it is also important to note that both Bolt and Pollock did take part in the process of collective creation for some of their other plays, notably *Buffalo Jump* and *Walsh*.

While Knowles' entry in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* acknowledges Sharon Pollock's early work as being important to the Canadian theatre tradition, it does not acknowledge its inherent feminism. In *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983), Richard Plant's entry "Drama in English" argues that in the past decade feminist playwrights' path "was marked by the work of writers such as Beverley Simons (*Preparing*, 1975) and Carol Bolt (*Red Emma*, 1974)" (167). He seems to regard their work as proto-feminist rather than feminist, as he calls these two playwrights trail blazers in feminist theatre, who paved the way for the "enlightened feminist perspective" of later writers, saying that these later playwrights benefited from "the higher profile earned by women dramatists in the past decade" (167). Louise Forsyth's entry in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* on feminist theatre traces its development from the work of Sarah Anne Curzon through to Toronto's "Company of Sirens" and "Mean Feet." In her discussion, she claims that "[i]t was outside the establishment . . . that contemporary feminist theatre in both English and French emerged in the early 1970s, often in cooperation with alternate, experimental theatre and playwrights' groups founded around the same time" (204). The dramatic writing of women in the 1960s, she argues, "tended not to advocate radical feminist social change." She includes Aviva Ravel and Beverley Simons in a list of nine female playwrights who "offered fresh perspectives on such issues as family politics, stereotypes, madness, violence, sexuality, and reproductive rights," but qualifies their feminist status by saying that "it was left to playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s to explore them in a more directly feminist way" (204). While Forsyth recognizes Ravel and Simons as proto-feminist playwrights and includes Sharon Pollock in her list of English-Canadian feminist playwrights, surprisingly she leaves out Carol Bolt. She concludes her citation by describing current feminist theatre as "experimental in theme, technique, and medium," and says that it

“ranges in outlook beyond linguistic and national boundaries” (206). Forsyth’s brief analysis of feminist theatre suggests that plays that are, as she puts it, concerned with women’s representation are not always “directly feminist.” This observation is borne out in an analysis of the early “feminist” work of these playwrights, because while it does conform to most of the criteria by which Forsyth judges “feminist” theatre, at the same time it is also deliberately ambiguous.

It is important to note Cynthia Zimmerman’s *Playwriting Women: Female Voices in English Canada* (1994), a valuable and groundbreaking critique of several major contemporary female playwrights, among them Carol Bolt and Sharon Pollock. While my investigation does overlap somewhat with this foundational study, my focus is not to introduce the playwrights under discussion here, so much as to assess how they engaged with feminist issues of their time. While Zimmerman states that her book is “not structured around a single idea or theoretical position. Neither ‘feminism in the theatre;’ nor ‘nationalism in drama’” (*Playwriting* 11), I assume that the early works of the playwrights in this study are feminist and, despite claims to the contrary, that these playwrights were advocating feminist values and had to strategize in order to do so because of the circumstances surrounding their production during the period 1966-77.

While the feminist contributions of Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock may be contentious, their engagement with the feminist movement is undeniable. All began working in theatre in the early 1960s, and produced work during the intense social upheaval of the second-wave feminist movement. Ravel joined the Montreal Playwrights Workshop in 1962 and her first play to be professionally produced was *Soft Voices* in 1966. Beverley Simons began writing plays while at McGill University in 1956, and her first two one-act plays, *A Play* and *The Birth*, were produced there. Carol Bolt, who had studied playwriting at UBC,

started writing children's plays in Montreal in 1963 and *Dawanawida* was produced in 1970 at Toronto Workshop Productions. Sharon Pollock began her theatrical career in Fredericton in the early 1960s. Her play *A Compulsory Option* won an Alberta Culture playwriting competition in 1971 and was produced in 1972 at The New Play Centre in Vancouver. All four playwrights brought the perspectives of women to the stage, contributing to an upsurge in social criticism in Canadian drama by women, as Forsyth explains. Certainly, all four playwrights were addressing women's issues and liberation, although perhaps not in terms of a strictly-defined feminist theatre. This does not, however, determine the value or impact of their feminist contribution, nor the extent to which their work can be read as directly "feminist" today.

While these playwrights attained a measure of success and recognition in their respective communities, only Pollock's plays have been and continue to be widely produced. All four playwrights, although they often disavowed a feminist intent, wrote plays that reflected the ideological tenets of second-wave Anglo-American feminism. However, their plays also often depict a decidedly vexed feminist vision. They critiqued restrictions imposed on women, while simultaneously arguing for the importance of women's empowered contribution to society, but often their message is obscured by ambiguous characterizations, structures, and conclusions. It is my contention that these playwrights asserted their feminist vision and challenged authority and stereotypical depictions of women on stage, while attempting to evade the antipathy of their audiences and critics.

In *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*, Coral Ann Howells identifies the fictions of women novelists in her study as "characterized by their indeterminacy, a feature confirmed by their frequent open endings. The emphasis is on process and revision so that the truth is only provisional and the writing is not transparent

but something to be decoded and reconstructed through the reader's collaborative efforts" (13). Similarly, the playwrights in my study construct ambiguous depictions of characters who are in the process of revising their perceptions of themselves, their histories, and their futures. The conclusions of the plays examined here are also ambiguous. This quality is essential to their success as feminist works, because they assert feminist messages without appearing polemical. Much like the celebrated fiction writers in Howells' study, these women playwrights insisted "on a need for revision and a resistance to open confrontation or revolution" (27) and "generate[d] a double sense not only of women's difference but also of their complicity in traditional power arrangements and an awareness of their strategies of appeasement" (27). This approach is consistent with that of the playwrights I am discussing. Like the women novelists of their generation, the work of Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock "is insistently double in the recognition of contradictions within the self and the perceptions of incongruity between social surfaces and what is hidden beneath them" (28).

In *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Linda Hutcheon also explores the idea of how Canadian women writers use irony to reflect their condition of marginality. She argues that they are divided from themselves because of the stereotypical role imposed on them by patriarchal society and suggests that irony is "a useful mode by which to acknowledge the force of . . . culture and yet to contest it, in perhaps covert but not ineffective ways" (99). Hutcheon suggests that parodic and ironic forms both allow speakers "to address and at the same time slyly confront an 'official' discourse: that is, to work *within* a dominant tradition but also to challenge it – without being utterly co-opted by it" (*As Canadian as Possible* 2). Both are elements of the second-wave "feminist" drama I am considering, which draws attention to the restrictions on women's identity in terms of domestic roles. Drama by these playwrights often locates their work in relation to a male

tradition in a way that subtly interrogates traditional perceptions of women in terms of their roles in society *and* in terms of how they have traditionally been represented in drama.

These playwrights' early engagement with feminism is a topic that, I believe, has not been given sufficient recognition in Canadian literary studies. This is particularly regrettable because their feminist reflections during the initial stages of the second-wave feminist movement in Canada provide a fascinating glimpse into how these writers were able to create a role for themselves in Canadian theatre against the backdrop of the women's liberation movement. They may have concealed their feminist sympathies to varying degrees; however, they nonetheless put women's concerns centre-stage and began an examination of identity politics and gender socialization, especially in relation to the notion of the performance of gender roles, that has continued for decades.

* * *

The 1960s was a period of immense social and political change for women in Canada. As the authors of *Feminist Organizing for Change* recall, the progress made during this brief period was nothing short of phenomenal: "In a very few years the movement had put the issue of women's liberation on the social and political map, and it was characterized by an exciting and seemingly endless growth" (Adamson, Briskin, McPhail 43). According to Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, the major ideological underpinnings of the women's movement in North America focused on two dominant ideas, "the personal is political" and "sisterhood is powerful" (198). These slogans were the focus of much grassroots feminism and "quickly popularized an understanding about women's oppression that has had far-reaching effects" (199). Both phrases underline the shift that took place for individual women, who began to see that their intimate personal experiences were part of a larger collective experience.

In *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution*, Judy Rebick labeled the 1960s the “The Seedbed” of the women’s movement in Canada. She traces the evolution of the women’s movement from its beginnings with the peace movement, in particular with the organization Voice of Women in 1960, which according to Naomi Black was “formed in response to a newspaper column by Lotta Dempsey asking desperately whether women couldn’t do something to deal with international conflict and the threat of war” and “picked up on the feminist pacifism of the interwar period” (156). Rebick emphasizes, however, that women in Canada were galvanized into action in part due to the influence of feminist writing and thinking from abroad: “In general, the second-wave of feminism is agreed to have started in 1963, with the publication in the United States of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*” (5). Rebick relates that Dorothy Inglis, a founder of Voice of Women, had this reaction to Friedan’s book:

I read it thoroughly, and all my friends read it. At every party, it was the topic of discussion. It was a revelation to me that other women were feeling what I felt. I hadn’t enunciated it to myself. (6)

Rebick also highlights the consciousness-raising aspect of the women’s liberation movement, saying, “Talking together in small groups in someone’s kitchen or living room, women began to realize that what they had thought were personal problems were really social and political. Friedan’s ‘problem with no name’ turned out, for many young women, to be the sexist nature of relationships. ‘The personal is the political’ became the movement’s *cri de coeur*” (12).

The early 1960s were a time that Rebick recalls gave rise to Canadian women’s demand for political action on equality:

Women everywhere began to act on their new awareness. In 1966 Thérèse Casgrain, a leader in the Quebec women's struggle to get the vote and a VOW activist, founded the Fédération des femmes du Québec. That same year, led by feminist Laura Sabia, a group calling themselves the Committee for the Equality of Women in Canada formed in Toronto to campaign for the establishment of a Royal Commission on the status of women. In 1967, after the committee's polite briefs were ignored by the federal government, Sabia upped the ante. "We're tired of being nice about trying to get an official enquiry into women's rights in Canada," she told *The Globe and Mail*. "If we don't get a royal commission by the end of this month, we'll use every tactic we can. And if we have to use violence, damn it, we will." Pearson set up the Royal Commission later that year, and the commission's cross-country hearings provided a rallying point for the emerging movement. (6)

Rebick also summarizes the emergence of different segments of the 1960s women's movement: "By the end of the 1960s, there were three streams of feminism in Canada: VOW peace activists; the middle-class mothers and career women who belonged to established groups such as the Canadian Federation of University Women and the YWCA; and the young radicals. . . . As a new decade dawned, the three streams of feminism flowed together to form the second-wave of the Canadian women's movement" (13).

Also important to the Canadian women's liberation movement was the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s. In her work on second-wave feminist critiques of oral contraceptives, Christabelle Sethna argues, "the demand for women's control over their reproductive capacities became the hallmark of second-wave feminism" (*A Bitter Pill* 1). The pill was legalized in Canada in 1969 and Sethna notes that "by the mid-1960s, increasing

numbers of single, White, middle-class girls in high schools and universities had begun to have, or at least sanction, sexual intercourse with one or more male partners outside the promise of marriage” (*A Bitter Pill* 13). While some, like Donna Cherniak and Allan Feingold, the authors of the *McGill Handbook on Birth Control* (1968), claimed that contraception was essential to the liberation of all women, others warned women about the dangerous side-effects of the pill and complained about the fact that women had to assume the entire responsibility for contraception, in much the same way that they had previously had to assume the entire responsibility for an unplanned pregnancy. The sexual revolution, which seemed to promise to revolutionize women’s sexuality, ultimately proved problematic for many women, to the extent that many contemporary feminists argue that it did little to achieve women’s sexual emancipation. Nonetheless, the sexual revolution brought about massive social changes that changed women’s experience in drastic ways.

According to Naomi Black, the “key period for the second-wave of the Canadian women’s movement was the years 1967 to 1970” (160). It was during this time that a number of women’s liberation groups sprang up in cities across the country, adding to the already established women’s clubs and organizations that had been founded by early Canadian feminist leaders. A number of changes also occurred on the political front, as the Liberal government of Lester B. Pearson adopted more expansive social spending. As Barbara M. Freeman explains in *The Satellite Sex: The Media and Women’s Issues in English Canada, 1966-1971*, his government believed that “spending money would strengthen the economy,” and his “last years in Parliament were marked by events that were designed to promote pride of citizenship among all Canadians” (21).

Freeman also argues that Pearson’s establishment of The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in February 1967 was “another exercise to ensure that Canada was a

democratic country for all its citizens, but was also a minority government's response to pressure brought on it by experienced women's groups utilizing an impeccable sense of political timing" (21). From April through October 1968, the seven commissioners, five women and two men, held hearings across the country and received briefs from women's groups and other organizations. The *Report*, with its list of 167 recommendations, was released in early December 1970. Other changes ushered in by Pearson's government included the end of the legal ban on the sale and advertisement of contraceptives (1969), the new federal Divorce Act (1968) that allowed for divorce on the basis of marriage breakdown, adultery and mental or physical cruelty, and the amendment to the Canadian Criminal Code to permit abortions under certain circumstances (1969). As Freeman observes:

The Pearson government updated laws that limited individual rights in areas which, after the advent of the birth control pill, were increasingly accepted as matters of conscience and personal sexual freedom. Parliament removed some of the severe restrictions on access to birth control, abortion, and divorce, issues which fundamentally affected women's lives. Most of the discussion was not about whether there should be more freedom, but how much, and the new laws still curtailed women's choices quite a bit. (22)

In addition to these legal and political changes, especially important during these years was the emergence of groups calling themselves "radical feminists" who, despite the fact that they shared "the central assumptions that women were the crucial agents of social change, and that men and male values were responsible for much that was wrong with society," nonetheless "disliked and rejected the very term 'feminist'" (165). Black explains that "[f]or the radical feminists, liberation was related to asserting the uniqueness of

women's situation; their earliest goal tended to be obliteration of gender roles as a basis of oppression" (165).

In Canada, one of the forums for progressive discussion about women's issues was *Chatelaine Magazine*. It was a strong voice for women under the direction of Doris Anderson from 1957 to 1977. The magazine boasted a readership of over a 1,000,000 women in English and French Canada and Anderson tackled controversial women's issues such as the wage gap, women's political representation, domestic labour, divorce, birth control, and abortion. According to Rebick, Doris Anderson began "to publish feminist articles long before the mainstream had a notion of the women's movement to come" (5). A much told anecdote about Anderson, related by Rebick, involves the fact that Anderson decided not to serialize *The Feminine Mystique* because she felt that they had already covered the issue: "While Friedan summed it up, Canadian women had been reading about this 'problem with no name' for several years by that time" (5).

A survey of articles in *Chatelaine* from the late 1960s reveals Anderson's clear-sighted approach to women's issues, as she advocated for women's participation in politics, the workforce, and in the philosophical debates about women's roles. In April 1966, for example, an editorial entitled "Women and the Elephant Story," Anderson argued that the "high-frequency bickering" about North American women came down to short-sighted views, with Friedan wanting "everyone out of the home and off to a fulfilling job" (1). However, Anderson's reasoned response was to advocate for an "aerial view" of the situation that would allow those arguing about women's position in society the opportunity to see the broader perspective that recognized diversity: "The trouble with all these theories is that they give simple, single solutions for complex problems. Each woman has to fashion her life to suit her own needs" (1). In July 1966, Anderson supported Laura Sabia and called for a

Royal Commission on the status of women in Canada, noting, “Although Canada ranks near the top in the number of women with higher education, we rank near the bottom of all western nations in the percentage of women in the professions and managerial jobs” (1). In 1968 eleven thousand women responded to a questionnaire in the January issue of *Chatelaine* supporting the need for a Royal Commission on women’s issues and the results were discussed in an article entitled “Report: What You Think of Women’s Status.” Thus, throughout the late sixties and early seventies, Anderson promoted the ideas central to the Canadian women’s liberation movement: reproductive, political, educational, and social rights and responsibilities.

Chatelaine also covered many stories about the women’s liberation movement itself. In September 1969, Jack Batten’s article “After Black Power, Women Power” offered a sympathetic portrait of the women’s liberation movement and expressed his support in his concluding remarks: “Utopian, unbelievable, unlikely as it may sound, the new feminists want most of all to carve out their just place in this world and at the same time they want to save us from ourselves. Us? That’s us men. Like true revolutionaries, they are out to remake society. And I, for one, believe they can.” The November 1970 issue of *Chatelaine* was devoted to “Women’s Lib” and contained a number of articles exploring the topic. These articles attempted to address the issues surrounding women’s liberation in a balanced way and underlined the multiple perspectives and issues surrounding the emancipation of women. Anderson’s editorial that month also emphasized the importance of mainstream women supporting even those they considered radical, as she suggested that women pay attention to the progress made by first-wave feminists in Canada: “The gains that were made for women were made by a small band of militant women – and the males who agreed with them. They

picketed parliament, chained themselves to fences and went to jail. But they made great gains for women while the vast majority of women were actively against them or neutral.”

While women’s issues became increasingly controversial in the media, the plays written by Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock also reflect an awareness of Anglo-American feminist thought and the popular feminist works of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, and others that promoted a new awareness of women’s oppression and advocated social change. The plays echo themes that were prominent in these texts and reinforce the re-evaluation of women’s roles that was occurring, at least in part, as a result of their critiques.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, although first published in 1949, was translated into English with its New York publication in 1953. This seminal feminist work had an enormous influence on women in North America. De Beauvoir’s central thesis is that women are subjugated because they are considered inferior to men. She also argues that “femininity” is socially constructed; the most quoted phrase of this work emphasizes this: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (267). At its core, de Beauvoir’s work aims to explore the issues that affect women’s sense of identity and self-determination. She hopes to establish women as independent subjects who will co-exist with men in a relationship of reciprocity:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him *also*: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an *other*. . . . when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the “division” of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form. (731)

De Beauvoir's work, while reinscribing the dominance of heterosexual relationships, which is not something contemporary gender critics such as Judith Butler would endorse, promotes women's equal standing with men and recognizes the significance and value of women's differences. Ultimately, she asserts the necessity of cooperation for the greater good of humanity: "To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood" (732). De Beauvoir's understanding of equality in terms of traditional male structures of power dates this work, but her belief that the power relations between men and women must be mutually deconstructed in order to establish more egalitarian relationships is significant to the feminist critiques that her work inspired. Men, she suggests, must assist women in the process of social change: "It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given" (732). This idea of both men and women sharing the obligation to facilitate social change is also present in the work of Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock, who each support traditional heterosexual relationships while questioning rigid gender roles. The influence of de Beauvoir's liberal feminism is significant, because she, in effect, is also promoting social change in a non-confrontational way, by emphasizing men's involvement in the process, despite her forceful critique of how women have been restricted and "constructed" by patriarchal society.

As already noted, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was another groundbreaking feminist text that changed the way that North American women saw themselves. Friedan's book, according to her biographer, Daniel Horowitz, depends heavily on de Beauvoir's, and both works examine the social construction of femininity and encourage women to redefine themselves in relation to imposed gender roles and find freedom in economic independence. *The Feminine Mystique* was particularly critical of the

widespread propagandistic tactics of the media to encourage women to return to the home following WWII when their involvement in the workforce was discouraged. Throughout the book, Friedan focuses on women's right to live as free and empowered human beings:

Why, with the removal of all the legal, political, economic, and educational barriers that once kept woman from being man's equal, a person in her own right, an individual free to develop her own potential, should she accept this new image which insists she is not a person but a "woman," by definition barred from the freedom of human existence and a voice in human destiny? (68)

Friedan coined the term "feminine mystique" to explain how women are encouraged "to ignore the question of their identity" and focus instead on fulfilling the requirements of a restrictive domestic role (71). She asserts that her central thesis is "that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity – a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique" (77). Like de Beauvoir, Friedan suggests that in order for women to attain freedom, men and women must cooperate:

I think the energy locked up in those obsolete masculine and feminine roles is the social equivalent of the physical energy locked up in the realm of $E=MC^2$ – the force that unleashed the holocaust of Hiroshima. I believe the locked-up sexual energies have helped to fuel, more than anyone realizes, the terrible violence erupting in the nation and the world during these past ten years. If I am right, the sex-role revolution will liberate these energies from the service of death and will make it really possible for men and women to "make love, not war." (395)

With her reiteration of one of the most clichéd dictums of the era, despite her revolutionary critique, Friedan also reinscribes a heterosexual norm. It was left to a more radical feminist thinker to challenge this type of pat, counter-culture conclusion.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1968) brought this new awareness of women's oppression to bear on women's history and literature, illustrating how a number of canonical male authors subjugated women in their work and contributed to the creation of an environment that restricted women's freedom and their opportunities for social parity. She deconstructed patriarchal authority, arguing that its "greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity. A referent scarcely exists with which it might be contrasted or by which it might be confuted" (31). Millett also emphasized that because of the pervasiveness of patriarchal culture, it is difficult to identify, but not impossible to challenge: "When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change" (31). Her summary of women's history ends with a call to arms: "Until the radical spirit revives to free us, we remain imprisoned in the vast gray stockades of the sexual reaction" (329). Millett's contribution to second-wave feminist consciousness was to prompt a reconsideration of the canon and to radicalize the idea of women's revolution. Her words, however, echo those of the aforementioned feminist writers:

For to actually change the quality of life is to transform personality,
and this cannot be done without freeing humanity from the tyranny of sexual-
social category and conformity to sexual stereotype – as well as abolishing
racial caste and economic class. (507)

Millett's focus on the larger issues of race and class, as well as her literary critique of canonical male writers D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet, encouraged women writers to challenge the authority of both social and artistic constructs.

Just as the foundational thinkers in Anglo-American feminism offered varied perspectives on women's condition, contemporary feminism is marked by its inherent heterogeneity. Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail assert that "Not only is the women's movement a diverse, complex, and shifting reality, but feminism itself is not a unified political ideology" (9). These authors also point to the underlying commonalities of all feminisms: "all believe in equal rights and opportunities for women; all recognize that women are oppressed and exploited by virtue of being women; and all feminists organize to make change" (9). The *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* provides an alternative description that is quite broad. It defines *feminism* as "a range of attitudes and actions that are concerned with the roles of women as individuals and in society, and particularly with ways of changing conventional perceptions of women, improving women's working and living conditions, probing the ways in which women's stories are told, and analyzing the audiences they reach" (353). As a starting point, my understanding of *feminism* combines these ideas. I appreciate the diversity of the feminist movement and yet focus on its primary aim to enable women's equal participation in society; equal opportunities to achieve success (however they define it) and to realize their ambitions (whatever they may be); equal ability to understand and to reclaim their histories (having had access to them); equal control over and medical provision for their bodies (on their own terms); and equal potential to influence human development (personal, emotional, intellectual, political, economic) and express creativity in order to bring about social and political change.

In this way, my approach is aligned with that of the Canadian playwrights I am

considering, and is characteristic of what is often labeled “liberal feminism.” Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail explain that liberal feminism was the most visible and politically powerful of the three currents within the women’s movement in Canada, which also included radical and socialist feminism. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Judith Dolan outlines the three dominant feminist positions in America as liberal, cultural, and radical. She argues that liberal feminists are more likely to work within traditional frameworks to effect social change:

Liberal feminism takes its cue from liberal humanism. Rather than proposing radical structural change, it suggests that working within existing social and political organizations will eventually secure women social, political, and economic parity with men. . . . Many working women playwrights vehemently resist the feminist appellation, because to survive economically their plays must be produced widely in commercial venues. The analogy between feminism and politics is seen as threatening to the universality of their work. (4)

This statement offers a compelling perspective on the work of Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock. Despite their distance from a radical or socialist feminist stance, their work *does* reflect a feminist ideology. However, it is particularly revealing that they often resisted the term *feminist*,⁶ which underlines how they viewed the label as potentially limiting to them, despite their obvious engagement with feminist consciousness and their interest in advocating an expansion of women’s roles and expression.

⁶ In terms of this study’s timeframe, Ravel is perhaps the most resistant to the term *feminist*. Simons redirects questions of feminism to consider humanism. Bolt acknowledged that to be labeled a feminist may somehow prejudice an audience against her work and therefore wished to avoid the label. Pollock, while acknowledging that she is a feminist, and that her work is feminist, does not shy away from the label, but also does not promote her identification with it. I will discuss this issue in more detail in the individual chapters devoted to each playwright.

* * *

In their plays, these playwrights often rely on what feminist writer Adrienne Rich refers to as “re-visioning,” the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes. . . an act of survival” (Rich 167). They do so to reflect critically on their own experiences in a way that calls attention to the restrictions of their social circumstances and exposes gender oppression. In “When We Dead Awaken,” an essay that takes its title from Ibsen’s play of the same name, Rich reflects on the idea that creating a new culture involves women’s coming to terms with how their lives and work have been put to use. She reflects on the agenda of social transformation and articulates how fraught this process of social change can be:

It’s exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful. This awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness has already affected the lives of millions of women, even those who don’t know it yet . . . in the last few years the women’s movement has drawn inescapable and illuminating connections between our sexual lives and our political institutions. The sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one’s eyes. (167)

Rich further explores how often the woman writer is subjected to the threat of male judgment, “the misnaming and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males,” which creates “problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival” (169). One senses that Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock were operating under similar constraints. Rich describes how in rereading Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) she was “astonished at the sense of effort, of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness, in the tone of that essay” (169). She identifies the underlying anxiety that is

associated with women's creative expression:

I recognized that tone. I had heard it often enough, in myself and in other women. It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is *willing* herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity. (169)

Rich's comments reflect a phenomenon that is often associated with women's self-assertion and particularly highlights how women writers consciously construct their persona and narratives in order to curtail criticism and condemnation.

In many ways, Rich's critique is linked to the notion of women's performance of gender roles. If, according to Rich, women writers have to be careful to structure their stories in such a way as to ensure that their message is heard without arousing antipathy, then it is interesting to consider how the playwrights in this study showed women performing gender roles under duress in accordance with socially sanctioned norms. The idea that women self-consciously perform roles in accordance with gender expectations imposed by patriarchal society and that this construction is inherently restrictive is something that each of these playwrights highlighted and it anticipates much of what is explored in contemporary terms as the performativity of gender. In her article "Performance Anxiety," Joyce Van Dyke notes, "because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strategy' better suggests the situation of duress under which gender as performance always and variously occurs" (qtd. in Case 7).

Performativity is a concept central to Judith Butler's theorization of gender. In terms of my study, I focus on the definition of performativity that posits that gender identity is the result of stylized acts performed under duress through time and therefore undermines the

notion of that identity being stable. Butler, in particular, seeks to demonstrate that gender is “performative” – a concept that postulates that “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” – in order to show that “what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts” (*Gender Trouble* xv). In a cogent summary of Butler’s work, Moya Lloyd argues that “Butler not only offers a radical critique of sex as natural and innate, she also contests the viability of women as a unitary category. Needless to say, the impact of this book [*Gender Trouble*] on feminist debate was profound for it seemed to challenge so many of the beliefs that feminism held dear” (25).

While Butler might be critical of the identity politics of 1960s and ’70s feminists such as Friedan, who seem to assume a stable female identity, Butler’s work, according to Lloyd, is indebted to Simone de Beauvoir’s critique:

Feminism is a political movement organized around transforming the lives of women. To begin with, therefore, one of the primary aims of feminist scholarship was to contest the male-stream definitions of woman circulating in culture and society at the time of writing. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, a text that was highly influential on Butler, exemplifies this aim perfectly. Here Beauvoir set out to demonstrate that humanity in a number of fields tended to be conceived of in terms of men and the male prerogative while woman was, quite simply, the ‘second sex’: weaker and essentially other to man. (Lloyd 4)

Lloyd also demonstrates how Butler’s theory is based on more radical feminist critiques (what Lloyd refers to as “différance feminism”) and suggests that the radicalism of feminist

theorists such as Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett also emphasized the idea that not only is gender socially and culturally constructed but that “gender *per se* could be *eradicated*. For them a liberated future for women was a future without gender” (30). Thus, Butler’s focus on the performative nature of gender provides an important lens through which to view how gender norms performed consciously (or unconsciously) by bodies stifle individual expression and restrict individual experience to the point where they must be overcome or eliminated in order for social transformation to take place. Butler suggests that all gender identity results from the adoption of socially constructed role-play, while the second-wave feminist playwrights I am considering focused on how various women (and they do not have a uniform identity) are forced to perform certain roles to comply with a feminine identity defined by their society. As Butler argues, “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (*Gender Trouble* 173). The obligatory frame, she implies, is both artificial and limiting to human experience and must be deconstructed in order for society to be more equitably reconstructed.

Butler uses the example of performance, specifically a drag show, to illustrate how this false notion of gender can be subverted:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency. . . . In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (175)

She argues that in drag “perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (176). The drag show, then, is one way that those who experience gender oppression are able to question dominant values and create a space for the assertion of their own individuality, and to question the relationship between sex, gender, and desire.

Butler’s views about how performance and parodic proliferation of gendered acts can challenge hegemonic values are particularly interesting when considering feminist drama. Feminist drama often involves a critique of dominant patriarchal values in order to portray women’s experience in a way that defies gender expectations. As Sherrill Grace argues in her article “Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact: Towards a Theory of Identity in Performance,” Butler allows that there is “the potential for stage performance of identity (gendered or any other kind) to be performative and, thus, capable of exposing essentialism as false (as a role) and of challenging the scripts that prescribe our identity acts” (Grace, “Performing” 70). The performance of gender in the early feminist work of the playwrights I am considering thus illustrates Butler’s theory of the performative and has a similar aim. Often, these scripted performances are characterized by irony and parody, in that they expose gender categories to ridicule in order to promote social change for those who are considered unintelligible.

The notion of abjection is another element that informs these texts. Julia Kristeva’s description of the abject in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and Butler’s use of the term in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) both outline how the abject haunts the speaking subject and the symbolic order. Kristeva describes the abject as that which “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire,” things outside of the subject that are not definable objects, but instead parts of the subject

that have been jettisoned, things such as bodily excretions that cause the subject to feel repulsed. These things show the subject what it must thrust aside in order to exist as a distinct, and self-contained, entity (*Powers* 1). She also argues that abjection is caused by anything that “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4).

The object is founded in the experience of the maternal body. Both the mother and the child experience a particular terror of separation. The child subject struggles against the fact that having once been part of the mother, it will necessarily turn into an object: “The object confronts us. . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (13). The mother, having separated from the child, also appears to see in it a source of both pain and *jouissance*, an ambivalence that troubles many of the characters in the work of these women playwrights.

Also significant is Kristeva’s theorization of art/literature as object: “artistic experience. . . is rooted in the object it utters and by the same token purifies” (17). The performance of the state of abjection onstage allows for the purification of the subject through its *exclusion*. It also provides the space for the aesthetic task as Kristeva sees it, “a descent into the foundation of the symbolic construct” (18). This territory, where subject and object confront each other, “collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: object. Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain” (18). *Powers of Horror* focuses on literature, and yet Kristeva does suggest that it is possible to confront abjection theatrically when she discusses the subject’s confrontation with a corpse: “. . . as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and

corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). The embodied art of theatre allows audiences to see and experience the abject directly, and symbolically replicates the idea of it being both a part of and separate from them.

Butler’s adaptation of Kristeva’s idea of abjection focuses more directly on “‘abject beings,’ who are not ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (*Bodies* 3). For Butler, the abject designates precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life “which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (*Bodies* 3). Butler suggests that normative sexuality produces a domain of abjection, which is seen as threatening. She writes, “The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (*Bodies* 3). As Lloyd summarizes, the abject “haunt[s] the security and stability of both the subject and the symbolic order. The abject thus remains part of subjectivity and of culture, threatening both with potential dissolution” (74).

The concept of abjection works on a number of levels in each play of this study. The characters are “cast out/outcast” in some way, and they struggle to articulate their own legitimacy and intelligibility, despite the fact that they are not readily understood. In the theatre venue the bodies of the female actors perform abject bodies of the scripted characters that perform the abjectness that they feel in relation to the social script imposed on them. The performativity of their social roles calls attention to the duress they feel in relation to them. The notion of abjection also seemingly protects the playwrights because it allows them to challenge dominant culture by presenting characters that are abject and therefore potentially

dismissible as aberrant or “mad,” even as they offer compelling protests of the conventions confining them.

In *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, Karen Shimakawa argues that while the theatre can “render the presentation of the abject ‘safe,’ the theatre can also function to destabilize the rigid categories of self/other, subject/object/abject – not only on a self-consciously fictive or diegetic level but on an experiential one as well” (19). The presence of an actual body on stage, the actor’s body, which is enacting a role and identity that is not his/her own, she suggests, “necessarily implies a threat (and tacit acceptance) of the destabilization of the opposition between (to paraphrase Butler) bodies that matter and bodies that don’t” (19). Shimakawa’s discussion of the construction of the Asian American abject in relation to contemporary American theatre is useful to consider in relation to the construction of the female abject in these early feminist plays of Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock. For, at the time that these playwrights were writing, the depiction of women onstage involved a challenge. Through their depictions of the abject female body onstage, they were at once presenting female characters as abject and also attempting to oppose patriarchal practices that relegated women to the realm of abject through their depictions of the abject. These playwrights therefore compelled interest through the depiction of normative values – abject female bodies – and provoked change by illustrating that these abject bodies were struggling human ones – mothers, wives, and lovers – individuals who were an essential part of society even as they challenged its conventions and resisted its restrictive gender categories.

Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock each explore the risks of female disempowerment. They each address the position of women by including female protagonists and experiences, but they also use theatrical forms and structures that both parody and revise traditional

dramatic forms in order to focus on personal memory, history, fragmentation, and the circumscription of female (often domestic and interior) space, linking psychological and social space, and addressing the artificiality of “feminine” gender constructs. As Hutcheon argues, parody “is one of the ways in which modern arts have managed to come to terms with the weight of the past” (*A Theory of Parody* 29).

Furthermore, these playwrights mask their dramatic critique of women’s roles with an ambiguity that emerges, in part, out of the role-playing and performative aspects of women’s interactions. The plays appear to reflect cultural hegemony, while they simultaneously trouble conventional notions of gender roles. They emphasize the performativity of femininity and highlight how women strategically employ role-playing in reaction to subjugation in their daily lives, which is another way of viewing social role construction. Yet they mask their depiction of women’s roles in order to trouble these normative constructions. Their masquerade⁷ allows them the freedom to express themselves without fear of censorship or condemnation, a move that indicates their awareness of the potential threat of social retribution and signals their sensitivity to the construction of social power relations and restrictions.

The vexed feminism of Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock may also reflect their conflicted responses to second-wave feminist ideology. While these playwrights critiqued the

⁷ Masquerade is a term associated with psychoanalyst Joan Rivière who argued in her 1927 essay “Womanliness as Masquerade” that some intellectual women use a feminine masquerade to avert male criticism when they assume traditional male roles: “Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if ... found to possess it” (38). Masculinity in this case refers to the woman’s abilities as a writer and speaker, work which Rivière suggests “was based on an evident identification with her father” (37). Rivière also argues that these types of women “wish for ‘recognition’ of their masculinity from men and claim to be the equals of men, or in other words, to be men themselves.” (37). In *The Female Thing*, Laura Kipnis addresses the notion of women’s strategic use of femininity, as is noted in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. These tactics reveal the performativity of women’s pleasing behaviour, in this case the fashioning of plays in such a way that they appear neutral or mainstream, while in actuality they intelligently assert women’s independence and intellectual power.

social restrictions placed on women and advocated social change and female empowerment, they did not advocate any radical revolutionary action, nor did they offer women prescriptive advice for how to initiate this type of widespread transformation. Indeed, in some instances they are overtly critical of the feminist movement and disavow any identification as feminists. As a result, their work often seems profoundly tragic in terms of how it depicts the potential for women to live unfettered, self-determined lives. This heart-rending tone may reflect their sense of unease in relation to their artistic endeavours in a male-dominated artistic field and betray their conflicted response to feminist ideology. However, despite their difficulty with the feminist label, we can speak of these works as feminist because at their core they promote the equality of women and expose patriarchal practices, even if they do not actively dismantle those practices.

* * *

In reading the work of these playwrights, I will attempt to address some of the issues outlined by Anne Ubersfeld in her groundbreaking work, *Reading Theatre* (1999). In this book, Ubersfeld outlines a concrete way to interpret theatre texts. She begins her discussion of the relationship between text and performance by discussing the ambiguity inherent in theatre texts. She argues that theatre is both more “dangerous and privileged” than other arts because it is a social practice:

Its relation to production can never disappear, although at times it may seem quite blurred, and theatrical seduction may transform it into nothing more than a means of entertainment for the pleasure of the dominant class. Theatre is a dangerous art. Censorship always has its eye on theatre, directly or indirectly – whether accomplished through economic structures, or by the police, or even in the particularly perverse form of self-censorship. (4)

Ubersfeld discusses ways of reading theatre texts in terms of a classic relationship, where the author “assigns privileged status to the text and views performance as no more than expression and translation of a literary text” (5), and a reading against the text, where it is regarded as “only one among several elements of performance” (7). She establishes the distinction between the text and performance and outlines the components of a text as follows: “It is made up of two distinct yet indissociable parts, dialogue and didascalía (stage or production directions)” (8). The distinction between these components is that one is a character’s voice and the other the author’s voice, which “allows us to see the author does not speak herself or himself in theatre, but rather writes so that another can speak in her or his stead – indeed not just one other but a whole group of others, through a series of speaking exchanges” (9). This unique aspect of the theatrical text makes it that much more difficult to interpret. Ubersfeld emphasizes that the only accurate reflection of a governing authorial consciousness in the theatre text is in the didascalía. Otherwise, it is the “superimpositions of all those voices” that are otherwise relayed in the text. She writes that “The literary problem of theatrical writing thus lies in the manner in which the voice of the writing *I* is covered by the voices of those others who speak. This is the corollary to the fact of not speaking one’s self” (9).

Ubersfeld’s observations point to the way that theatre texts allow authors to present potentially provocative content without seeming to endorse it themselves. It also points to the fact that theatrical representations of women do not necessarily assume a stable female identity. This is particularly noteworthy when considering how women have used theatre texts to explore identity politics. The notion of interpreting the superimposition of all the voices in a text is compelling, for it requires a critic to consider the often contrasting voices within a text and to draw conclusions about the play text based on how these voices interact,

not on their individual assertions. The ambiguity of the theatre text must also be regarded critically and can be seen to reflect the potentially “dangerous” social awareness of the author combined with their equally perilous self-censorship. In terms of the playwrights discussed here, it is important to consider their theatre texts in terms of the author’s critical social voice as illustrated in the stage directions and sum of textual voices, as well as the notion of how this voice reflects a critical social stance that is often obscured by self-censorship.

Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock each employ somewhat different strategies in their plays. Each playwright creates protagonists who are conflicted and their motivations, as a result, are ambiguous. This ambiguity becomes part of the feminist strategy of each play. Ravel, in particular, exploits this quality in terms of her characterizations and conclusions in order to draw her audience into their own negotiation of the matrix of women’s issues she raises in each play. Simons’ protagonists, while conflicted, are also provocative; far from encouraging identification, her characters are compelling yet terrifying in their seemingly desperate attempts to establish their legitimacy. Bolt’s protagonists are “straightwomen” surrounded by bewildering genre-specific circumstances that compel them to act against expectations. Similarly, Pollock’s stereotypical women also veer away from historical type to illustrate the potential for social transformation through perhaps questionable assumptions of empowerment. All four playwrights thus incorporate elements of feminist theatre practice, including the representation of a female perspective and the depiction of personal transformation. They also, as previously noted, offer a critique of gender roles that anticipates later debates about the performativity of gender. That the characters performing gender expectations are often women expressing divergent perspectives on women’s oppression is also interesting and complicates a straightforward reading of gender

performance, as does the fact that these characters are performed by female actors who were, by the nature of their work, also challenging conventional assumptions about women's roles. Supplementing the implicit self-reflexivity of feminist drama is often an ironic subtext, introduced on the level of structure and/or characterization. Finally, didascalia in each play highlight the playwright's intentions in ways that allow a reader, if not an audience, to interpret the playwright's underlying motives. Together, the range of approaches by Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock illustrates the varied and inventive negotiations that women used in order to have their voices heard on the Canadian national stage in the 1960s and '70s. This study will consider how and why these playwrights used the strategies they did in relation to their specific cultural circumstances and to the dominant social discourse of their time. Their approach enabled them to assert a feminist vision and to establish a strong presence for themselves in Canadian theatre, as well as for the women who followed them on stage.

Each of the following chapters will focus on two plays by each of these playwrights in order to examine what I see to be the complex feminist perspective in each writer's oeuvre of this period. Where possible, I also discuss the critical reception of these plays in order to highlight audience assumptions and expectations at the time.

In Chapter 1, I consider two plays written by Montreal playwright Aviva Ravel. Ravel's plays *Soft Voices* (1966) and *Dispossessed* (1976) both reflect a vexed feminist vision. *Soft Voices* presents a powerful critique of the second-wave feminist idea of the "liberated" woman. Carol is a complex character who rebels against a domestic role, yet who cannot find satisfaction in an independent position either. Ravel's poignant verse-drama, *Dispossessed*, explores the complex familial relationships of an aging Jewish woman in an immigrant community in Montreal. Roochel's self-sacrificing attitude in the service of a rigid social identity is depicted as leading to her death. Both plays reflect critically on the

idea of women's liberation and offer harrowing variations on the possible outcomes available to women who are socially marginalized. Ravel's characters and the conclusions of both her dramas, however, are marked by an ambiguity that obscures the clarity of her feminist critique. This allows her work to be read in radically different ways, reflecting feminist values without appearing to endorse them. In writing about Ravel, I incorporate some aspects of an interview I conducted with her, as well as references to letters and play scripts that I consulted in her archive at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal.

Beverley Simons' plays *Crabdance* (1969) and *Preparing* (1973) are the subject of Chapter 2. The Gyllian Raby Collection at the University of Calgary Archives, which I consulted in the summer of 2003, provided me with invaluable insight into Simons' work and personality. Her plays are generally considered to be self-consciously avant-garde. Her major work, *Crabdance*, uses absurdist elements to explore the stresses experienced by her middle-aged heroine, and explore her conflicted response to subjectivity. Sadie's domestic role situates her as a key player in commerce, but alienates her from her community and her family. The play was written in the mid-1960s and received a great deal of attention in the Canadian Playwrights' Movement because of its experimental style and the fact that it premiered in Seattle and was not mounted in Canada until 1972. *Preparing* is a one-act play that similarly protests the way that women are categorized and dismissed in a patriarchal culture that is defined by materialistic concerns. Jeannie is disempowered by following a rigid patriarchal script for her roles as a "good" girl, a rebellious young woman, a concerned wife and mother, and a leader in the arts community. In much the same way as *Crabdance*, this shorter monodrama illustrates how women's experiences are both biologically and socially constructed. Simons questions the position of women by placing them at the centre of a symbolically charged stage action where they actively struggle to assert their personal

power in relation to restrictions imposed by biology, social structures, and cultural expectations. She thus creates poignant images of protest that invite her audiences to question how culture and social identity define and limit women's lives.

I turn to Carol Bolt's work in Chapter 3 in order to explore how she addressed feminist values and visions in relation to Canadian women in rural and urban environments. The Carol Bolt Fond at the National Archives of Canada enabled me to read through Bolt's notebooks and various drafts of her plays. *Shelter* (1975) is an unsettling and ambiguous farce about a young widow who runs for her deceased husband's seat in federal parliament. It deconstructs the ideal of the political wife, exposing the notion of women's political and personal power being curtailed both by an overly authoritarian patriarchal society and their own internalized sense of marginalization. Bolt's most commercially successful play, the chilling psychological thriller *One Night Stand* (1976), explores more directly the conflicted consciousness of a young woman coming to terms with sexual and social liberation. In much the same way as *Soft Voices*, it plays off the cultural stereotype of the '70s liberated woman. In both plays, the theatrical form masks Bolt's feminist critique: in *Shelter*, her social drama appears to hinge on the farcical comedy of female relationships rather than their sense of disempowerment and political ambition; in *One Night Stand*, the thriller genre she employs overshadows the compelling social critique of the sexual revolution that the play provokes. Both plays express a vexed feminism because of how they mask their feminist critiques with entertaining elements, such as farcical humour and thriller form conventions, troubling a straightforward feminist reading.

Chapter 4 examines how Sharon Pollock's plays *My Name is Lisbeth* (1975) and *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976) subtly exploit theatrical conventions in terms of their status as "historical drama" and then expand the factual elements of the genre in order to address

feminist concerns. My interview with Pollock in 2003 and research conducted at the University of Calgary on the Sharon Pollock Papers helped me understand her commitment to theatre and to feminist politics. *The Komagata Maru Incident* ostensibly reconsiders the historical event that occurred in 1914 in Vancouver when a boatload of Sikh immigrants was not allowed to disembark, yet Pollock's critique extends beyond that historical frame to consider broader issues of marginality within Canadian culture. Pollock investigates feminist issues through a historical lens, complicating our understanding of women's roles in relation to historical contexts, particularly how they contribute to, resist, and are undermined by the subjugation of minority groups. In *My Name is Lisbeth's* first production at Douglas College, Pollock played the character of Lizzie Borden, on which the play is based. Her examination of Lizzie's motives for murdering her parents hints at the social pressures that compelled America's most famous murderess to wield the axe against her father and stepmother. The play imaginatively explores the conflict between domestic obligation and personal liberty, using the infamous Lizzie Borden case as inspiration. Both plays encourage Canadians to review historical events from a more critical cultural perspective; however, they do so by exploiting stereotypical assumptions about actual historical incidents while depicting female characters in ways that complicate direct identification. Thus while they do offer a strong cultural critique in relation to accepted social history, their feminist content is obscured.

Sharon Pollock, Carol Bolt, Beverley Simons, and Aviva Ravel each responded to the contentious issue of women's liberation during the 1960s and '70s by writing plays that explore how women adapted to social and domestic role restrictions. During this critical period in the development of Canadian drama, each of these women critiqued the dominant culture by employing theatrical themes and forms in a way that helped change how

Canadians viewed the experience of personal, cultural, and national identity. That they did so by couching their feminist critique in various ways is a testament to their ingenuity at a time when feminist drama was bound to be met with a lukewarm, if not hostile, reception. Their early and undeniably “feminist” plays contributed in a significant way to the creation of a challenging contemporary Canadian dramatic aesthetic as well as to a distinctly female theatrical tradition.

I

Aviva Ravel: New Age, New Woman?

Aviva Ravel has captured those moments of despair that many will recognize when aspirations remain unrealized . . . frequent shifts from pathos to dramatic tension and to ironic comedy display a mastery of stagecraft and keep us constantly entertained, even as they probe the grimmer realities of disturbed lives.

Richard Perkyns, *Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre*

In 1979, Lois Gottlieb's review essay on the *Women Write for Theatre* publication argued, "The demand for women's plays . . . should echo Shaw's challenge that modern drama be representations of 'ourselves in our own situations.' Women's selves *have* changed, and so have our situations" (219). Despite Gottlieb's dismissal of the volume's success, she admits that some of the plays "suggest possibilities of a new dramatic perspective on women's lives" (214). One of the playwrights she singles out in this publication of winning entries from the *Women Write for Theatre* competition, which was held in 1975-76 and was "designed to introduce and integrate more women writers into Canadian Theatre" (qtd. in Gottlieb 214), was Montreal playwright Aviva Ravel.

Ravel's association with community theatre in Montreal began with her family's return from Israel in 1962 after 14 years at the Kibbutz Sasa in Galilee, where she had been active in community theatre. Ravel's third child was born that year and she began teaching elementary school in Montreal. In the early 1960s, she became a member of the Montreal Playwrights' Workshop and started writing plays. In 1968, she began training at the Actors' Studio, traveling back and forth to New York while raising her young children, a decidedly ambitious undertaking for a mother of three. Ravel acknowledges that she could not have done this without her husband's support: "Through this period, and throughout my career, the whole-hearted support of my late husband, Nahum Ravel, was indispensable" (Speech). This reflection on her husband's assistance, however, is interesting considering remarks she makes in this same article about the difficulties that accompanied her writing and acting careers. Ravel seems to suggest that her career could not be the sole focus of her attention and, to a certain extent, her family obligations interfered with her ambition: "I am often asked why I chose to be a playwright; the truth is I really wanted to be an actor, but

circumstances did not permit me to pursue studies in this direction, so the next best thing was writing, which could be accomplished between the laundry, cooking, raising four children, and teaching at an elementary school” (Speech).⁸ An important factor to note here is that Ravel’s involvement with theatre was inextricably linked to her difficulty with her own domestic position, and this underlines the importance of the theme of women’s roles in her work.

Through her husband, Nahum, who was General Manager of the Saidye Bronfman Centre from 1972 through 1982, Ravel had a close association with Jewish community theatre. Both *The Twisted Loaf* (1973) and *Dispossessed* (1977) premiered there, although former artistic director Muriel Gold says that Nahum Ravel insisted that his wife’s work be judged on its own merit.⁹ In her own recollections, Ravel is careful to suggest that a number of smaller theatres supported her work:

Miraculously, my first two one-act plays [*Good-bye* and *Arnold Had Two Wives*] were produced by a non-professional company, received good reviews in the press, were applauded by the audience, and the late Norma Springford became my mentor. Within ten years theatres such as the Saidye Bronfman Centre, Centre d'Art Canadien, Hart House Theatre, Revue Theatre, and CBC produced works such as *Soft Voices*, [*The*] *Twisted Loaf*, *Dispossessed*, *Shoulder Pads*, *Mendel Fish (Peddler of Fortuaie)*, and *No More Ketchup*. (Speech 1991)¹⁰

⁸ In his unpublished paper, “Reflections on the Plays of Aviva Ravel and the Anglo-Québécois Theatre,” Gregory J. Reid notes that Ravel “didn’t begin her writing career until she was in her late thirties. She was married at the age of 17 and has raised four children” (10).

⁹ This information was gathered through a personal interview I conducted with Muriel Gold on April 7, 2004.

¹⁰ *Soft Voices* was performed by the Centre d’Art Canadien in April 1966. *The Twisted Loaf* and *Dispossessed* were mounted at the Saidye Bronfman Centre in 1974 and 1976 respectively. *Shoulder Pads* was produced by

The association between Aviva Ravel and the Saidye Bronfman Centre, however, was essential to the development of Ravel's oeuvre, particularly in relation to how she addressed the unique perspective of Jewish women.

The Saidye Bronfman Centre theatre was an important venue for the Jewish community in Montreal. The centre was opened in September 1967 as a gift to the community from philanthropist Samuel Bronfman in honour of his mother's 70th birthday. It included galleries, studios, and a 230-seat theatre. The theatre's first artistic director was Marion André, who emphasized contemporary works in the classical theatre repertoire including those by Brecht, Orton, and Fugard. After Nahum Ravel took over as general manager of the center for the 1972-73 season, with Muriel Gold as artistic director, the focus of productions was altered slightly. Gold increased subscriptions by bringing in plays that had more definite entertainment appeal, but she also instituted a policy whereby she would produce Canadian work alongside international plays and productions that dealt with Jewish themes. This undoubtedly contributed to the centre's decision to produce Ravel's plays, which addressed both recent Jewish history and more contemporary community concerns about family, memory, and the past.

Most of Ravel's plays reflect complicated relationships among family members, including couples, and many are set in the Jewish community in Montreal. Of these early works, she says, "The plays . . . were informed by social issues such as feminism, the plight of the factory worker, family relationships, and social values" (Speech). *Good-bye* (1965), *The Tuesday Games* (1966), *Arnold Had Two Wives* (1967), and *The Adventures of Mendel Fish* (1967) investigate these issues from varying perspectives. For example, in *Arnold Had*

CBC television in May 1966. *Mendel Fish* was performed by Hart House Theatre in 1967. *No More Ketchup* was mounted by Revue Theatre in Montreal in 1969.

Two Wives, Ravel explores polygamy and its impact on individuals and their relationships with each other in everyday domestic interactions. *Mendel Fish* is a folktale of a stranger's impact on a small-town community. Her first play to be professionally produced was *Soft Voices*. Later, *Shoulder Pads* (1966), *Our Bed is Green* (1969), *No More Ketchup* (1969), and *The Twisted Loaf* (1970) were mounted. Each of these plays addresses the ways family and domestic situations both support and curtail women's personal development and expression. *Our Bed is Green*, for instance, explores the experience of kibbutz workers, but it also includes a graphic rape scene. Ravel's early plays also reflect an interest in absurdist drama; for example, *No More Ketchup*, ostensibly a play about family life, is composed of staccato, improbable dialogue that reinforces the ridiculousness of a materialist culture obsessed with conveniences such as bottled ketchup. *Dispossessed*, a poetic verse drama that is perhaps the culmination of these stylistic and thematic explorations, premiered at the Saidye Bronfman Centre in 1977, directed by Sean Mulcahy, and is arguably the most successful of Ravel's early plays.

Despite her interest in women's relationships within the family, Ravel's feminist vision is conflicted. Her plays suggest that women have to define themselves independently of any ideology that would restrict their freedom, and they demonstrate the multiplicity of female experience. She imagines the space of identity as open to constant revision and argues against closure and essentialism by leaving her audience with open-ended problems that require some form of emotional resolution. Ravel's endings often leave her audience anxious and frustrated, however, forced to deal with devastating outcomes that they could not have anticipated. Her work also interrogates gender roles in a less than overt way. Her characters and themes are often ambiguous, which sometimes makes it difficult to assess her feminist intent. In fact, Ravel often disavowed a politicized feminist agenda, telling Patricia Morley in

an interview published in *Canadian Drama* in 1979, “I’m very concerned about women’s roles as parent, mate, independent contributor to society. But I never think of myself as a feminist” (180). Later in the interview, Ravel suggests that feminism imposes restrictions on women: “One of the problems with the feminist movement is that women who are at home raising families feel terribly *guilty*, that they’re not professors, politicians, running companies, going to board meetings, and wearing elegant clothes” (180). While this statement reveals a degree of self-defensiveness, it also illustrates Ravel’s resistance to the idea that women should conform to a socially dictated role, whether it be domestic or corporate.

Despite her discomfort with being labeled a feminist writer, Ravel’s plays reflect the emerging feminist beliefs of the 1960s and ’70s women’s liberation movement. As outlined in the introduction, during the 1960s and ’70s a number of influential feminist texts, such as the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953), Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1967), and Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971), contributed to an increased social awareness of women’s history, issues, artistic production, and social roles. In response to these galvanizing feminist texts, many women in Canada became more thoroughly politicized. Gloria Steinem’s work published in *Ms. Magazine* was also influential, as was her image as an attractive, intelligent leader of the women’s movement. In her 1979 interview with Morley, Ravel reluctantly acknowledges some of these influences, but claims that her own explorations of feminist values preceded her awareness of influential feminist thought:

I wrote “Soft Voices” in 1965, it was produced in 1966, and, if you recall, the feminist movement didn’t become widespread until several years later . . .

Gloria Steinem, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett and that crowd, it was all in the seventies. I just saw things happening, so I wrote about them. It was probably an expression of my own conflict at the time; I had three small children and was typing that play on the balcony while they played. I never felt guilty about teaching; it was a sure way of earning a living. But I did feel guilty about writing, because I thought at first it was an indulgence. (180)

Ravel's comments suggest that although she was aware of feminist critiques, her plays reflected her immediate circumstances, including her own artistic ambitions and frustrations. Ravel's work, like that of other female playwrights of her generation, reflected both her own personal experiences and the tenor of her time.

Ravel's plays are thus *feminist* in the broadest sense of the word. Rather than advocating institutional or social change, her early feminist plays focus on women as conflicted characters in compromised circumstances.¹¹ Her female characters reflect critically on their own experiences in a way that calls attention to the restrictions of their social circumstances and exposes gender oppression as destructive. However, it is intriguing to see how Ravel, writing during a period of intense social upheaval, uses various strategies to mask her provocative social critique of gender roles.

The critical response to Ravel's work has often obscured the fact that she was operating strategically in relation to dominant values, both in terms of Canadian theatre and Canadian society. The critical reception of her work, however, has changed through time, especially as a result of recent feminist criticism. A 1991 study by Yvonne Hodkinson entitled *Female Parts: The Art and Politics of Female Playwrights* recognizes the powerful

¹¹ Here I would include *Soft Voices* (1966), *The Twisted Loaf* (1973), *Dispossessed* (1976), and *Listen I'm Talking* (1978).

feminist message of Ravel's work, arguing that her play *The Twisted Loaf*, along with the work of other prominent female playwrights, dramatized "Canadian cultural mythology from the standpoint of the female imagination" (1). Two recent theses, Evelyn Walters' *Images of Women by Female Playwrights in English Canadian Drama* (1990) and Marlene van Luven's *Charting the Territory: A Study of Feminism in English Canadian Drama from 1967-1991* (1991), also discuss Ravel's work in relation to feminism. However, many critical analyses have downplayed the provocative feminist content of Ravel's drama, even though her plays present a powerful critique of the restrictions of women's social roles and emphasize the necessity for social, political, and cultural change.

The complexity of the relationships and the ambiguous themes and characterization in Ravel's work illustrate the complicated psychological experiences of women who are forced to adapt to new social and cultural contexts and powerfully depict the tension between personal and social identity. As Ravel stated in her interview with Morley, "I think that society evolved the feminist movement, not the other way round. Society *needs* women's contributions at this point" (182). Ravel's work argues for the inclusion of women's perspectives and simultaneously offers insight into women's experience in relation to their specific cultural communities in a way that questions the restrictions and limitations imposed on women in the family and in relation to broader Canadian society.

One of the primary ways that Ravel does critiques the curtailment of women's experience is by exploring how women enact gender roles and how debilitating this process can be. Many feminist writers of this period, such as de Beauvoir and Friedan, undertook this type of radical critique. In the mid-1970s, when Ravel was working on *Dispossessed*, there had been a consolidation of the women's liberation movement. *Dispossessed* reflects this expanded feminist awareness, including the more radical feminist writing of Millett, but also

expresses a profound sense of despair. The authors of *Feminist Organizing for Change* explain that in the 1970s, feminists in Canada tried to “establish a broader and more public character” for the women’s movement, which involved coalition building. As the authors explain, “In the late 1970s through the mid-1980s the women’s movement was engaged in the important process of moving beyond a white middle-class viewpoint and attempting to open itself up to represent the concerns of all women” (79). In particular, this process involved addressing the interests of minority women, those who are considered abject because of their status in relation to mainstream Canadian society. In *Dispossessed* in particular, Ravel focuses on the experience of an immigrant woman in Canadian society and addresses broader issues of social exclusion and emotional alienation. As I will demonstrate below, the evidence that emerges from research into Ravel’s oeuvre, particularly the plays under discussion here, provides a sense of how her voice evolved and the conditions that contributed to the development of her feminist vision.

Soft Voices: Conflicted Feminisms

Soft Voices is an important early play because it is set in Montreal, but not specifically in a Jewish community or family. Instead, it looks at two women negotiating mid-life and attempting to reconcile themselves to the choices they have made in relation to their careers and families. *Soft Voices* focuses on Carol, a successful career woman who has left her husband and two children and moved into a bachelor apartment, where one evening she entertains an old childhood friend, Toby, a woman who lives a more traditional life as a homemaker. The play examines women’s roles in terms of traditional family values and a changing cultural landscape. It illustrates the conflict that women feel in relation to social expectations of their role and place. Ravel suggests that it is difficult for women to assert

their own desires and ambitions in a culture that generally promotes male standards of individualism and achievement and yet acknowledges women solely for their support of men and children and not for their own individual talents. Carol is a successful journalist and yet she is also depicted as an outcast because she was unable to fulfill her traditional role as wife and mother. Moreover, the play's feminist message is present not only in its critique of the feminine role, but also in the dramatic form itself, both in terms of the play's making women's issues central and in terms of its parody of plays that addressed women's emancipation, such as *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*.

Marlene van Luven observes how "[i]n the most basic sense [t]he woman playwright, by virtue of her public pursuit of a 'platform' for her ideas, is exploding myths about the confinement of acceptable female roles to the domestic realm" (14). *Soft Voices* explores the concept of female liberation by illustrating how women perform roles at the same time that it positions women onstage as the subject of community attention, attempting to learn from memory, and incapacitated by an identity conflict that arises as a result of differences between their personal ambitions and their social roles and context. Ravel uses the theatre space to stage women's domestic space, revealing what is traditionally an interior world, and exposing it as a space where women's identity can be reconstructed and re-visioned. The ambiguity of the play's ending reinforces the fact that the process of liberation is fraught with pain and is potentially debilitating. It illustrates the artificiality of the feminine role and the tragic consequences of conforming to it.

The conversations between Carol and Toby in *Soft Voices* address many of these concerns and illustrate how attuned Ravel was to cultural currents, particularly those of the women's liberation movement. Ravel explores both Toby's naïve adoption of her role as model wife and the resulting sense of unreality she experiences. In contrast, she depicts

Carol's rebellious refusal to act as the dominant culture insists she does and the dire consequences of her choice not to conform to social expectations. The tension created by these two equally unbearable options forces the play's audience into an engagement with the text's dialectic.

From the beginning of the play, it is obvious that Carol is struggling with notions of femininity and independence. Carol herself is a clear illustration of Riviere's theory of masquerade, for the play opens with her telling her friend about an ambassador picking her up at the opera. She entices Toby with tales of her glamorous single life, yet appears increasingly anxious for Toby's attention and refuses to let her leave the apartment. Carol's single life has apparently resulted in her status as outcast; she is alienated from her family, she has contempt for her lovers, and is emotionally isolated from a female community. When Toby finally says, "For heaven's sake, I have to go," Carol's response underlines her frustration with her friend and the restrictions she abides by, but also highlights Carol's own desperate need for control: "Oh, I understand. It must be dear Henry. He won't find you at home and he'll wonder where his Toby has been all afternoon. We don't want to upset Henry, do we?" (40). Carol's controlling behaviour is ominous and reflects her deep-seated anxiety about her independence. Stage directions describe her taking Toby's purse from her, "trying to entice her to stay," "pursuing her" (40). Eventually, having succeeded in convincing Toby to stay, Carol chastises her for her deference to her husband: "You're so feminine, you make me sick" (53). When Toby turns on her, Carol tempers her criticism, acknowledging that it is not Toby herself who is responsible, "It's the whole damn system . . ." (53).

Carol's words both acknowledge and condemn the construction of feminine identity, yet she also recognizes that women are responsible for conforming to these expectations and

hectors Toby for buying into conventional values: “You silly brainwashed dunce. Their propaganda has really got into you” (48). Carol’s words emphasize that it is the social system/patriarchal culture that is intent on manipulating women, yet ironically, her behaviour reveals her to be both controlling and manipulative in relation to Toby. Carol is an unreliable character; however, despite her bizarre behaviour, she seems to exert a compelling influence over her childhood friend. Eventually, Toby admits that she is jealous of Carol and confesses that she acts out her life according to a media script:

You won’t believe this ... but I **play** housewife. **I am** the ladies in the women’s magazines, the soap operas. I wear a pretty starched apron, I decorate my home, I pack lunches for the cubs ... and I think that soon the producers will pay me for my appearance and I’ll go home ... but I have no other home. (53) [bold and ellipses in original]

These lines are remarkable because they illustrate the extent to which Toby is following a script dictated by magazine and television media, which reinforces the impact of external advertising and systematic manipulation. Indeed, the passage echoes Friedan’s critique of the feminine mystique, for it reinforces her central thesis that the female domestic role was an artificial and destructive construct promoted by media images and advertising:

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. . . . Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers;

their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. (18)

Ravel depicts both Carol and Toby as dissatisfied with their career and personal choices. Both women are performing roles that have little to do with their desires, which remain inchoate and unarticulated. Much like Friedan's "problem that has no name," Toby and Carol, though in different stages of awareness, echo the helplessness of women attempting to conform to the cultural conditioning described by Friedan:

Sometimes a woman would tell me that the feeling gets so strong she runs out of the house and walks through the streets. Or she stays inside her house and cries. Or her children tell her a joke, and she doesn't laugh because she doesn't hear it. I talked to women who had spent years on the analyst's couch, worked out their "adjustment to the feminine role," their blocks to "fulfillment as a wife and mother." But the desperate tone in these women's voices, and the look in their eyes, was the same as the tone and the look of other women, who were sure they had no problem, even though they did have a strange feeling of desperation. (21)

Like the women that Friedan describes, both Toby and Carol find their "feminine roles" untenable, even though they express their discontent in different ways. Much like the women in Friedan's anecdote, Carol runs out of the house and walks the streets, while Toby stays inside her house and cries. Both choices, Ravel insists, are undesirable. However, she leaves the audience to speculate about what other options may exist for women caught between these two extremes. The ambiguity of Ravel's message, combined with the ambiguity of Carol's character, reinforces the unease that women experienced in relation to femininity and independence.

Ravel emphasizes this sense of anxiety about gender roles by using a metatheatrical approach. Having Carol and Toby act out various family roles on a stage that visually encloses them in a sterile domestic space, Ravel reinforces the social construction of female space and visually depicts its boundaries. The stage directions preceding the opening action stress that while the apartment “resembles thousands of others like it . . . on closer examination one sees an unreal quality about the room – as though the present surroundings were part of another sphere of reality” (38). Carol’s apartment is thus figured as an expressionistic space where the two characters confront the audience, memory, and each other. It is a place teeming with symbols of childhood and it foreshadows Carol’s regression into the past that occurs at the end of the play. Throughout the play, Carol and Toby enact roles depicting their younger selves and important people in their lives. Their memories are brought to life and their reminiscences are staged for each other and the audience, which illustrates their experiences and the limitations of their agency in a strikingly visceral way. Their resistance to restriction takes place in a public space that interrogates private and personal life and metaphorically depicts the personal as the political.

One of the ways Ravel makes her audience aware of her characters’ dilemma is to have her characters enact the performative nature of gender roles. She does this by employing metadramatic elements. In “Feminism and Metadrama: Role-Playing in *Blood Relations*,” Susan Stratton discusses the relationship between feminism and metadrama and argues that while feminist theatre often shows women negotiating social roles, metadrama also explores theatrical conventions. She defines metadramas as “those plays about drama and theatre that examine the conventions – the language of dramatic representation itself” (69). Stratton proposes that “feminism and metadrama intersect in the role-playing of Sharon Pollock’s *Blood Relations*” (68). Similarly, in Ravel’s *Soft Voices*, the theatrical role-playing

of her characters underlines their social performance of role and its artificiality. Ravel's form, calling attention to the performances that both Carol and Toby engage in, both in terms of constructing their identities for each other, and reconfiguring the past, reveals that these two women are, in essence, consummate actors, with the ability to adapt to social constraints, to be critical about their past, and potentially to imagine a more dynamic future.

Throughout the play Carol and Toby regress into fraught memories from their pasts. At one point, in an ironic reversal of theatrical convention, Toby, taking on the role of Carol's husband, voices a sentiment that reinforces Carol's failure to accept the fulfillment of the feminine mystique: "Our mothers look back on the days when their children were young as the nicest time of all" (49). Carol's reply, as herself in her marriage, is coloured with negative adjectives, and highlights the disgust she feels for the conventional obligations and physical demands associated with motherhood: "Our mothers were stupid and old-fashioned. Down with swollen bellies and varicose veins. Down with nursing and bottles and wasting precious hours pushing a stroller in the park! I want to live!" (49). Carol is apparently repelled by the notion of the maternal body and she abjects it, regarding the physical demands of child-bearing and -rearing as restrictive and unfulfilling, thus distancing herself from a role she found stifling. Carol's condemnation of the domestic role and her assertion of a desire for emotional and economic freedom in response to her "husband's" admonishment reinforce assertions of women's right to create an independent life outside the home while graphically illustrating how demands placed on women can result in resentment and rebellion. This sentiment echoes Friedan's assertion that the identity crisis associated with women's discontent is related to a drive to participate in life at all levels: "I think this is the crisis of women growing up – a turning point from an immaturity that has been called femininity to full human identity. I think women had to suffer the crisis of identity, which

began a hundred years ago, and have to suffer it still today, simply to become fully human” (79). Carol’s attempt to express her freedom reflects these concepts. She is attempting to live independently and experience full human identity, yet this ideal is difficult to realize. Carol’s shifting responses and roles throughout the play also illustrate the way that feminine roles and attitudes are “performed” and emphasize the artificiality and limitations of these constructions. Carol’s failed attempt at independence contributes to the ambiguity of Ravel’s message, yet her struggle with her identity firmly reinforces feminist concerns.

What is most striking about the play is its ending. The ambiguity of the play’s final scene obscures its message and prevents a straightforward reading of its feminist intent. This ambiguity ultimately allows the strongly feminist dialogue and depictions throughout the play to remain unresolved, forcing the audience into an active role in relation to the play’s interrogation of women’s roles. In many ways, the play’s conclusion recalls the ending of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. At the conclusion of *Soft Voices* the timid housewife, Toby, walks out of the home, closing the door on Carol, leaving behind the pressure of her domineering influence, yet possibly inspired by Carol to find her own freedom. In *A Doll’s House*, Nora leaves Helmer to find her own way in the world after it becomes clear that their marriage is not one between equals. When Helmer suggests to Nora, “First and foremost you are a wife and a mother,” she replies, “I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, like you – or, anyway, that I must try and become one” (Barnet 424). At the conclusion of the play the disdascalia describe Torvald contemplating the concept of a true “marriage” before “The street door is slammed shut downstairs” (425).

But what are we to make of Carol? Is she, analogous to Miller’s everyman Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, a representative of the Canadian everywoman, caught up in the hype of women’s liberation, but succumbing to despair when it fails to confer its

promised rewards? After an evening of reminiscences, during which Carol seems obsessively fixated on finding an ally in Toby, the play ends with Carol in a state of psychic distress.

Carol's descent into madness at the end of the play is evident in her creation of a funeral pyre out of the magazines and childhood memorabilia she has collected, including Toby's "Lady in Red" dress, which she clutches possessively and regards as a symbol of Toby's love. Carol asks Toby to "[s]et a match to this heap of rags and let it rise in flame. And I shall leap into the fire and set myself free" (63). Just prior to this announcement, however, she contradicts much of her earlier assertions of independence and self-determination, regressing to her childhood fixation with the poet Shelley and confessing, "A new age . . . made a monster out of me and left my Shelley alone and lost. I breathe fumes instead of mountain flowers. I'm intoxicated with my prowess. I am the new woman, and I destroy everything I touch" (63). Carol tells Toby to go home and after Toby "runs out," Carol stands over the heap of articles, picks up Toby's red dress and drops it in the toy box. Quoting Shelley yet again, she intones, "The lone and level sands stretch far way" (63). The didascalia indicate that music and sounds of children's voices grow louder, reinforcing Carol's flight into an imaginative realm. Carol's final words and actions reinforce her conflicted feminist values. While apparently admitting her guilt to Toby and preparing a theatrical suicide, the play ends with Carol returning Toby's dress to her toy box, lost in reverie. It is not clear whether she recognizes that Toby's love is lost to her and is despondent and determined to commit suicide alone, or whether she has abandoned her plan to commit suicide and instead resolves to find solace once again in her imagination. Certainly, the play suggests Carol's mental deterioration and defeat, and yet she is not destroyed. Indeed, her admission, "I am the new woman, and I destroy everything I touch," reinforces her experience of role frustration and her incapacity to deal with her newfound

power. She is unable, ultimately, to be truly free, because her self-assertion apparently drives the people she loves, including Toby, away from her. However, at the end of the play Carol remains defiantly alone by choice, having dismissed Toby and her offers of assistance. Her disapproval of Toby's conventional femininity and her assertion of her own independence allow the play to be read as both a condemnation and an assertion of feminist values. The ambiguity of this conclusion presents a vexed feminist vision that reinforces the fact that the issue of women's liberation and desire is not easily resolved.

Two points emerge at the play's conclusion. The first is that the memories that Carol and Toby revived *have* caused them to realize the incongruity of their desires and their actual experience. They both begin to see more clearly how their roles as wives, mothers, and lovers have compromised their personal goals and ambitions. The process of re-visioning their past experience has raised their awareness of the limitations imposed on them by their cultural conditioning. Ravel suggests that both women have sacrificed their human needs for self-development and fulfillment for the sake of others. Only through memory, revisiting and re-evaluating the past, she suggests, can women learn to make sounder choices for themselves. But there is also a danger associated with this process. Even with awareness, the obstacles to their achievement of personal freedom will be too great for them to bear. This is connected to the second point. The ambiguous ending seems to reinforce the dangers of feminist independence, suggesting that women who take up a feminist mantle and refuse to assume conventional female roles are doomed to experience mental deterioration and social marginalization. Despite the fact that Ravel depicts both Carol and Toby as unhappy and unfulfilled, Carol's transgression of gender stereotypes does not succeed. Carol is depicted as a literal madwoman, decidedly abject, especially in light of her ambiguous sexuality, even though she articulates a legitimate critique of dominant social values. While much of the

play protests the restrictions of gender roles, the playwright ultimately concedes it is potentially debilitating for women to transgress social codes of behaviour.

While contemporary feminists may find this an unacceptable message because it seems to endorse women's powerlessness and victimization, and punishes the woman who transgresses social expectations, there is no doubt that it reflects an ambivalence about roles and consequences that has been observed in the work of many other Canadian playwrights of this time. Marlene van Luven, writing about Canadian drama, says, "In order to explore women's opportunities for freedom, playwrights often delineate society's current constraints upon them. It is therefore a mistake to assume that feminist drama must present only happy stories about strong, successful women's behaviour or achievements" (17). In her study of images of women in Canadian drama, Evelyn Walters notes that "the strong subversive element . . . together with disapproval of the traditional woman, lends to [many of the works in her study] a political commitment which may not at first be apparent" (ix). This depiction of women operating under constraint is also apparent in the work of other female writers and artists, including performance artists, working during the 1960s and '70s. Jeanie Forte's article, "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism," for example, observes that women's performance art during the 1960s and 70s was often violent and disturbing as "women used performance as a deconstructive strategy to demonstrate the objectification of women and its results" (252). The reason why Ravel illustrated the potentially negative consequences of feminist rebellion may have been to emphasize the identity crisis that many women experienced as a result of outmoded social expectations and to demonstrate the social cost of maintaining them. As Leavitt points out, a large number of plays by women focus on women's identity and interrogate it through violence:

The heroine is dissatisfied, angry, confused and on the brink of

some new awareness about herself and her role as a woman. The dramatic conflict arises out of how she will react to and solve her dilemma. . . . Whatever her function in the play, the woman acts according to her own desires, dreams and motivations and not out of stereotyped perceptions of what a woman should do or be. (97)

Both Carol and Toby explore their desires in *Soft Voices* in unexpected ways; Carol expresses her grief and anger throughout the play and seduces Toby into similar confessions of dissatisfaction and longing. The end result of their meeting, however, is that Toby abandons Carol, who appears entirely incapacitated by her realization that she is, ultimately, alone. The audience is left to consider the fate of both women and the options both will have as a result of their new awareness of their frustrated ambition and the limitations that they have experienced performing their roles as wives and mothers.

***Soft Voices*: Critical Reception**

The critical reception of *Soft Voices* reveals how disturbing its feminist message was to audiences of the time and how critics often dismissed the legitimacy of its feminist critique. The journalists and producers who viewed the play in the 1960s either chose to ignore its feminist message, or dismissed its validity. They did so in a number of ways: by deeming the play irrelevant, by stressing its more universal theme of lost innocence, by portraying the characters as lacking in credibility, and by claiming that the play did not conform to genre expectations. *Soft Voices* premiered at the Théâtre de la Place in Montreal on April 12, 1966. It was performed by a French company, the Centre d'Art Canadien, as its only English offering that season, and, perhaps because of this, several of the Montreal newspapers, including the French language *La Presse* and *Metro-Express*, carried reviews of

the play. While the reviews of the Montreal drama critics are positive, they also illustrate the press's reluctance to acknowledge feminist concerns. Interestingly, the response of the English reviewers was quite different from that of the French reviewers.

French language critics Martial Dassylva and François Beaulieu regard Carol's emotional distress as an important part of the play. They also stress the play's universal theme of lost innocence. Both of their reviews acknowledge the feminist content, but dismiss its significance. While they resist the play's feminist theme, they seem more accepting of its "experimental" form and controversial ending. They also both address Carol's madness, an integral part of the play's feminist critique.

In his review for *La Presse*, Dassylva begins by asking, "Qu'arrive-t-il lorsqu'on se laisse reprendre par les 'douces voix' d'une enfance trop vite envolée? On risque de succomber sous le poids des jours qui s'accumulent, de la solitude qui gagne du terrain; on risque de voir avec trop d'évidence la précarité d'une vie qu'on avait voulue libre, émancipée, pleine."¹² Dassylva's review, through the rhetorical device of questioning his readers about their lives by evoking the play's theme, fully identifies with Carol's dilemma of being disillusioned with her life. He observes that before the play opens, we realize that Carol is "désemparée" (distraught) and that she needs to prove herself and validate her choice to be independent. However, he suggests that Carol fails at her own game and that her flight into the past with Toby is dangerous because it revives profound unconscious elements that threaten her emotional stability. Dassylva argues that while Toby finally comes to her senses regarding her past life, Carol is worse off than before her imaginative retreat into the

¹² "What would happen if we were to listen to the soft voices of childhood that have too quickly flown away? We would likely succumb to the weight of accumulated days, to increasing loneliness, and risk seeing too much evidence of the precariousness of a life that we had wanted to be free, emancipated, and full." NB: All translations of French-language reviews are my own.

past and all that is left for her to do is to escape into madness: “Il ne lui reste plus qu’à avaler les somnifères qui la libéreront définitivement.”¹³ His interpretation of the play suggests that Carol’s decision to become independent has destroyed her sanity and that she has no way out. While he observes that Carol is playing a “game,” he fails to see that her actions and retreats into representations and memory are significant.

Despite the limitations of Dassylva’s reading, his review does offer a number of sensitive insights into the play. He identifies Carol’s dilemma as a universal one: he regards her as an individual who longs to return to a past where her hopes and aspirations were simpler and more accessible. He calls Ravel an original talent and praises the intensely personal and “feminine” way of articulating herself in a style reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield. Dassylva’s review also recognizes that Carol wanted to prove that she was more than a “domestic animal” and that she became a celebrity writer with a large following. He acknowledges that this controversial character is struggling to justify her choice to leave her husband and three children and that this experience evokes memories of the childhood she spent with Toby, before their dreams were destroyed. Yet, while Dassylva identifies Carol’s personal challenge, he does not regard it as having anything to do with female subjectivity. He ignores the fact that Carol’s attempt to be free reflects an emerging feminist consciousness about women’s marginalization. He stresses that Ravel’s work reflects universal concerns related to an individual’s drive for freedom and self-definition, but ignores the feminist critique of the specific restrictions placed on women.

François Beaulieu’s review in the *Metro-Express*, “Les douces voix (*Soft voices*) d’Aviva Ravel au théâtre de la Place,” is less appreciative. He writes, “Les caractères trop extrémistes de chacune des femmes; nous empêchent de saisir les nuances de ces êtres à la

¹³ “She has no option but to swallow the sleeping pill that will release her permanently.”

recherche du bonheur. Toby est trop une femme modèle, et Carol trop naïvement à son opposé.”¹⁴ Beaulieu argues that the characters seem too artificially polarized, which in effect dismisses the content of Ravel’s critique because the characters do not conform to conventional expectations of women. In this case, Beaulieu suggests that the characters are not “realistic” depictions of women. Because they are extreme types, he says that the play’s message, which he also concludes is about the search for personal happiness, is lost. What he is reluctant to accept, it seems, is that Toby, the model wife, is simply enacting a restrictive social role, one that is imposed from without and that causes her to question her own identity. In defying this limiting stereotype, the character of Carol may appear extreme, or “mad,” yet she is also sexually and emotionally vulnerable; in effect, she is shown to be performing identity in a strategic way, but this role-playing is also an attempt to define herself in relation to dominant expectations that restrict her individual freedom and agency.

Beaulieu also resists the didacticism of the play: “Les arguments des deux antagonistes ressemblent parfois à des revendications de suffragettes. La liberté, ou plutôt le bonheur, n’est pas nécessairement dans l’affranchissement de la femme.”¹⁵ He identifies the political nature of the arguments that the characters make, but believes that this weakens the play. Moreover, his comments on the notion of female emancipation minimize its validity. While his comments correctly identify Carol’s direct and precise diction, peppered with obscenities and slogan-like statements, they fail to recognize the subtle interaction between Carol and Toby that underscores the problematic nature of a woman’s personal freedom. For example, Toby’s use of language is more elusive and her word choices conventional, in

¹⁴ “The characters are too extreme, preventing us from seizing the nuances of these women in their search for happiness. Toby is too much a model woman, and Carol is too naively depicted as her opposite.”

¹⁵ “The arguments of both antagonists sometimes resemble the claims of suffragettes. Freedom, or rather happiness, is not necessarily in the emancipation of women.”

keeping with her politesse, and she is not really partaking in Carol's argument; rather, she resists Carol's politicized speeches and parrots conventional sentiments that attempt to curtail Carol's arguments, such as when she says, "You're not normal. I don't care if you are the famous Caroline Fitzgerald. You frighten me. You're not like any woman I know!" (53). The play is not as didactic and one-sided as Beaulieu suggests, and his dismissal of its critique refuses to engage with the subtlety of Ravel's argument about how feminism affects women and their roles in the family and society. Ravel's play illustrates how difficult it is for women to redefine themselves in relation to feminist ideology. Carol is a figure who rejects the conventional expectations of women to be good wives and mothers, yet she is unable to sustain an independent life. Even the validity of her social critique is undermined by her sense of outrage, disenfranchisement and, ultimately, helplessness.

Beaulieu compares the play to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which he says played for a long period of time in Montreal, saying it "raconte si fortement cette affrontement de deux êtres, ce déchirement cruel, que les femmes en colère d'Aviva Ravel nous semblent des reflects pâlis de l'exploration de l'âme humaine."¹⁶ His comparison denies the context of Ravel's work, measuring it against a powerful canonical piece of the American theatre that critiques marriage from a far more conventional perspective. The irony is that Ravel's play explores what could happen should a wife like Albee's Honey pick up and leave her conflicted marriage.

Much like Dassylva, Beaulieu regards the idea of the lost dreams of childhood as the primary interest of the play: "Et l'aspect le plus intéressant du spectacle, demeure justement ces 'voix douces' de leur enfance, qui reviennent comme une grande nostalgie, leur rappeler

¹⁶ "[It] so strongly depicts the cruel confrontations between two beings, that Aviva Ravel's angry women are a pale reflection of the exploration of the human heart."

l'absurdité de ce qu'elles sont devenues."¹⁷ Again, Beaulieu, like Dassylva, does not seem to see that the contrast between what the two characters have become and their dreams is in any way linked to the fact that they are women, nor does he notice that the form of the play is a metacommentary that investigates women's roles through its metatheatrical devices, such as Carol's dramatic enactments within the play.

In contrast to these French reviews, which acknowledge the play's universality, Sydney Johnson of the *Montreal Star* and Zelda Heller of the *Montreal Gazette* both denounced the play, particularly because of its ambiguous feminism. Johnson begins his review of *Soft Voices* on an extremely dismissive note: "It is a women's play. A play about women for women." While he praises the production's set, staging, and acting, he is dubious about its relevance: "If it can attract an audience of women – preferably married women of at least fifteen years marital experience – it stands a chance of becoming a solid success. But it is not a man's play – at any rate, not this man's play." Johnson spends most of his review condemning the play's message, and yet shies away from directly identifying that message:

For me it is not a play at all. It is for the most part a monologue in which the author spins every known cliché about the merits of suburban married life with husband and children when contrasted with the glamorous but lonely life of the successful career woman. By the time the play has been going for fifteen minutes you know which side the author is going to come down on, just as surely as if you were reading the story in the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Nowhere in Johnson's review does he actually say which side Ravel is on; however, he implies that Ravel "comes down" on the side of the suburban married woman (his remarks

¹⁷ "And the most interesting aspect of the piece remains precisely these 'soft voices' of their childhoods, which return like a great nostalgia, to reveal the absurdity of what they have become."

about *Ladies' Home Journal* also provide interesting corroboration for Friedan's thesis). He ends his article with a statement that reiterates his initial dismissal of the play: "I admired the acting and the production immensely, but I have to confess that the play had nothing to say to me." Johnson's dismissal of Ravel's work and his refusal to evaluate the play's feminist protest, even though he calls it a "women's play," reveal the challenges that Ravel faced when attempting to stage a critique of prevailing cultural norms.

While Heller's review in the *Montreal Gazette*, "Aviva Ravel's Voices Speak Softly," acknowledges the play's feminist theme, it does so in a cursory way that minimizes its impact by contextualizing it in a highly conventional way. Ironically, it is a female reviewer who calls attention to the actresses' appearances, without fully acknowledging their words:

The bright, attractive blond actresses, who make up the play's entire cast, move with ease on stage and speak as if they understood and meant their lines. The loosely organized lines they speak revolve about the much publicized dilemma of modern woman. Carol, the liberated man-rivaling woman, lives alone, miserable in her liberty. Toby, the mother-housewife, is only too ready to flee from her house, husband, children and all.

Heller also criticizes the play's form: "The play proceeds largely verbally. And the words seem to go around and around, over and over in circles of clichés...." Like Johnson, Heller shies away from addressing the play's ambiguous ending, criticizing the triteness of the text without addressing the validity of its cultural critique: "But by the end of the play the problem seems to lie not so much with the women as with the text." Her review also reveals her rather conventional expectations of theatre (in terms of theme and form) and seems to

indicate a bias against feminism because of her patronizing description of “the liberated man-rivaling” Carol. Interestingly, neither she nor Johnson mentions Carol’s madness, which completely obscures this prominent feature of Ravel’s feminist drama.

Both English critics assume that the intent of *Soft Voices* is obvious, but they both seem to miss Ravel’s point. Her play is not a straightforward denunciation of feminism, nor is it a whole-hearted endorsement of women’s liberation. It is a problematic representation of the difficulty that women have negotiating gender roles that are being challenged and redefined in a culture that is undergoing a similar process of change.

All of these reviews reveal that, at the time of its initial stage production, the play was not regarded as promoting a feminist message. Instead, both sets of reviewers downplayed the characters’ struggles with social role adjustment. The French-language critics promoted the important “universal” message of failed ambition, acknowledging it as having a certain measure of aesthetic value, yet avoiding a discussion of how this experience related to the specifics of women’s social position. The critics did not pay particular attention to Ravel’s experiments with form that fused role-playing regressions and memory sequences with symbolic setting and properties, elements which, viewed from a contemporary feminist perspective, call attention to the performative aspects of contemporary women’s lives.

The feedback Ravel received from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in relation to *Soft Voices*¹⁸ focused more directly on the play’s structural failings and both characters’ weaknesses. After the initial production of *Soft Voices*, Ravel was determined to have the play produced not only in theatre venues in Montreal, but also through programs like CBC television. During the 1960s she wrote repeatedly to CBC producers in both Montreal and

¹⁸ The correspondence pertaining to the CBC production of *Soft Voices* is held in the Aviva Ravel archives at the Jewish Public Library Archive in Montreal.

Toronto and attempted to interest them in the piece. While *Soft Voices* was read and considered for production, she received comments that illustrate how uncomfortable some CBC producers were with the play and with the relationship between Carol and Toby. In a letter dated August 25, 1965, producer Robina Richardson wrote that she found the idea of the play *Soft Voices* and the character of Carol intriguing, but added, “I must say I got bored half-way through and at times very confused about Toby.” While Richardson does not elaborate on why she felt this way, she includes in her letter the comments provided by one of her story editors:

He, as I did, found the idea fascinating and Carol a terrific character except he felt she was too obvious in what she was doing – that Toby would have walked out on her right at the beginning.

Richardson also included some of the story editor’s notes, which also highlight his feelings of unease regarding the relationship between Carol and Toby: “We are embarrassed a bit by the force of Carol’s problem,” he writes, “Toby is much too easily taken in – especially when Carol is such an obviously disturbed woman.” The letter illustrates the extent to which the CBC producers were discomfited by the social implications of Ravel’s work. The use of the word “problem” also calls to mind Friedan’s phrase “the problem with no name.” Carol’s “problem,” as the story editor refers to it, suggests that the topics of female independence, desire, and madness were considered too taboo to mention by name.

Although Richardson considers the play “fascinating,” the decision about whether or not it would be produced through the national broadcasting corporation seemed to rest on the content of the piece and the reluctance of the broadcaster to endorse a seemingly inflammatory feminist perspective. Despite the fact that the play itself does not present Carol’s choice to live independently as having a positive outcome, the story editor suggests

that it is precisely her transgressive behaviour and its apparent appeal to Toby that weaken the potential of the play. In later notes his observations center on Carol's disturbed nature:

Page 15 - Carol is a thorough characterization but by now I feel I have her completely sized up and I'm just in for more of the same.

Problem: she has *talked* it all out. Too bad, she's capable of *doing* very fascinating things while we find out how disturbed and twisted she really is.

A similarly dismissive comment follows:

Page 15-16 – throughout the play up to this point I constantly think – why does Toby stay – this woman is a nut – why not take off, go to a movie or go right home and tell her husband about how this “old friend” she met turned out to be a real nut so she left.

What these comments suggest is that the story editor had stereotyped Carol as a “nut” and thus dismissed her critique of Toby and the patriarchal system that keeps both of them from fulfilling their creative potential. If Carol is mad, he suggests, what can she possibly say that could be of value or interest and why would Toby listen? What the editor does not understand is Carol's appeal. Carol is a woman who defiantly lives outside of social conventions and expectations. Her decision to leave her husband and children in order to pursue her career and an independent life that leaves her free to experiment sexually and socially, despite being figured as a major factor in her own mental disintegration, is nonetheless appealing. Carol is “free” from restraint, despite the fact that her resultant fragile mental constitution prevents her from enjoying her freedom.

Richardson's letter, while outlining a number of points in relation to the script, does not go into much detail or justification of its remarks. The impression given by the letter is that the play required further development. Her closing comment is “I'm sorry this isn't a

more encouraging letter but perhaps from the Editor's notes you may feel it is worth rewriting." Her letter is not entirely discouraging. It suggests that Ravel's play has promise, but that it is too provocative for the network because of its content.

Ravel followed up by writing to CBC television story editor Suzanne Finlay. In a letter written on April 13, 1966, a euphoric Ravel wrote to Finlay summarizing the reception of the audience to the opening of *Soft Voices*:

I was very pleased with what you had to say about *Soft Voices*. I enclose a review . . . , which will give you an idea of how it went last night at the premiere. I could not have hoped for a better production – and what is more important, is that the audience, both male and female, was most enthusiastic.

Despite the fact that some of her later comments are evasive about the feminist stance of the play, it appears that Ravel was determined to counteract a prejudice against her work that characterized it as threatening to conventional values, particularly the heterosexual norms which she interrogates. It may also be that she became more evasive about its feminist content in response to negative reviews of the play. Unfortunately, Finlay's letters do not indicate what she felt were the limitations of the script and the review mentioned is not included in the archival file. A letter written by Finlay in October 1966, in response to a letter and revised script of *Soft Voices* that Ravel had sent her, reveals the extent of Ravel's frustration in relation to getting the play produced with the network:

Your frank and generous letter upsets me all to pieces, because of the frustration out of which it comes. And please, please do not think that in offering criticism we are hoping to encourage you to "Kill your utterly ridiculous stubborn drive." In fact, it is the [sic] quality you have, above all

others, that makes me persist in sending detailed critiques. Anyone with your determination demands careful attention.

Finlay's reassurance indicates that Ravel was becoming increasingly sensitive about the response *Soft Voices* was eliciting.

The CBC did not produce *Soft Voices*; however, another work, *The Tuesday Games*,¹⁹ was chosen for a CBC television production in May 1966. This play is an absurdist critique of romantic conventions starring two characters called Romeo and Juliet and their director, a clown named Archibald, who contrives to re-ignite their passion for one another by showing Juliet that the course of most love never "does run smooth." While the work explores mores and romantic relationships, it serves to reinscribe stereotypes rather than challenge them. Ravel's interest seems to have become somewhat more conventional after this time, focusing on women within the family and Jewish community. For the most part, she focused her efforts on domestic dramas that explored women's position within the family, particularly Jewish immigrant families, perhaps because audiences and producers were more responsive to this type of material. As her work became increasingly better known to the Montreal community, she engaged more directly with representing the particularities of her cultural and ethnic heritage. In terms of its feminist content, this change in perspective reflects a broadening awareness of all women's subjugation, particularly that of immigrant women and women from visible minorities, but it also depicts, at least in the case of *Dispossessed*, a darkening feminist vision.

¹⁹ This play is interesting in that it deconstructs the romance of Romeo and Juliet, depicting them as aging actors, desperate to rediscover the passion they used to feel and prey to the manipulations of a tragic-comic clown, their director, who tricks them into emotional realizations by having a pseudo-affair with Juliet.

***Dispossessed*: “Almost Despairing”**

With *Dispossessed* Ravel makes use of a similar strategy of masquerade, emphasizing women’s vexed adoption of domestic roles, but also focuses on a minority community, linking feminist and class critiques; however, the play has a far more tragic ending than *Soft Voices*. In terms of its form, *Dispossessed* does not employ a metatheatrical approach, but its verse form, its use of Yiddish diction and language structures, and its frequent references to Biblical parables, despite the author’s assertions to the contrary, establish the play as a kind of morality play with an instructive aim. It promotes the amelioration of social circumstances for people on the margins, for the abject, the “dispossessed.” It is set in Jewish Montreal and concerns the experience of an immigrant Jewish woman, Roochel, who is particularly compromised by her status in relation to a man from a privileged Jewish-Canadian family. Roochel is, as Evelyn Walters observes, the archetypal fallen woman (52), and yet she suffers as much from her desire to conform to social norms as she does from her transgression of them. Roochel performs a domestic role that restricts her, is unable to learn from her past experience, and is ultimately devastated because her personal ambition is compromised by her social restrictions. Thus, much like the women in *Soft Voices*, Roochel illustrates the restrictions that accompany women’s roles and how they prevent women from living with self-determination and confidence.

In her interview with Patricia Morley, Ravel invoked prominent 1970s feminists Kate Millett and Gloria Steinem. While *Dispossessed* reflects Steinem’s critiques of the relationship between racism, classism, and sexism in her award-winning “After Black Power, Women’s Liberation,” Millett’s condemnation of women’s sexual servility appears most prominently in the play. Ravel’s depiction of Roochel’s tragic circumstances echoes Millett’s assertions about the dangers of romantic love:

The concept of romantic love affords a means of emotional manipulation, which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity. And convictions of romantic love are convenient to both parties since this is often the only condition in which the female can overcome the far more powerful conditioning she has received toward sexual inhibition. Romantic love also obscures the realities of female status and the burden of economic dependency. (Millett 51)

Ravel's depiction of Roochel focuses on how she is compromised by her romantic attachment to a man who exploits her love, but it also considers her experience of marginalization in terms of the class bias in the Jewish community and the racism of broader Canadian society.

Dispossessed takes place within a family living in a community of Jewish immigrants in Montreal. It explores the dreams and disappointments of its main character, Roochel, and her relationship with her mentally-challenged son, Benjie; her lover of forty years, Seymour; and her former boss and long-lost love, Feldman. While the majority of the first act concerns the relationship between Seymour and Benjie, this work explores Roochel's experience as a Jewish-Canadian woman, and reflects her strong sense of Jewish tradition, as well as her acute sense of dislocation within Canada. In relation to the prevailing patriarchal order, she is abject in Butler's terms, a body that is not understood because it lies outside of the norms of the dominant culture. Yet, the work also emphasizes class distinctions within the Jewish community. Feldman is a Jewish man, but he is from a long-established and wealthy Canadian family. Ravel suggests that the reason Feldman does not marry Roochel is because his family, perhaps due to their fears of social marginalization, demanded that he marry a

woman from a similarly privileged background, that is, his father's cousin's daughter, who will inherit money when she marries. Roochel is discarded because she is not able to play the role that Feldman expects of a wife and she seems acutely aware of how even love is powerless in the face of economic exigencies.

Roochel spends a lifetime "paying" for her mistake of having an illegitimate son with Feldman: "All my life I paid," she explains to Seymour (582). However, Roochel is not easy to categorize, because despite her transgression, she still tries to conform to traditional expectations of a woman's role. The ambiguity of her characterization allows Roochel to be read in a number of different ways. Ravel is able to assert a feminist message because of Roochel's unreliability: her inconsistency reinforces her victimization and vulnerability without arousing antipathy because she is trying her best to behave and live according to social and cultural expectations. She is both a "fallen woman" and a "traditional woman." Her victimization is what forces her to adopt these polarized roles and this fact allows her to be considered as representative of both.

Despite her past indiscretions, Roochel attempts to live with some measure of social propriety, acting out the role of mother and "girlfriend." She chastises her lover, Seymour, for suggesting she spoil him, saying, "Who ever heard a woman should spoil the boyfriend/A boyfriend spoils the woman,/A woman spoils her son,/You read all those books,/But you still don't know the fundamentals" (558). Ironically, Roochel's statement of her own inability to live by the "books" underlines her anxiety about living by the rules. Indeed, Roochel spoils her son and longs for "a nice happy family" (559). She is steadfast in her adoption of domestic duty and explains, "It's a woman's job to wash the dishes, /It's a man's job to study his books, /It's a woman's job to fix the children's clothes ..." (566). Much like Toby in *Soft Voices*, Roochel is preoccupied with parroting traditional sex-role wisdom and living up to a

domestic role, which has been socially dictated and decidedly disappointing.

As a “fallen woman,” Roochel is also particularly concerned with her spiritual role. She emphasizes her faith in God: “When God will want us to get rich, /We’ll get rich” (565). When she hears about Feldman’s death, her response illustrates that she also has faith that she can redeem, and has redeemed herself in God’s eyes:

All my life I do the right thing,
I keep kosher, I fast on Yom Kippur,
I don’t work on Shabbos when Mr. Silverman
Can get someone to take my place,
I don’t steal, kill, swear,
I respect all the Laws,
So now God rewards me and gives me Feldman’s million. (582)

Yet, Roochel’s faith is undermined when, instead of leaving her money, Feldman leaves her an assortment of personal memorabilia, explaining in a postscript to his letter, “The business and properties and money I leave to my children. That is a burden you do not deserve. Because of money I lost you, my dear Roochel” (585). Sinking into despair at his apparent betrayal, Roochel begins obsessively accounting for her own life: “One old man, one sick boy, /Two broken cups, one saucer, /a torn oilcloth, three ashtrays” (591). The glaring disparity between the hopes she pinned on Feldman and the outcome of his will leads to her rapid mental decline. Just as in *Soft Voices*, where Carol similarly sinks into despair, Roochel also begins to link her pain to her social and cultural circumstances. She remembers how compromised she was because of her vulnerability as an immigrant and single woman, alone in a new world:

I was so young, I had nobody.

He asked me to go to the movies,
He bought me a milk-shake, chocolate,
When he brought me home he kissed me.
I asked him to come in,
He didn't want,
I begged him.
It's frightening to be alone. (589)

It is in Canada, especially, that Roochel is isolated and unprotected. She explains, "I can't sleep alone, /In the old country I slept with my sister." Roochel also condemns the government for contributing to conflict and inequity: "In the government sit a bunch of stupid men/What don't know nothing,/With my advice we'd have some peace in the world" (580). Roochel feels despair in relation to a country that does not offer her a sense of security or recognition. As an immigrant woman, she is especially vulnerable to exploitation by men and by the labour market.

Her mental breakdown results from the disparity between her dreams that she will be "the finest example/Of a Jewish Mother" (580) and her reality: she is dispossessed, economically weak, and despised because of her moral transgression with Feldman and her illegitimate and disabled son. At Feldman's funeral, she is ignored by members of the community, and explains, "Nobody give me a lift home, /I am the bad woman, they don't even look at me" (586). Roochel suffers due to social prejudice and acknowledges that the reason that Feldman did not marry her was because of her lowly social status:

I know why he didn't marry me,
He was ashamed to bring me to his family.
With my accent I didn't look too good,

I had no education, no clothes,
He had a real Canadian family from 1866.
A car, a degree and a big house,
I had nothing. (590)

Throughout the play, Ravel depicts Roochel as a woman torn between traditional roles and circumstances that force her to act in ways that contradict those values. Roochel gets involved with Feldman because she is lonely and without means. She attaches herself to Seymour for the same reasons. As an immigrant woman with no support from her family or from her community, she does whatever she has to in order to survive. Her circumstances clearly reflect Millett's condemnation of a system of sexual politics where there is an "interior colonization" of women: "What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females" (33). Ravel's play questions the idea of Roochel's position in the social order, but it does so in a subtle way, illustrating the consequences of her misplaced love for Feldman, her misplaced faith in redeeming herself through self-sacrifice, and her attempt to conform to conventional domestic roles and religious dictates.

As she is dying, apparently of a broken heart, Roochel comes to the devastating conclusion that everything that she has done to atone for her sins is futile. She especially regrets her misguided choice in love because it deprived her of ever loving again:

I wanted to put the baby in the snow
And leave it there,
But I saw God's hand in the sky,
So I figure there's a purpose to all this,
Now I know there was no purpose,

It was a trick to punish me,
So I kept the baby,
And got poor Seymour to help me,
So there should be a man in the house sometimes.
I never wanted to marry,
I never trusted no man again,
I gave it all to him [Feldman],
I had no love left for no one. (595)

Roochel's failure, it seems, is her over-valuation of Feldman, to the extent that she is unable to properly care for herself, her son, or Seymour. She has allowed Feldman's rejection to destroy her ability to live with hope, optimism, and agency. As a character, she represents the worst-case scenario for women, because she is forever compromised by her association with Feldman and sees herself as powerless to change her situation. While she is a victim, she allows this experience to define her. She dreams of being a more powerful and effective woman by conforming to traditionally defined roles, performing them for her family and community, yet in doing so she limits her ability to be self-determined. Thus, Roochel can be read as a victim of circumstance, but also as an individual who willingly submits to social expectations that curtail her freedom and is therefore undone by them.

The ending of the play is also ambiguous, allowing Ravel to provoke a critical re-evaluation of Roochel's experience in an indirect way. Roochel dies dreaming of Feldman and returns to idealizing her long-lost lover:

I can hear your voice,
I'm not sad no more.
Everything is soft all around,

It's easy now.

Love is stronger than life,

Love is stronger than death,

Love is stronger than anything.

I am ...

(600; ellipses in original)

Despite the fact that this last speech reinforces her devotion to Feldman, it also underlines the futility of her desire for him. Love has caused her death. She is unable to assert who she is. As Benjie explains, he is "The son of a dead mother" (595). He has suffered as a result of her loss of selfhood and Ravel may be suggesting that a woman's compromised state has far-reaching negative consequences, both for her and for her dependants. Had Roochel been able to redefine herself, carving out an identity unrestricted by conventional roles, she may have survived, rather than died for love.

Yet, the play's depiction of Roochel can be read in alternative ways. She may be seen as representative of the marginalized, either as a working-class or immigrant woman. Ravel establishes Roochel as an "Other" or abject who exposes the unfairness of the system in a tolerable way because most of her Canadian-born audience would not identify with her and thus would feel safely distant from her plight. This touches on Millett's and Steinem's link between sexism and racism, for similar processes of power displacement are at work in both. Ravel employs a similar strategy in this play as she did in *Soft Voices*. In both instances she obscures their provocative feminist critique, because the woman who transgresses social norms and expectations is shown to be the victim of her own misguided choices, even as her experience of social marginalization is critiqued.

In *Dispossessed*, the Canadian state is also seen as a restrictive force that disenfranchises those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and those most marginalized are

immigrant women. Roochel suffers as a result of economic and social marginalization that prevents her from being with Feldman, living freely with Seymour, and attaining a measure of comfort for her family that will allow her to survive emotionally and physically. In this way, the play reflects issues taken up by the alternative theatre produced after the late 1960s, which was part of a dominant literary tradition that countered hegemonic nationalism and focused on social issues. As Renate Usmiani argues in *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada*, “the young artists who grew up during this period of cultural progress . . . attributed the emergence of art centres from coast to coast to a kind of collective ‘edifice complex,’ rather than to a genuine understanding of the cultural needs of the country, and they soon rose up in rebellion against this newly created ‘concrete establishment’ and the social and cultural value system which it presented” (24). The harshness of the Canadian socio-political environment is reinforced metaphorically throughout the play by the cold that continually plagues the family, who live in a cold, cramped basement apartment. The play opens and closes with Seymour banging on the pipes, calling for “Heat!” This tragic appeal emphasizes his isolation and is directly related to his marginal social status in an inhospitable environment. It illustrates a compromised social *and* existential condition. Roochel is doubly maligned, isolated by both the Jewish community and mainstream Canadian society.

In my interview with her, Ravel stated that “*Dispossessed* is one of my best plays and the reason it has not had more than one production is that it is very dark and almost despairing.” Roochel’s despair leads to her death, again evoking a feminist protest of dominant values that make women’s domestic and economic roles untenable. In Millett’s words: “There is no way out of such a dilemma but to rebel and be broken, stigmatized, and cured” (329). Ravel does not go so far as to endorse the radical spirit of rebellion, but with

her depiction of Roochel's tragic demise, she underlines that the "current state of affairs" in relation to women is damaging to individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole.

Dispossessed: Critical Reception

In 1976, *Dispossessed* won a "Women Write for Theatre Award" sponsored by the Playwrights Co-op. This contest was designed to promote female playwrights in a theatre system that was dominated by men. The contest and the commentary published on it underline the marginalized status of women in Canadian theatre of the time and the sense of frustration that accompanied their efforts to have plays produced. After winning the contest, *Dispossessed* was performed at the Saidye Bronfman Centre on June 18, 1977, directed by Sean Mulcahy and produced by Muriel Gold. It ran just under a month, until July 17, 1977.

In contrast to the reception of *Soft Voices*, *Dispossessed* was not nearly as well received by the Montreal press. While Ravel did receive a favourable profile by Lawrence Sabbath in the *Montreal Star*, the media reviews of the play were far less enthusiastic. However, academic critics have been generally more appreciative of the play, although they, too, view the work in a limited way, downplaying its social critique and focusing on easy categorizations of a difficult subject.

Lawrence Sabbath wrote an article about the play and Ravel in the *Montreal Star* on June 14, 1977, but it is largely comprised of an interview. Interestingly, Sabbath begins the article saying, "The author of *Dispossessed*, which premieres this Saturday at the Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre, has no hang-ups about women's lib and the lack of opportunities for women," and includes a quotation from Ravel alongside his physical description of her, which suggests she is a woman without an obvious feminist agenda: "'I see myself as a person in a human world,' says the hazel-eyed, medium height, quietly expressive, if shy

Ravel: 'I have not experienced any discrimination as a woman and the difficulties I have met as a writer are not unlike those of other writers'" (B8). These remarks contradict previous statements she made about her experience and her interest in feminism, particularly in light of her portrayal of Roochel's plight in the play. Sabbath explains that Ravel is "one of the very few dramatists writing about the local Jewish scene" and calls *Dispossessed* "her first, full-scale major production" (B3).

Ravel's own remarks about the play stress her reluctance to assert an ideological position. She says the play is "a subjective view of a Jewish working class family and the ability to cope and survive. It's also about love and the loss of love" (B3). Later in the article, when Sabbath asks her what contribution to society she thought she might have made with her plays, her comments belie the fact that she is writing with social intent. She responds, "I would kid myself to think I had made any. Literature can't change the world. It can only make people more conscious of themselves, of their environment, of injustices. One of theatre's prime functions is to entertain and not to produce messages, though they are inherent in the writing" (B3).

In contrast to Sabbath, other Montreal theatre reviewers, Myron Galloway and Julia Maskoulis, panned the play for its dreary humourlessness and saw it as having little relevance to contemporary audiences. Neither critic noted the play's critique of women's subjugation or the particular social marginalization experienced by the working-class Jewish immigrant characters. Instead, they suggest the play presents subjective images of Jews that are of little interest.

Maskoulis' review in *The Gazette*, entitled "Play about miserable life nags much but gives little," initially takes issue with the social relevance of the play: "[T]hough it may have been meant to take place in the present, the play's emotional time-slot is back 30 years or

more, around the time its main character Roochel stopped really living.” Maskoulis calls the play weak and writes that as “a subjective slice of Jewish life, it is a very narrow slice indeed that Ravel presents us with – leaving out the schmaltz (sentiment), the chutzpah (charm) and overdosing us only with Kvetch (nagging or complaining).” She distances herself from the character of Roochel and from the representations of the Jewish immigrant community on stage: “The play’s strength is in creating an absolutely terrifying revulsion in us that a situation like this actually exists, or that we might be stuck in the flytrap of memory, as Roochel is. But it is a play about losers, who talk at us, talk at each other and kvetch endlessly.” Maskoulis also dismisses Ravel’s depiction of Jewish life by calling into question its veracity: “While the play has a realism that comes from elements of autobiography – emotional if not factual – along with details supplied by the lives of acquaintances and neighbours, it leaves so much out and focuses so heavily on one aspect only that it feels like the work of a beginner.” Maskoulis’ review not only neglects Ravel’s feminist critique, she entirely dismisses the play’s validity as an accurate depiction of Jewish life and culture. She resents the play’s humourlessness and says, “one cannot accept that even a miserable life can be so totally barren of the odd joke or a frivolous gesture.”

Myron Galloway’s review in the *Montreal Star*, “Despair permeates *Dispossessed*,” is equally critical. He calls the play “relentlessly grim” and argues that its greatest weakness is that it contains no evidence that “life has as many small joys as it has overwhelming miseries.” He condemns the play for its unremitting darkness, and describes it as emotionally overwrought: “Using material reminiscent of 19th century melodrama Mrs. Ravel offers us a view of life as being nothing more than a can of worms. In parlous times like these we could do with a somewhat more affirmative message.” Galloway, like Maskoulis, is affronted by the piece and, in an effort to diminish its significance, characterizes it as “melodrama,” an

entirely inaccurate stylistic categorization. Indeed, Ravel's play is the antithesis of sensational and her characters are not exaggerated, polarized types, but more mundane and ambiguous individuals whose motivations are not easily understood. They are each attempting to survive difficult circumstances by loving each other, even though they may not actually love each other enough. Galloway's reference to "parlous times" suggests that he expected the play to engage with social issues and yet he makes no attempt to address Ravel's social critique. Throughout his review, Galloway ignores Roochel's plight, and instead focuses on Feldman: "Obligated to marry into money to save his business from bankruptcy, Feldman has deserted the pregnant Roochel who gives up her job and is literally thrown into the snow with her new born babe by relatives who call her a whore." In Roochel's account of circumstances surrounding this event, she implies that Feldman was far more cold-hearted: "Maybe, I thought, if he saw the baby/He would change his mind. /I should have known/That money has a mind of its own" (591). Also of note is Galloway's criticism of Ravel's depiction of Jewish people, accusing her of reinforcing stereotypes about "Jewish mothers, Jewish mothers-in-law, Jewish ladies who collect hats; ruthless Jewish factory owners and a cruel and merciless God." He, like Maskoulis, dismisses Ravel's depiction of her culture, and seems oblivious to her feminist critique.

It is no surprise that female literary critics have been somewhat more receptive to Ravel's work, although even in these cases the feminist message in Ravel's plays tends to be overlooked. In her 1978 review of *Women Write For Theatre* in *Canadian Theatre Review*, Sandra Souchette recognizes Ravel as one of the playwrights in the collection who has not achieved a national reputation, yet notes that she "is well-known in Montreal and has worked extensively for CBC television and radio" (124). Souchette praises *Dispossessed* as "the richest play of the group. It is both the most emotionally involving and the most depressing"

(126). Souchette identifies the underlying social critique that *Dispossessed* makes about Canadian culture when she includes Roochel's speech about why Feldman, her wealthy lover, would not marry her and argues that it "may be the most succinct statement of the Canadian dream existing in our literature to date and its finality was the shaping force of Roochel's entire life" (127). Souchette's observations reinforce Ravel's subtle interrogation of nationalism, especially in relation to feminist concerns for economic and social parity.

Other literary reviews of *Dispossessed* include those by Margaret Peppert Martinello in *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1977) and Lois Gottlieb in *Canadian Drama* (1979).

Martinello's review stresses the play's association with Theatre of the Absurd and Judaism:

Aviva Ravel could be described as a Jewish Absurdist playwright. These two concepts may, at first, seem incompatible but Ravel has managed to balance them successfully. She establishes a Jewish sensibility in this play not only throughout her careful creation of Jewish language and characterization but also through the celebration of a determination that, in the face of all obstacles, continues to espouse hope in the future and defiance of present problems, an attitude that could be described as an integral part of the Jewish tradition. The absurdist overtones of the drama are fairly obvious. (113)

Martinello emphasizes the Jewish content of the play, yet she also regards the play as offering a compelling portrait of people struggling with both economic marginalization and existential angst. She argues that the success of *Dispossessed* lies in its ability to articulate a hopeful vision for those in the midst of despair:

Aviva Ravel successfully turns commonplace, lower-class people and events into a vision of universal validity. She accurately reproduces the inflections and rhythms of Jewish speech and her use of metrical, unrhymed verse

reinforces the poetic power of her language. Throughout her play, she sustains a balance of the tragic and the hilarious, a subtle comment on the absurdity of life. (114)

Martinello calls attention to the hope that survives the overt despair of the play's end, where Seymour curses the landlord, but like other critics, she does not directly acknowledge how Roochel's story reflects a tragic vision of women in relation to dominant culture and society. Her review, much like Perkyns' foreword in *Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre*, praises the distinctiveness of the play, yet regards it, somewhat dismissively, as an example of "local colour" with universal significance. Martinello does not engage with the piece as a substantial critique of contemporary social conditions, and she also distances readers from its critique by referring to the characters as "commonplace, lower-class people," instead of acknowledging the dramatic circumstances that have led to their subjugation.

Lois Gottlieb's discussion of *Dispossessed*, contained in her review of *Women Write for Theatre for Canadian Drama* in 1979, makes a similar judgment about Ravel's characters:

Despite the poetry . . . the play is about the sordid dreams and wasted lives of marginal people. From Roochel's interaction with the past, one understands why some women – perhaps a good many – can never be free of the past – no matter how humiliating, no matter how painful. (216)

Gottlieb compares Roochel to other characters in the collection, arguing that she "is the single low-class character of the previous three plays, the one social rebel, the one deviant, the one poor woman for whom economic hardship has been an inescapable fact of life" (217). Like Martinello, Gottlieb is quick to dismiss Roochel as a representative of a

“different” class, as deviant, and thereby distances herself from Roochel’s plight. Gottlieb, like Martinello, criticizes Ravel for portraying this type of woman on stage:

Whatever “mystery” Ravel may have intended to convey, the reality is that Roochel, at the end, is a figure of shocking pathos. Releasing her soul to a self-centered exploiter; reducing life’s meaning to the memory of a month-long passionate sexual encounter; these are the compensations she claims for a lifetime of toil and self-denial. Given the meager fare life has offered her, romance, allied with death, appears as sustenance. (217)

Gottlieb’s remarks about *Dispossessed* and her conclusion to the review stress her disappointment with Ravel’s female characters. She suggests that the contest,²⁰ and the plays generated by it, fail women. She ends her review by saying that the plays in the collection do not “satisfy the hunger to have a collection of contemporary Canadian women’s drama that charts new social as well as psychological territory, and [do] not satisfy the need for a vision that will soar above the paralyzed spirit of women’s drama” (220). These comments suggest that Gottlieb, unlike Martinello, is at least conscious of the fact that characters like Roochel are victims of *specific* social and psychological circumstances. However, like Martinello, she distances herself from the validity of Ravel’s social critique by failing to see that Roochel, like many of Ravel’s female characters, attempts to assert her personal freedom within a family, culture, and society that systematically restricts her liberty and livelihood. Her comments also suggest that women writing during this period were reflecting their own pessimism in their work and seemed unable to envision how they might escape their own

²⁰ The Canadian Women Write for Theatre Contest was held in 1975 to commemorate International Women’s Year.

restricted circumstances.

In literary reviews, Ravel's work has variously been described as absurdist, Jewish, feminine, and humorous. However, even female critics seem reluctant to address the feminist content in her work, despite the fact that her plays centre on women and their roles, and the difficulties associated with the marginalization of women economically, socially, and within the family. Ravel's work documents the tragic consequences that accompany women's attempts to live according to conventional values. Her feminism is not always affirmative; instead, it often presents a bleak picture of women's circumstances and calls into question the position of women without offering much hope for the amelioration of their circumstances.

In *Soft Voices*, Ravel explores the early feminist ideal of total liberation and the tragic consequences that result from the abandonment of the role of wife and mother. In *Dispossessed*, the protagonist dies of a broken heart after living according to conventional expectations of self-sacrifice. In both plays women are portrayed as victims of unsustainable personal and social situations. Each play presents a vision of women that can be read as a condemnation of a sexist culture that restricts their ability to attain personal success and happiness. Yet, in both plays, the feminist critique is masked. The ambiguity of Ravel's work enables a feminist reading without necessitating it. Her plays emphasize how important it is that women reflect critically on their experience in order to see the potentially destructive patterns of their conditioning, even as they succumb to them. Ravel insists that women must become conscious of the impact of their past conditioning and present role-playing, and in her view the theatre was one place where this message should be disseminated. As Ravel herself asserted in the introduction to her thesis on Patricia Joudry (1985),

Until the flowering of Canadian professional theatre in the 'sixties, few Canadian women wrote for the stage. The scarcity of women playwrights was doubtless related to social roles ascribed to women in previous years. While more women are writing for the theatre today, they still constitute a small minority. . . . In a theatre that has traditionally been dominated by men, subjects concerning child-rearing, woman's role in the family and society, relationships between mothers and daughters, and women's personal liberation still do not receive adequate attention on the stage. (viii)

This statement confirms Ravel's interest in theatre that reflects women's experience and feminist values and underlines her intent to create plays in order to comment critically on women's social roles and conditioning.

Gottlieb's review of *Women Write for Theatre* identifies how important the concept of feminist revisioning is to the plays from that collection:

[T]he audience is engaged by the women's retrospective vision, their evaluation of what they have already lived through. In this way, the past, particularly a past in which men have played central roles, becomes an important, highly charged element of the drama. In this "past," women gained their identity, status and sense of value, by fulfilling their socially dictated functions. . . . Several of the plays capture the woman at a moment when there is a sharp break with this past. (214)

Ultimately, Gottlieb believed that the women playwrights published in *Women Write for Theatre*, including Ravel, did not succeed. Gottlieb failed to see the worth of Ravel's critical response to the past because she was unable to recognize the significance of Ravel's conflicted treatments of feminist principles and how this act of articulating a vexed feminist

message was perhaps the best way to illustrate the various possibilities for women which the sharp break with the past portended.

II

Beverley Simons: Exorcising Powerful Women

Beverley Simons is, without a doubt
Canada's most ignored, important
writer. Or, on the other hand, she may
be Canada's most important, ignored
writer.

Don Rubin, *Canadian Theatre Review*

Beverly Simons' plays, while recognized during the sixties and seventies as masterful and groundbreaking, have now slid into near-obscurity. In part this lack of recognition is attributable to the relative difficulty of her work. As Gyllian Raby argues in her 1982 M.A. thesis "Beverley Simons: A Critical Evaluation," "[t]he plays of Beverley Simons are neglected by theatre critics and practitioners in Canada because they explore areas of dramatic theme and structure which extend beyond the domain of traditional criticism and common commercial practice" (Raby Abstract). Simons' plays are self-consciously avant-garde and experimental, qualities that contributed to their notoriety. In his introduction to the *Canadian Theatre Review's* casebook issue on Simons (Winter 1976), Don Rubin asserted, "Her full length play *Crabdance* is perhaps the finest play yet written in this country. Her monologue *Preparing* is a minor masterpiece. But Ms. Simons' work is not generally known" (Rubin, *Casebook* 4). In terms of feminist content, these two plays in particular, *Crabdance* (1971) and *Preparing* (1973), engage directly with feminist issues related to women's socialization and role-play. Malcolm Black suggests that *Crabdance* "depicts the quintessential woman" ("Strange Unhappy") and *Preparing* similarly considers the particular stages of women's lives; however, the feminist message of both plays is unclear. Simons' characterizations of Sadie and Jeannie are almost wholly unsympathetic and her focus on their conflicted feelings about motherhood and the ritualistic aspects of their lives as women complicates a direct reading of their gender socialization by attributing their conduct, at least in part, to biological imperatives.

Simons had a long association with performance before she began writing plays. As a child, she was a musical prodigy and she suggests that this helped her develop a keen awareness of her ability to influence others:

I realized from a very early age that I had a kind of charisma. . . in music competitions I would smile out at the judges, I knew what power I had. . . but then one day I wondered if I really won the competition because I was the best. . . I stopped using it on purpose right then . . . but I still wonder.

(Biographical Details 1)

Simons' self-consciousness highlights her recognition of the influence of self-styling, which is a theme that she investigates in most of her work. In her teens, Simons was offered a number of scholarships to study music, but she had also won a national writing contest for a verse drama she wrote called *Twisted Roots*. This play was later published in an anthology entitled *First Flowering*, and it encouraged her to devote her attention to writing rather than music. At eighteen, she won a scholarship to study Creative Writing at the Banff School of Fine Arts, where she wrote a full-length play, *My Torah, My Tree*. In 1956, Simons moved to Montreal to study English Literature at McGill University, where she became involved with the Players' Club. It produced two of her plays, *The Birth* and *A Play*, and she was engaged with every aspect of production from writing, to acting and directing. In 1958, she transferred to the University of British Columbia where she studied English and Theatre. Following her graduation, she received a Koerner Foundation scholarship to study children's theatre with Brian Way and acting with Robert Gill.

In 1959, Simons and her husband left Canada for Europe, where they worked and studied for a period of two years. They settled in England where her husband joined a law firm and Simons taught school. In her interview with Gyllian Raby, Simons recounts the formative influence of that period of time: "kids [would] come to school hungry and go through the garbage pails. . . and those poor emotionally stunted kids made me decide to love my family before anything else, never to use them, never to stint them affection"

(*Biographical 3*). Her family responsibilities and her experiences at Harrogate had a direct impact on the scope of Simons' ambition; however, she began writing again while in Europe, inspired by the productions she saw abroad. She drafted *The Elephant and the Jewish Question* while overseas and completed it after her return to Vancouver. It was adapted for CBC's "Festival" program in 1963. Her next play, *Green Lawn Rest Home* (1973), was completed soon thereafter. Simons then turned to scriptwriting and wrote *Encounter* (1965), *If I Turn Around Quick* (1966), and *The Canary* (1967) on commission for CBC television. *The Canary* was the only one that was actually produced. Meanwhile, several smaller Canadian theatre groups (Savage God, Spectrum Theatre, Greenthumb, and Manfrog) produced Simons' short plays, including *Prologue*, *Preparing*, *Triangle*, *The Crusader*, and *Green Lawn Rest Home*.

Simons' literary output led to her award of a Canada Council grant in 1967. She used this grant to do two things, the first of which provides a glimpse into her conflicted perspective on motherhood and was cause for uproar in the Vancouver arts community. Simons used her grant to hire someone to care for her young family so that she could spend time during the day working on her play. As Malcolm Black recounts in "The Strange Unhappy Life of *Crabdance*," the decision to give her this type of grant "was unusual, although, as one of her referees, I naturally applauded the Council's wisdom in giving it." Black also reveals that her receiving this grant caused "a furor in Vancouver; it even became the subject of a cartoon by Norris in the *Vancouver Sun*, in which a suburban lady was depicted luxuriating on her porch, enjoying the peace of having someone else take care of her children" ("Strange Unhappy"). The grant points to the difficulties Simons experienced in balancing her obligations to her family and to her own artistic ambitions, and it hints at the real-world basis for her depiction of maternal conflict in her plays. The fact that the arts

community and general public were so reactive also illustrates how challenging it was for female artists of the time who did not conform to rigid social-role expectations. It also highlights the social prejudice that existed towards working mothers generally. The grant not only allowed Simons time at home to work on *Crabdance*, it also enabled her to travel through Asia in order to study native theatres there. She believed that this study was necessary in order to help her transcend the restrictions of Canadian theatrical practices. As she wrote in her application:

I have felt cramped and dissatisfied for some time in traditional drama forms of the West. I have come to conceive of some of my plays almost musically: the spoken word, recitative, singing, musicians on the stage . . . mime, the formality of ritual counterpointed against informal, lyrical, simple scenes and lewd splashes of action, these elements controlled and made meaningful by rhythm. I discovered in reading *Oriental Drama* . . . that it was very much akin to the style I had been working toward. (Raby 4)

Simons' experience of balancing childrearing and creative work and her travels abroad had a direct impact on the development of her script for *Crabdance*, which she had begun before she left and finished after her return, between 1964 and 1968. The play fuses her meditations on motherhood with many of the formal theatrical elements that she describes, although it is also specifically local in its domestic setting and critique of Canadian consumerist values.

Simons received a lot of critical attention for *Crabdance* and following her early notoriety, she became more involved in campaigning for Canadian productions of Canadian scripts. In a letter to *Performing Arts in Canada* published in its Winter 1971 issue, she explains the predicament of Canadian playwrights such as herself:

It's a lonely experience being a playwright in this country. My

plays have to wait years for a Canadian production or publication. . . .

What can we do to improve Canadian theatre? Create a hothouse atmosphere for the next ten years to make up for the chill that has stunted our artists in the past. We've suffered a national inferiority complex too long. A bit of swagger is in order. (2)

A few weeks later, she wrote the four one-act plays that were eventually assembled and published by Talonbooks as *Preparing* in 1975. In 1976, the *Canadian Theatre Review* devoted an entire issue to Simons' work, including a draft of *Leela Means to Play*, a work that she considers her most important, but which was never produced, perhaps due to its bewilderingly complex form and the obscurity of its themes. Simons described it as reflecting "the rhythm of our times. . . my own emotions. . . the multi-contact of cultures and values. I wanted that rhythm to play within the play and to shape the structure of the work" (Raby 203). While the play is ambitious, its diffuse structure and incorporation of Eastern mysticism make it particularly difficult to stage and to analyze. It is for this reason that my analysis will focus on *Crabdance* and *Preparing*, as they are the most critically successful and succinct representations of Simons' engagement and conflicted response to feminist themes.

In much the same way as the other playwrights in this study, Simons denied being a feminist. When Raby asked her "Are you a feminist?" Simons replied:

No. I distrust movements, and memberships. They become parochial. I think they can help illumine the way on a journey, but ultimately the individual has to discover their own answers alone. . . . That's not to say that I don't admire the political gains the women's movement has made in society. It makes me mad to think of all the wasted creativity in the women of my mother's

generation and because – because women were permitted to be no more than a supportive echo of their husbands. I've never allowed anyone to take that line with me, and that was difficult for me at one time because I come from a patriarchal culture. (*Miscellaneous* 1-2)

In her thesis, Raby suggests that despite the fact that Simons does not regard herself as a feminist, her work can be read as feminist because of its reflection of her cultural circumstances:

The school of feminist criticism received its impetus from the consciousness-raising nineteen-sixties which liberated women from the traditional social stereotypes in which they had been immolated. This was the era in which Simons' formative works and youthful philosophies were developed. The feminist critical attitude is therefore an appropriate consciousness to bring to the works of a female writer, despite the fact that she does not profess the feminist ideology. (10)

In her interview with Raby, Simons states, "I prefer to use the words 'other' or 'extended' consciousness rather than 'raised consciousness'. And that is not only in terms of male/female relationships and social realities, but for aesthetics and philosophy: a positive personal synthesis" (16). The "liberal feminist" label seems to apply best to Simons, as it does to the other playwrights in this study, especially because Simons regards her feminist sympathies in humanist terms. As Raby summarizes: "Simons eschews the specific politics of feminism but shares the broad concerns of the movement. She wants all human beings to achieve a satisfactory life. In this sense, Simons and feminists are among the contemporary humanists" (16-17).

While Raby's evaluation of Simons is sensitive to the feminist themes and structures

of her work, not many critics have been as responsive to them. Rota Herzerg Lister is perhaps the exception. In her article “Beverley Simons, Canadian Playwright of the Pacific Rim,” Lister examines Simons’ “mature plays”²¹ and suggests that Simons “has given us women’s theatre, the theatre of cruelty, and now a new kind of global theatre. She deserves our attention” (15). Other supporters of Simons’ work, such as Malcolm Black, Mavor Moore, and Don Rubin, tend to regard it as powerful because of its universality, in particular for its critique of consumerist culture and Canadian parochialism.

Most of Simons’ plays, including *Green Lawn Rest Home*, *The Elephant and the Jewish Question*, and *Leela Means to Play*, explore women’s socialization and protest the way that individuals are categorized and dismissed by institutional thinking and a culture defined by materialistic concerns. Simons creates poignant images of women that challenge her audiences to question how culture and social identity are defined and how they limit women’s freedom, yet her feminist message is undermined by her own conflicted views of the maternal and this is reflected in her characterizations. Her female protagonists are anything but sympathetic, and despite their marginalized circumstances, audiences may have difficulty identifying with them. Instead, audiences are more likely to regard them as hostile and offensive, even if they offer insightful perspectives on the female condition.

Certainly, in Simons’ reflections upon her own work, she admits that she has no interest in creating a “well made play” and promoting “identification.” In a 28 August 1967 letter to a correspondent named “Chuck,” held in the Gyllian Raby Collection at the University of Calgary, she writes, “I’m in the process, and have been for the past five years, of questioning the well made play. . . . I’m looking for what? A more fluid form, one less reassuring. Because I don’t believe the world is reassuring. My world isn’t.” Simons

²¹ The plays that were written between 1962 and 1975 are the subject of Lister’s paper.

suggests that she wants to shock audiences out of their routines by disrupting their expectations:

By habit, people, the audience, have a set of built in reactions.

“Oh, yes, major characters. Oh, yes, involvement. Whoops! Something’s going to happen. It has. That’s nice. Some hot chocolate and then let’s go to bed.” I want to reach. I want to move. I want to slice the emotional retina of my audience so that they’re forced to reorientate and re-evaluate. One way of doing this is to make them identify, but I’m not sure anymore that the old means of accomplishing this, i.e. put the hero in a predicament, make him sympathetic, etc., is enough.

Instead of gratifying an audience’s desire for traditional drama, Simons wants to force them to experience a radically altered perspective. Her acerbic characters are one way for her to shock audiences into confronting the dark or repressed feelings that women rarely express.

Both *Crabdance* and *Preparing* examine how women are manipulated by patriarchal culture, yet they also contain protagonists who are decidedly unsympathetic. In both works the protagonists display an incredibly powerful negative will and an equally arresting sense of powerlessness. The female characters in both plays are figured as especially abject, in the sense used by both Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Both Sadie Golden and Jeannie are outcasts. They are positioned as “abject” both in relation to the audience (they are both, seemingly, mad) and in terms of their families and their communities. Nonetheless, both Sadie and Jeannie illustrate how women experience biological drives and how their biological and social experiences are ritualized. Both characters proceed through culturally-sanctioned female rites of passage, but both feel marginalized by them. Although Simons’ plays question the social and cultural limitations imposed on women and consider how

women are forced to adopt ritualized performances in relation to both personal relationships and public institutions, their feminist vision is complicated by her intensely ambivalent portrayals of female (dis)empowerment.

Crabdance: Tragic Loss

While Simons conceived of *Crabdance* as early as 1960, she found it difficult to find the time to work on the play, in part because of her young family. Before its completion, *Crabdance* was commissioned by CBC television producer Don Eccleston for a half-hour drama slot, but because of the play's eventual length, he decided to produce a one-hour version scheduled for broadcast in the fall of 1968; however, the series was postponed and finally cancelled.²² The play was first produced in 1968 at A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle.

Following its debut, the play received a great deal of attention, although it was not produced in Canada until 1971. In the *Canadian Theatre Review* issue devoted to Simons' work, Peter Hay, Malcolm Black, Michael Sidnell, and John Juliani argue that her work represents an extraordinary and unprecedented theatrical achievement. In his article, "The Strange Unhappy Life of *Crabdance*," Black explains that the play was written following what he mysteriously refers to as a "tragic loss." Raby, in her interview with Simons, reveals that "[f]or 15 years Beverley was unable to speak of the death of her only baby daughter of 'cradle death'. It happened just before *Crabdance*. . . . It is still a painful subject to her" (*Biographical 3*). This revealing information was so sensitive that Raby does not address it in her critique of the play, but it is essential to understanding this difficult work. According to Black, the tragedy Simons experienced and "[t]he concern shown to Beverley by well-

²² The CBC did eventually produce a radio version of the play in 1976.

meaning relatives and friends became very oppressive to her, and she was close to a nervous breakdown” (Black 9). He relays that she “told me she started to write the play in some anger, but that she ended up understanding these older women, the ‘power centres,’ as the play progressed” (Black 9).

In a number of interviews, Simons mentions that *Crabdance* was an attempt to come to terms with female power. She explained this to Raby as follows:

I began writing *Crabdance* in order to exorcise several powerful women who, I had jarringly realized, in the name of love were trying to destroy me. (109)

Raby attributes “the manipulative side of Sadie Golden’s character” to this process, but it is interesting to consider not only how the play depicts Sadie Golden, but also what the absence of other female characters suggests. Simons’ imaginative engagement with the issue of mothering and loss was a primary impetus behind *Crabdance*. In an interview with Bruce Winter on CBC radio she reveals:

It grew out of my own psyche. The root of the play came to me once, when I was washing those double diapers, doing the housework. . . suddenly it flashed upon me – what if I were in my mid-fifties and I didn’t have those babies, what if I didn’t have that man coming home at night. . . I saw Sadie Golden. (Winter)

The play thus began as an intensely personal reflection on motherhood and family. Simons also told Winter that, as a new mother, she developed a dependence on the salesmen that would visit her home and bring with them “a little piece of the world” (Winter), which echoes Sadie’s experience in *Crabdance*. However, at the same time, she became aware that the consumer relationship was corrosive. In the Vancouver Playhouse advertisement for *Crabdance*, Simons describes a society “[w]here relationships are based on buying and

selling” and reveals that she “saw those relationships as a façade, protecting and at the same time providing the emotional nourishment that we all need” (Winter).

The concept of nourishment evoked in this statement is intriguing when considered in relation to Sadie’s problematization of this concept throughout *Crabdance*. Sadie’s obsession with breast milk as a source of power and horror, in particular, seems to anticipate Kristeva’s critique of motherhood and abjection in both *Stabat Mater* (1976) and *Powers of Horror* (1982). Sadie is described as “in her fifties, sagging” and “highly nervous. She makes little noises without being aware of them. Smiles appear and disappear involuntarily. She emanates a strange combination of vulnerability and threat, naiveté and cunning” (11). These stage notes highlight the extent to which Sadie has internalized the demands of performing her feminine role, appearing genial (smiling) and yet repressing other less acceptable emotions (making little noises), but they also call to mind Kristeva’s delineation of the abject, something that compels and threatens at once. Sadie is an abject character because of her subjugation by the dominant patriarchal culture, and she is abject because of her “outcast” status in relation to her husband and family. She is also strangely troubled by “objects” of abjection: her milk, her maternal body, her dead husband, her absent children, and her fantasy lovers.

The play focuses on a particular afternoon in Sadie’s life during which she prepares for a tea-party, presumably held in honour of a number of salesmen who are due to arrive at her home at three in the afternoon, a time she dreads because sunlight pierces through her windows, effacing her with its glare. Her preparations for this party are interrupted by phone calls from her guests and the intrusion of three other salesmen: Mowchuck, a young man on his first assignment selling encyclopedias whom Sadie mothers; Dickens, who sells condiments and is a regular guest in her home, whom she treats as a husband figure; and

Highrise, a charismatic, larger-than-life (he actually wears “heavy, built-up shoes”), pseudo-lover and fanciful salesman who attempts to sell Sadie a conceptual environment system – interlocking bricks which assemble themselves around the purchaser according to whatever they most desire.

While all three men participate in a series of sexualized role-playing with Sadie, after Highrise’s appearance in Act III, he initiates a game that involves removing the dust-covers from Sadie’s living-room furniture and provoking the other men into participating in even more frenzied role-playing games, which end with Sadie experiencing a sexual crescendo with Highrise followed by a denouement involving each of them regressing into childlike dependence on Sadie, who launches into a monologue detailing her own experiences of marginalization. When Sadie’s other salesman guests arrive at three o’clock, she also attempts to entertain them, but with less success. Initially pleasant, they soon surround Sadie and try to steal her cat/piggy bank away from her. When it falls and shatters, scattering money, they scramble for it, while Sadie retrieves another one of many from her cupboard. Despite the ominous atmosphere, Sadie continually attempts to enact the role of a gracious host, yet this ends abruptly when she recognizes that the song she is singing is inappropriate and she breaks out into a moan, before she collapses and is eventually carried away.

The anguish of Sadie’s final moments is foreshadowed by her first appearance on stage. The setting is described as a highly-stylized domestic space that “appears to be a two storey middle-class house”; however, “the second storey does not exist visually,” and “freestanding stairs end abruptly in space above the set” (11). The void above the stairs is “obscured at first by a wall or scrim which moves during the glare at the end of the play. The fourth wall represents a large plate-glass window” (11). This space, in much the same way as the set for *Soft Voices*, traps Sadie in a sterile domestic scene, which both stifles and exposes

her. The didascalia suggest that the setting is designed to create a “curiously disturbing” effect, with “furniture shrouded in cowl-like sheets,” and “mounds of writing paper, envelopes, letters, lists” on the dining table, with a “large blue china cat with an enormous belly. . . in a conspicuous position on the floor.” The effect of the stage properties as described is to suggest that Sadie’s home is in a state of disruption or in the process of being shut down. The cat, which is also a bank, adds both a feral aspect to the scene and the upcoming proceedings and serves as a reminder of the multiple dimensions of power, sexual and economic. It also perhaps signals a spiritual dimension, as a feline Buddha, which will become significant in Sadie’s interrogation of Judeo-Christian patriarchy.

Aspects of Eastern religious philosophy are threaded through the play. Simons told Raby, for example, that Sadie was based on the archetypal model of Kali the Killer (130). This Hindu goddess, who is often depicted as a patroness of war, but who also is said to be a mixture of both demonic and divine influences, resonates with Sadie’s conflicted character. Sadie’s erotic manipulation of the men in the play also reflects aspects of Kali’s persona. In *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali*, Sarah Caldwell notes that the reason why male actors may dress as Kali in Kerala rituals may be explained as their attempt to “cultivate power which can kill and destroy evil. The Sakta worldview in the Dravidian context focuses this force in the female breasts; and it postulates the source of aggressive, destructive power (a combination of the Sanskrit Sakti and Dravidian ananku) in the erotic attraction wielded by women over men” (Caldwell 30). The cat’s swollen belly, while signaling aspects of divine nature, may also symbolize a woman’s pregnant body, which Sadie regards as particularly problematic and which underlines her resistance to female biological imperatives. Sadie’s association with the powerful and terrifying aspects of femininity belie her apparent submission to a domestic role.

Following her initial entrance, Sadie begins a monologue entitled “Prologue: Sadie’s Talk to God,” wherein she establishes her direct-line communication with the creator, questioning his authority and offering her own critical summary of his involvement in the act of creation. The monologue is worth quoting in its entirety because it sets up the play’s action by establishing Sadie’s intent in her upcoming performance, to illustrate women’s power, her own sexual confidence, her contempt for patriarchal power, and her sense of disenfranchisement and responsibility because of the work of childbearing:

Listen, you can’t kid me about making woman out of man’s ribs. You wouldn’t change your mind about how to do things right off the bat. I mean, God doesn’t make mistakes. First shot, bango, right on target. So why ribs and then wombs? Man springs from woman, it’s in your book.

Come on, you can tell me. Nobody’s listening. It’s a cover-up, right? You don’t want us to know you had a bit of pleasure with the first woman. You shouldn’t be ashamed. Immaculate Conception! Pheh! That must have been some fight before you got her down. *With appreciation.* Or maybe you haven’t told because you don’t want the other women, me, to take a real look at what we’re left with. . . . Mortal lovers.

She spits.

Then sings the following song, simply

How she loved her darling man

She wound her arms around him

But when she woke

Her man was gone

A baby had replaced him.

After a pause she resumes her work. (12)

Sadie's opening monologue highlights her resistance to patriarchal norms and underlines how she attempts to exercise power over men through sexual appeal. Her song emphasizes the consequences of her romanticized sexual transaction and suggests that her identity has always been defined through others, whether lovers or children. As in *Dispossessed*, Sadie, too, is expressing a form of dispossession. There is also a sense that motherhood has left her vulnerable and alone, echoing the theme of the King Crab's mating ritual, which involves the female losing her shell in order to engage in copulation, which leaves her both defenseless and dependent on the male crab she has coupled with.²³

The monologue also echoes de Beauvoir's reflections on maternal love, which she describes as "a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle daydreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion, and cynicism" (513). Through Sadie, Simons depicts this range of feeling and what de Beauvoir describes as "[t]he great danger which threatens the infant in our culture" – "the fact that the mother to whom it is confided in all its helplessness is almost always a discontented woman: sexually she is frigid or unsatisfied; socially she feels herself inferior to man; she has no independent grasp on the world or on the future," and as a result, "She will seek to compensate for all these frustrations through her child" (513).

Kristeva's *Stabat Mater* is compelling to consider alongside de Beauvoir. In this work, which ends with Kristeva calling for a new definition of female ethics, she critiques the Christian construction of woman as mother through the Virgin Mary and highlights the fact that the focus on maternity in Christianity reflects a number of influences: the lived

²³ Additionally, the title describes the overt conceptual framework for the play, which is the mating ritual of the Alaskan King Crab. Simons explains that this involves the female crab enticing several male crabs into mating following her molt.

experience of feminine power, the “social remnants of matrilinearism and the unconscious needs of primary narcissism on the one hand and on the other the requirements of a new society based on exchange and before long on increased production, which require the contribution of the superego and rely on the symbolic patterning agency” (259). Kristeva’s essay is perhaps most powerful in the lyrical fragments that interrupt her critical analysis with “FLASHES” of her first-hand experience with her infant son. In these passages she conveys women’s sense of both personal power and sorrow in their dynamic relationship with their infants:

My body is no longer mine, it doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold,
puts its teeth in, slobbers, coughs, is covered with pimples, and it laughs.
And yet, when its own joy, my child’s, returns, its smile washes only my
eyes. But the pain, its pain – it comes from inside, never remains apart, other,
it inflames me at once, without a second’s respite. As if that was what I had
given birth to and, not willing to part from me, insisted on coming back,
dwelled in me permanently. One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth
to pain: the child represents it and henceforth it settles in, it is continuous.
(241)

Kristeva’s description of Judeo-Christian ambivalence about the maternal and her argument for a new discourse on motherhood illuminates the complexity of Sadie Golden’s response to her maternal role in *Crabdance*. Simons’ play is, in essence, an extended meditation on motherhood and how it defines and limits female experience, but it is intriguing precisely because it is a consideration of this through the eyes of a post-menopausal mother. As a result, the play’s tone is particularly dark and the characterization of Sadie strangely troubled. Her obsession with nursing and with her own sexual appeal contrasts with her stage

of life and suggests that her monologue is an extended fantasy of sorts, generated by a mind that is unable to come to terms with the loss of maternal function and power and with the reality of aging and death. Thus, *Crabdance* can be read as an elaborate projection of Sadie's disturbed mind, an extended mental performance that depicts her struggle with the specific grief and loss associated with the female condition, but without evoking identification in the viewer. Her struggle with subjectivity and abjection is also detailed, troubling her audience's understanding of women's power and influence.

Aside from Sadie, all the other characters in the play are male, and while several critics have noted their archetypal resonance as son, husband, and lover, there is a sense throughout the work that Sadie attempts to live through her association with these men and is alienated from her own experience as a woman and from a female community. The play is an expression of that sense of abjection, too, and its attendant despair is a poignant depiction of Friedan's feminine mystique. Yet Simons also anticipates Millett's more vehement critique of power politics when she depicts Sadie succumbing to despair and death when she realizes that she has become a willing pawn in a consumer transaction that she has tried to disguise as something more genuine over which she has control. She has become nothing but a consumer of services, using her buying power to compensate for her lost sexual allure and maternal influence.

Sadie's description of her body at the beginning of the play suggests that she is sexually aroused at the prospect of the upcoming "mating" ritual she has planned; however, she is also consumed with self-loathing regarding her lost maternal role and her aging body:

It's starting. My breasts. I can feel them. Muscles tick tick.

They're my two white sacs, no, collapsed globes, maps of

blue veins and white stretch lines, meaning nothing until they. . . .

Yes, starting, swell and fell, full. . . . Then whole worlds can be
read on them. My nipples corks of fire. Burn! I want to hurt. The pain
pleasures me. MILK! (14)

Sadie's power seems to reside in her ability to provide milk, yet it also causes her pain, which resonates with Kristeva's articulation of the feminine experience of both masochism and gratification and *jouissance* in relation to fulfilling the mothering role. Sadie displays a decidedly conflicted response to her biological function of producing milk. Following Sadie's revelation about the pleasure and the pain her swelling breasts give her, the didascalia describe her falling over her cat. Perhaps this symbol represents the combination of Sadie's lost sexual/maternal/spiritual desire and how it has been replaced with economic power, as the cat is also a piggy bank. Here she is literally tripped up by her female biology. Sadie confuses mothering and desire, and ultimately she is felled by her misapprehensions. There is a prominent feeling of misplaced maternal instinct in her revelations about her sexualized contact with men:

The conductor will get out and knock on our door. "May I have a glass of water?" Like last year. The blond one. Remember? *Suddenly concerned*. We won't have room for him this time. *She looks out again*. No. *Sadly*. Gone. . . . You are a liar, old woman. You're dry. You sag. Why don't you throw them away, Sadie, with the old vacuum-cleaner bags? (14)

Sadie has fantasies of sexual conquest, yet is self-conscious about the state of her body. She seems driven by either ritual or instinct and while she recognizes this, to a certain extent, she revels in it rather than wishes to prevent it or challenge it. In her conversation with Mowchuk, the "son" figure, she observes:

You are a salesman and I am a buyer. "A Relationship". There aren't many of those left anymore. Mother and child. Husband and wife? Lovers? *Dismissing each of them.* Umh! Who cares about me, unh? Why you and I might be the last two people in the world having a real conversation. Would you care to sit on the couch?

Lifts an edge of the sheet seductively. (29)

Sadie's conversation with Mowchuck and her interactions with him and the other salesmen also echo Millett's idea of sexual politics being linked to a material economy where women are subjugated both through sexual contracts and through broader economic transactions.

Sadie implies that the only stable relationship in the list she enumerates is that of mother and child. She believes, however, that her family no longer needs her and attempts to recover that feeling through sexual intrigue:

It's a good thing I've learned not to trust anyone. I used to be soft. Any fool could take advantage of Sadie Golden. My own family taught me better. . . . I've got a son, Mr. Mowchuk, who shrinks from me when I go to kiss him. . . . "Mind your own business" they tell me. What other business has a mother to mind? I'll soon be dead and gone. Do you think it's for my sake? I don't count anymore. I used to be beautiful. I watched the veins sprout like grapes on my hips and my breasts when I was pregnant. They share nothing with me, not even their troubles. My hands were spoilt washing diapers. My skin smells from all the meals I cooked for them. . . . (37)

Sadie describes her loss of identity to the mothering role, and with it her loss of beauty and physical vitality due to unremitting domestic labour. She resents both, having been compromised by her biological and social functions in relation to her family. Her angst at

becoming physically obscene because of her effacement translates into a sense of alienation from the children she sacrificed herself for. The very experience of pregnancy and breast-feeding is an abject one, and Sadie's sense of marginalization is not redeemed by her experience as a mother because that role has compromised her experience of sexuality, which is a role that, while apparently empowering, is equally corrosive.

Given the opportunity to assume the role of romantic/sexual object in the play, Sadie positions herself on a pretend throne, titillated by the fact that Mowchuk and Dickens, the lover figure, intend to fight for her honour. Afterwards she says:

My men! You've battled well for me. . . . For me, yes. And for Puss. She's gone to sleep. One day you'll miaow, won't you Puss? And the world will go deaf. (53, 55)

The reference to her cat's miaow suggests that Sadie believes in some symbolic sense of female power, but she is unable to access it herself. She subsequently enacts a ritual with Dickens, playing up her status as victim and appealing to his masculine propensity to protect her. This game is apparently titillating to him, but her skill in acting it out, and the didascalia, reveal her contempt for her role, and Simons' critique of women's experience more generally:

Pace builds, revenge in her voice.

I'd lie here festering, a corpse of love. My children love me. They won't leave me alone. Then they'd feel sorry. My breasts hurt. They'd touch me, the little children, the mothers, the businessmen, the doctors, the plumbers, the dogs would have a sniff too, and they'd all catch the plague. *She laughs again that surprisingly clear laughter.* Because that's what happens to milk. It turns rancid. (67)

This disturbing passage highlights Sadie's manipulation of her abased position. She positions herself as abject and is in turn repulsed by the abjected contents of her own body. The passage aligns with Kristeva's account of the paradoxical revulsion a subject feels for milk:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk. . . .
I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. . . . But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*. (*Powers* 3)

Kristeva's description of this negotiation of subjectivity reflects the subject's difficult transition to autonomy, reacting against the symbolic system that he/she is undeniably inscribed within, "without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it" (3). Sadie struggles to assert her subjectivity throughout the play, and her difficulty in establishing her sense of self is directly linked to her experience of abjection in relation to dominant patriarchal culture as well as within her own domestic environment.

This series of associations underlines her struggle to come to terms with the shifting female roles that she must play and her inability to feel secure in any of them. Sadie's self-sacrifice also suggests that although she has lost her sexual identity, what endures is her status as mother. However, as quickly as she suggests so, she undermines the comfort of that image by evoking the notion of her body as "festering" and diseased. A subsequent passage

similarly emphasizes Sadie's subjective diffusion and physical martyrdom in relation to her children:

Bit by bit, stone by stone, let her take away the foundations of her soul and plant them in her children. In the night when she puts her hand on their forehead let it be her forehead. It will be her body she covers in the night. Her ears will be on them. Her arms and her hair will be to protect them from the sun. Then one day let her be surprised when she looks at herself and sees there's nothing left of her but the skin. Let her scream that she can't tear it off, too, to make a tent to protect her children from the world. *She sings.*

Bye baby bunting

Mama's gone a-hunting

She's taken off her own white skin

To wrap her baby bunting in. (69)

Sadie's revision of the classic lullaby changes it from a soothing assertion of paternal love into a gruesome depiction of maternal martyrdom.²⁴

Despite Sadie's belief that she has lost herself to her offspring, she nonetheless finds that it is the maternal role that allows her to manipulate the men in her life. Her power comes from her ability to appeal to and satisfy men's infantile needs:

They would sit in my lap. . . *HIGHRISE gestures. DICKENS sits in her lap. . .*
. I fed them milk. *SADIE unbuttons her blouse.*

²⁴ Sadie uses this nursery rhyme twice in the play. In the first act she revises the original to read "Bye, Baby bunting, / Mama's goin' a-hunting/The world is round/And though you run/You'll end up here with the setting sun. . ." The original version of the lullaby is, "Bye, Baby Bunting/Daddy's gone a hunting, /to get a little rabbit skin, /to wrap his baby bunting in."

Her monologue becomes a mini-drama enacted by the three men, as they are directed by Sadie's words:

Every morning they came. One, of course, turned into a prince, but I threw him away. Sometimes the ants would come. *HIGHRISE mimes*. They didn't frighten me. Slugs would leave trails that looked like dance patterns with me at the centre. And the birds. Down from the tree they flew. . . . I had lots of milk for all of them. No. Don't fight. Some of them nibbled at the tips of my fingers. Or my ears. But they grew back. You see, there were no leaves in the forest, no worms, and no berries, just me. I could hear the birds behind me fall out of their nests out of the trees. . . kerplunk, kerplunk. . . . *HIGHRISE takes over the dull thud sound*. . . from hunger. *SADIE stands up*. *DICKENS rolls out of her lap*. *MOWCHUK falls from her shoulder*. All dead. (79)

Sadie's claim that she threw away her prince suggests that she felt complete without a romantic interest. She also claims that she had enough milk to provide for all the creatures in the forest. Her fantasy, then, involves her starring in a contemporary fairy tale where she, the princess, is entirely self-sufficient, and yet it is tainted by the fact that the forest creatures attempt both to ravage her and to gain nourishment from her. However, they die of hunger. Whether sex object or mother, Sadie fails. She is unable to successfully translate received cultural expectations into a renewed feminist vision.

Soon after this compelling scene, Highrise reveals that Sadie's husband has recently died: "I read a notice in the obituaries, and I said to myself, 'Sadie Golden needs me. For her pleasures. She'll be able to afford them again. What luck I'm ready for her'" (81). Viewed in relation to the scene before it, the reason for Sadie's husband's death is mysterious. It is unclear whether she, in fact, was in some way responsible for his death and why she has

arranged her group tea party with the salesmen in response. It appears as though Sadie has arranged the ritual play with the men in order to explore her subjective crisis in having performed so many alienating female roles. The performative nature of her role as wife, mother, and lover is initially indulged in and then satirized with the trio of archetypal men represented by Mowchuck, Dickens, and Highrise.

The artificiality of Sadie's self-dramatizing is underlined by Highrise when he challenges Dickens:

And you? You don't like it, eh? Especially before an audience? If you're not willing to be a jackass, go home, Buster. Change professions. We're performers. Artists. (95)

The metatheatricality of this moment reminds audiences that they are watching a staged event, and it may be significant that it precedes a highly-charged and potentially threatening scene. Following Highrise's feather duster dance for Sadie, which ends in her crumpled on the floor, legs spread, twitching (97), the didascalía reveal that "[t]his last effort to please SADIE has exhausted HIGHRISE. He slumps on love seat [sic]. His magical jacket is too heavy for him. He takes it off revealing a surprisingly slight frame" (97). From that point on, the stage directions suggest that "the three men remain in varying positions of childlike vulnerability" with Sadie presiding, eventually offering them her final speech:

The things we might have done for you and didn't. Holding you in our arms, dependent on our breasts, grasping, pulling at us. . . . I have led a full, rich, and rewarding life. You think it's just me standing here? I have friends and relatives. While they are alive, wherever they are, so am I. We should be like the tribes in Africa. They all live under one roof. On the mother's side, I read it somewhere. Or no roof at all. That's how it was in the old days. There's no

such thing as neighbours anymore. My friends are here. But none of you can suckle from me. It's nearly three o'clock. (100)

The beginning of Sadie's speech involves her remembering how powerful she felt in relation to her infants; however, her assertion that she has friends and relatives is undermined by her suggestion that they are distant from her, and that she has no sense of connection to her neighbours. That Sadie refers to the salesmen in her life as "friends" and then acknowledges that she cannot give them nourishment or feel powerfully maternal as a result, leads her to obsess again about the terror of "three o'clock," when the sun streams into her home and symbolically effaces her. This passage highlights the fact that despite her performance, she has failed to assert her subjectivity and fears that she does not, in fact, exist.

In response to her dawning sense of annihilation, Sadie remembers her former sexual attractiveness and how it predominated in her relationship with her husband. While this reverie seems to affirm her sense of worth, it only further emphasizes her experience of victimization and invisibility:

Before he couldn't have enough of me, Old Man Golden, it wasn't decent, it was cruel, he wouldn't let me alone, when I bled, in the night when I was safe in my dreams he came for me, in the hospital right on the hospital bed, right after I'd had the babies, in the afternoon when even the teacups were sleeping. . . . He'd surprise me, "Now, now" he'd say. Am I real? Do you see me? And then the pain, but "now" he'd say, "Now". These hands, wrinkled, crippled, blue veins, but parchment, too. I think. Do you see them? Or through them. . . . (100)

Sadie's recollection of her husband's desire and her own submission to it leads her to the recognition that she is now without that defining influence in her life, and perhaps, even with

it, that she was not truly alive. De Beauvoir describes how women are haunted by growing old and suggests that once a woman realizes that her sexual attractiveness is waning she understands that “she is allowed no hold on the world save through the mediation of a man” (576) and she becomes obsessed with what is to become of her:

This is what she anxiously asks herself while she helplessly looks on at the degeneration of this fleshy object which she identifies with herself. She puts up a battle. But hair-dye, skin treatments, plastic surgery, will never do more than prolong her dying youth. Perhaps she can at least deceive her mirror. But when the first hints come of that fated and irreversible process which is to destroy the whole edifice built up during puberty, she feels the fatal touch of death itself. (576)

In the play, Sadie seems to come to a similar epiphany:

You're not in the house of a dead woman, are you? Thin, dissolving . . . transparent, like my window. I float into it, yes, I love it, yes, I become this glass and through it, too, dissolve. I enter whatever passes in front of my window. . . . But when the sun hits it, ohmygod the glare, then I'm trapped like a spirit in a white cave crying for a body to enter. (101)

At the climatic moment in the play, the undertaker approaches Sadie and she says, “I've been waiting for you” (102). Then the didascalia relates,

The salesmen drop their products to the floor and move in on SADIE, grasping for the cat. Frightened, she lets it fall. It shatters. SADIE goes to cupboard and opens it, revealing rows of coloured cats. She takes one of a new colour and returns to salesmen [sic] who are scrambling on floor [sic] for money from cat's belly [sic]. (102)

Sadie's desperate attempts to appease the salesmen with one of many of her stock-piled cats evoke a poignant sense of despair, as it suggests that Sadie recognizes the commercialization of the female role and the fact that the salesmen's desire is both predatory and generalized. She comes to the realization that she has no true identity, and is unable to sing the song she intended to entertain them with. She is confused to the point where she cannot remember her song,²⁵ and when she opens her mouth to sing again, is unable to articulate anything but a sound that "starts as a moan and builds and builds to a terrible cry, a scream of loneliness and anguish," and "As the cry builds the lights on stage rise to an unbearable glare, the 3 o'clock terror SADIE has spoken of" (103). Her scream is accompanied by rock music (apparently coming from her son's room) and she falls and is carried away by the salesmen to a coffin, deposited therein, and then the "rock music merges with the howl of the cat. The wall moves, or, if a scrim, is pierced by the light. It's apparent now there is no second storey. The sound ceases abruptly" (103). Sadie is then carried silently upstairs to the void. This ambiguous ending suggests that Sadie's elaborate preparations have been in the service of her own demise.

Ultimately, despite her "crabdance," a highly choreographed performance of abjection, Sadie apparently succumbs to the salesmen. The play's ambiguous conclusion suggests that Sadie is unable to live when deprived of her roles as mother and wife. When the role of "consumer" does not satisfy, it becomes apparent that she is still being exploited and she is unable to continue to perform any role at all. In much the same way as in *Soft Voices*, the audience is left to decipher what exactly has led to Sadie's tragic end, and while Sadie's puzzling character may allow her to be dismissed as anomalous or a "madwoman," her angst has also been powerfully delineated. Sadie's negotiation of the mothering role, her

²⁵ Jackdaw song.

exploitation of her sexuality, particularly in relation to her maternal status with the men, illustrates the conflicted feelings women have in relation to motherhood and the challenge they have maintaining their sexual identity. The performative nature of domestic, sexual, and consumer roles is emphasized throughout the play, as Sadie seemingly cannot escape her circumstances and so is seen to exploit them. The play thus problematizes women's experience of their biological and social roles. Having to be some combination of mother and lover, Simons suggests, leaves little room for an independently defined self. The remaining option of asserting oneself as a consumer is depicted as a trap. Sadie's self-devised ritual – the crabdance – is her only way to cope with multiple role demands. Only through her own play – her assumption of the role of director/mother/lover – does she triumph, and that triumph is questionable. At the play's conclusion the audience is left to wonder whether she is, in fact, dead or whether she has merely staged a metatheatrical scene – a “staged” death. Another possibility is that she has ascended to pursue her own spiritual evolution, to resume her role as mother to her rebellious son, and to leave her previous sexual and economic dependence behind. The ambiguity of the play's conclusion and Sadie's conflicted negotiation of motherhood and her own subjectivity create a disturbing feminist text.

***Crabdance*: Critical Reception**

Crabdance was first produced by the Seattle-based A.C.T. (A Contemporary Theatre), who commissioned Malcolm Black to direct the play's world premiere on September 17th, 1969. In “The Strange Unhappy Life of *Crabdance*,” Black describes the reaction to the play as mixed: “The play caused great controversy and excitement in Seattle: some people loved it, others were repelled by it, and many, like the reviewers, were confused” (11). American reviewers such as Sylvia Lewis and Bertram Joseph praised the

work for its multiple resonances, and Joseph regarded it as a major theatrical achievement, but neither saw the play as a feminist *crie-de-coeur*.

In a review entitled “A Cruel Funhouse of Id,” Sylvia Lewis of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* describes the play as a “cantilevered funhouse,” and suggests that the characters are “constantly play-acting, donning and stripping roles and psyche, each of the three men defining himself through the eyes of Sadie Golden, all wife-lover.” Lewis’ review considers Sadie’s character to be conflation of several typically female roles, “widow, client, mother, mythical female, lonely old woman” and calls her “a cross between Mother Courage and Molly Bloom.” Lewis reserves the highest praise for the character of Sadie whom she describes as a “true portrayal of one of the most mercurial-epic characters in recent theatre” (33). Lewis ends her review by calling *Crabdance* a “weighty” and “interesting” play in “its intellectualizing, its cruelty, its strange characters that seem to function id-to-id.” Lewis recognizes the significance of Sadie’s characterization, yet doesn’t speculate about how she is to be read in relation to larger cultural concerns. By suggesting that the play is a cruel funhouse, she limits its potential social commentary.

Bertram Joseph, a Shakespearean scholar, was enthusiastic in his radio review, comparing the stature of the play to Pinter’s *The Room*, and suggesting that Simons would become a theatre celebrity:

I have no hesitation in saying this is a superb play. . . . There is no point in trying to tell you about the play in words: what it is, what it means. The only words which can convey the experience of this play have been used already by Beverley Simons. I can tell you it has a main cast of four; one woman and three men; that it concerns itself with relationships between human beings, (what play does not?), with the needs of individuals, the power drives and the

weakness drives which make us want and do the things we do. It is a play of enormous depths, of enormous sensitivity, of unbelievable tenderness and delicacy. (1)

Joseph's review focuses on the universal aspects of the play and does not distinguish between the experiences of men and women in the piece. Instead, he suggests that the play regards human experience generally and that it has the potential to affect each gender equally:

Many people rarely concentrate on communicating anything except what they want to sell. But the play isn't called *The Salesmen* because it deals with more than selling. It shows what we buy, what we need from others, what we take, what we give, what we seize from and thrust upon our fellows. If you still have a lot to find out about yourself as a man or a woman, this play may come to you as a revelation of yourself, of your own inadequacies, of the terrible things you have done to others and to yourself. (2)

Joseph reserves the highest praise for the production, comparing it to a classic masterpiece of theatre of the absurd:

Yes, I am not afraid to use the word 'great' of this play. I am more certain it is great than I am that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is great. *Crabdance* is great in its vision of life. That vision is communicated in never less than competent and very often brilliant dialogue, character imagining, structure, symbol. (2)

While Joseph's review also focuses on the absurd elements in the script, he argues that the play has the potential to lead to a renewed understanding of one's responsibility to oneself and others.

James Barber reviewed the Seattle performance for *The Vancouver Province* on

September 18, 1969. He suggested that the play had been diluted in production but noted that “It is a strong play, a fierce play, and above all a play which has incredible potential for leaving an audience seriously concerned about the realities of its own existence.” He emphasized the topicality of the piece and noted its preoccupation with the performative, but doesn’t acknowledge its feminist underpinnings. His use of the masculine pronoun to describe the roleplaying further obscures the fact that it is Sadie who is at the mercy of the drama and who is ultimately destroyed by it:

It is a play about roles, roles being played in relationships between two or more people. Miss Simons sets out to examine the responsibilities in these roles, the need for continuation of a role in a continuing relationship, the acceptance by one person of a role thrust upon him by another, stronger, person, and the need that develops in him to nurture that role, even though it will eventually destroy him.

Barber’s description of Sadie as “an open-line-show woman, a sad caller of people, the terror of visiting salesmen, a spider in a very nasty, sticky web,” suggests that she is in control of what happens in the play. He also labels her “a killer, a cunning, many-faceted sexpot, the keeper of a room in which she hides hope, the owner of the only compass and all of them afloat in a sea of doubt and insecurity,” which implies that Sadie orchestrates the play as a means of survival. Thus, Barber distinguishes many of the play’s features, yet does not extrapolate from those particular circumstances to speculate about what they imply about women in general.

The Canadian premiere occurred at the Queen Elizabeth Playhouse in Vancouver on January 14th, 1972. This production did not seem to generate as much enthusiasm as the Seattle production. Raby notes, “Simons’ personality caused as much interest as did her play,

and to an extent, clouded its reception. The author was seen by some as an abrasive, aggressive, and arrogant person; the play was correspondingly perceived by many in the same light, although it was championed by some critics” (115).

James Barber reviewed the play again for the *Vancouver Province* on January 17, 1972. Barber began his review “*Crabdance* Proves Utterly Exhausting” with compelling praise: “Beverley Simons’ *Crabdance* is a fierce, exhausting play, a script which reads like the scratches of a cat locked in a cupboard, which builds like an orgasm and finally, when all the rituals are over, when the games are played and the worlds are no more, leaves its reader empty and satisfied.” He argued that the play was topical and that it illuminated “in two and a half hours . . . the obscure corners which sociologists, research psychiatrists, and every guru in and out of Christendom spends thousands of hours and dollars trying to explain. . . . a play which has incredible potential for leaving an audience seriously concerned about the realities of its own existence” (33). Just as some of the other critics noted the play’s potential to inspire self-examination, Barber notes its educational role. However, like many of the other critics, he does not articulate what that awareness might suggest about society and women’s particular role within it.

In January 22, 1972, Christopher Dafoe gave the play a slight review in his column for the *Vancouver Sun* in which he suggested that “A number of people have expressed dismay and consternation over Beverley Simons’ play *Crabdance*, currently sending them around the bend at the Playhouse. People tend to love it or hate it, few I suspect have found it dull.” Dafoe stresses the fact that those he spoke to suggested that it left them feeling exceptionally vulnerable, as though they had survived an attack: “I emerged from the theatre on opening night feeling as if I had been expertly worked over and left for dead. One man told me he felt as if someone had sent an insane gorilla to his bedroom. Another expressed

the view that he had both ears sawed off with a dull razor blade. *Crabdance* as you can see, hits hard and leaves a hole.” Dafoe also includes a quotation from another viewer, whose gender is not noted:

“It reeks of sex,” gasped another viewer. “I can’t quite put my finger on it, but I know it’s there. Or have I got a dirty mind?”

The audience member’s confusion about the play illustrates how its complex content both disturbed and obscured its message. Sadie’s abjection both compels and disgusts. Simons’ portrayal of her abject position, while political, also arouses the interest and revulsion of those who witness it. The tenor of these critical reviews perhaps suggests that Simons’ strategic deflection of an overt feminist critique was successful. Like Aviva Ravel’s work, Simons’ play evinces a conflicted feminist vision that veiled its political message.

Preparing: Funny, Satirical, and Painful

Simons’ play *Preparing* is a one-act monologue written in 1972 as part of a trilogy with *The Crusader* and *Triangle*, and was first published in the *Capilano Review* in January 1975. Talonbooks subsequently published the trilogy later that year, along with an additional play entitled *Prologue*. All four plays were written around the same time and Raby believes that they “show a huge leap in style from the rest of Simons’ plays” (198). Of the four, *Preparing* is the strongest and most accessible, and it addresses many of the concerns that preoccupied Sadie Golden in *Crabdance*, particularly the problematization of sex-role socialization and the limitations of the ritualized aspect of women’s experience. Simons suggests that the play “was a leave-taking of the work I had done up to that time. It is essentially direct, linear; there’s a development of time in it, but it’s realistic in presentation” (qtd. in Raby 160). The monologue is powerful as a piece of theatre that echoes its content in

visual form, as it explores the notion of a woman's self-conscious and contemptuous preparation for various stages of her life, her performance of gendered subjectivity, and her eventual death.

The play focuses primarily on Jeannie and is a distillation of the feminist themes present in *Crabdance*, especially in terms of how Jeannie negotiates important stages of female development and is compelled to perform a rigidly-defined gender script. In many ways the text reflects de Beauvoir's discussion of a woman's life in terms of her quest for transcendence. Jeannie is shown to overcome her upbringing, her painful divorce, and her post-partum despair to become a powerful matriarch. Like Sadie in *Crabdance*, Jeannie attempts to find a sense of identity through material acquisitions; following her divorce, she focuses on her career, accumulating wealth and influence through her adoption of patriarchal values. However, in the process of transcending her female condition, Jeannie is also depicted as losing her humanity, both in terms of her personal characteristics and, literally, in death. The focus on Jeannie's preparation for female rituals suggests that women's experiences are not only culturally determined, but also biologically determined. Jeannie suffers because she is an ambitious young woman who does not want to be constrained, and yet the limitations she experiences are a direct result of both her biological vulnerabilities and the fact that she is unable to escape the expectations of her gender, from being a "good girl" with her family of origin through to being a scolding "mother" to those who need her direction in the arts community. The notion of performativity as outlined by Butler is anticipated in relation to Jeannie's forced adoption of not only socially dictated roles but also the repetitive gestures of femininity, both adopted under duress and ultimately responsible for her sense of personal alienation and experience of abjection in relation to her family and her community.

Raby suggests that the subject matter of *Preparing* grew out of the pressures that Simons was feeling in relation to a period of involvement in arts advocacy:

she was an active member of the Vancouver art “scene,” attending continual board and committee meetings. She became impatient, disgusted and heartsore at the waste and corruption that she found in some of the artistic organizations: this seemed a microcosm of life. Out of the microcosm came Jeannie, who is by turns self-disgusted, impatient, heart-sore and corrupt. (158)

The monologue hinges on strong characterization, and yet Jeannie is a difficult character. However, her sardonic critique of contemporary culture and how women must fashion themselves to fit in seemed to strike a chord with audiences. In her thesis, Raby claims that the “critical response to the play’s production has been uniform in its approbation, in marked contrast to the controversial reactions elicited by Simons’ full-length plays. The consensus at the play’s appearance was that Simons had at last found her ideal form. *Preparing* is generally considered to be a member of the new genre of ‘women’s plays,’ due to the predominance and power of Jeannie’s vision” (165).

The setting of the play is domestic and Simons includes a good deal of stage direction for the piece, outlining for the reader the nuances of the character’s speeches and suggesting gestures, character traits, motivations, and legitimizations for her words and actions:

“Preparing” begins with the brash rebellion of early teens. As JEANNIE talks, she adjusts her dress, hair, and make-up, she matures; but always present is her growing sexual power, her fear, her quick ironic mind, her candour. The monologue ends with the brash indifference of old age. (26; italics in original)

The didascalia emphasize that Jeannie is self-conscious about her own self-styling as female. Femininity is shown to be assumed through dress, hair, and make-up. Despite the acid tone of much of Jeannie's monologue, Simons also suggests in her stage notes that there are opportunities for humour in the text, but it is pathetic rather than light-hearted:

It's important that the actress take her time in the opening sections, allowing the audience to adjust to her and to her transitions. If she enjoys herself the audience should find "Preparing" funny as well as satirical and painful. (26)

Simons emphasizes that the rituals that Jeannie experiences are not necessarily ones that she is consciously choosing. Her adaptation to the demands of her roles is thus seen to be done under a certain degree of duress. She is, in effect, acting out her role as woman, and yet it is depicted as contrived and almost entirely unfulfilling.

Jeannie describes her life as being consumed with "preparations," as she tries to conform to the expectations of others. However, she is seemingly unaware of what she really wants:

Just once, I wish I could step outside of time where just once I could prepare myself, without being rushed for . . . nothing, or . . . maybe something. . . important. . . when I find out what that is. (27)

Unfortunately, Jeannie never does discover how to simply prepare or construct herself. She is, as Butler suggests, constructed by her performance as a gendered subject and has no identity apart from that.

However, just as she does in *Crabdance*, Simons shows audiences that a woman's experience is not only socially determined, but also biologically and psychologically conditioned. Once again, Simons challenges motherhood. Jeannie's reflections on her family of origin suggest she is actively rebelling against them, and against her mother, especially.

She is shown to sacrifice her own well-being in an attempt to establish her independence:

But it seems the old umbilical cord is intact. . . . I'll break it yet, even if I bleed to death. I've done everything I know they disapprove of. I've had more men than my mother has fantasies. The only thing that gets me through it sometimes is imagining her enraged face. (29)

Jeannie's youthful arrogance and ambition highlight her desire to live outside of culture and history, but at the same time reinforce the extent to which she is controlled by them:

I intend to shape my experience myself. No rituals, no history. I spring, fully developed, out of my own forehead. (29)

Simons highlights the irony of Jeannie's assumption that she can control her own experience by portraying how her life is circumscribed by all manner of conditioning: cultural, social, biological, psychological, and intellectual. Jeannie's belief that she can shape her own experience evokes pathos, as she is so clearly at the mercy of conditions beyond her control. Throughout the play, Simons addresses the rituals associated with female experience and shows how each one exerts a coercive power that determines the female subject's experience.

The next scene portrays Jeannie just before her wedding. While acknowledging her own ambivalence and apprehension about marriage, Jeannie nonetheless decides to go through with the marriage ritual:

Then why are you preparing? Because you're a coward, Jeannie.

Hearing a noise.

What's that? You can leave. It's not too late. You'll never be able to stick it, one man for a lifetime. You'll be bored after the first month. Oh god, is he thinking the same? It's the only way to go into it, with a mature agreement to

separate if one or the other. . . . (30)

Jeannie's feelings about marriage highlight her sense of the limitations of the matrimonial contract, yet they also illustrate the power of social conditioning. Despite her intentions and reservations, Jeannie proceeds with a culturally-sanctioned ritual that she has little faith in.

With respect to childbirth, another defining ritual in women's lives, Jeannie attempts to perform according to the preconceived script, yet the actual physical pain she experiences throws her off track and back into a child's dependence on her mother:

Poor Doctor. I'm sorry, but I haven't had a chance to. . . Mummy! It hurts . . .
hold my hand. I'm scared. I'm not ready. I can't . . . make it . . . stop, you see.
That's what's so . . . unreasonable. (31)

This scene highlights the inescapable quality of women's experience. The ritual of childbirth is depicted as both socially conditioned and biologically demanding, so much so that the woman, reliant on a medical professional, is ill-prepared for the intense feelings of vulnerability she experiences and is seemingly unable to reconcile her lived female experience with her received cultural script about her fitness or 'natural' preparedness for motherhood. Women's biological vulnerability and the social issues compounding that are further explored in relation to Jeannie's post-partum depression. Following her child's birth, Jeannie suffers a nervous breakdown and is overcome by fears of violence, which strain her relationship with her husband.

Instead of portraying Jeannie as succumbing to weakness following her husband's abandonment of her, the stage directions at this point in the play depict Jeannie in the midst of a significant transformation. Her outer appearance alters to express her inner resolve and her awareness that she must assume an entirely different role:

She is changing her hairstyle.

How shall I make myself appear? What role shall I play today, when one half of me that's already begun to wither, is about to be lopped off?

JEANNIE takes off her wedding ring and drops it into the box. Divorce.

What face shall I put on? (33)

At this point in the monologue Jeannie becomes conscious of how she must strategically perform her identity for others in order to assume a measure of power, particularly because of the vulnerability of her circumstances. Simons suggests that following Jeannie's divorce, she becomes more aware of her sexual power and that this is what allows her to exercise power in a public arena:

She has aged, yet her sexual power and her awareness of it has increased.

Her voice has deepened. She is a Queen Bee who attracts but gives no honey.

(33)

As Queen Bee, Jeannie apparently has power, but, like Sadie Golden in *Crabdance*, she also has lost her nutritive capacities. She is not able to nourish or nurture her family. In Jeannie's case, she is contemptuous of her family's needs and reluctant to assist them.

Jeannie also becomes more masculinized with respect to her role as breadwinner. She soon outpaces her husband in terms of her earning power and explains:

Did I tell you the alimony payments were reversed? I've never enjoyed signing cheques quite so much since. But he'd changed. Pity I couldn't have mailed them through a time slot to that "kind" man who left me for my "own good." I was the only one at his funeral, which I paid for, of course. (34)

In much the same way that Sadie realizes that she is a pawn of a consumer culture, Jeannie regards her fortuitous (and anomalous) post-divorce financial standing as providing others with more opportunities to exploit her. Jeannie's increased financial status also translates into

a new set of responsibilities as she assumes responsibility for a number of arts organizations:

Would you believe it? Me? Kept awake at night about how to help them survive? I'm on the phone endlessly. When I'm not playing tiddlywinks with their books, I'm playing mama to those quarrelling fools who think they run our local institutions. (34)

Jeannie's understanding of herself as "playing mama" reveals her deliberate manipulation of her maternal status and influence. Just as Sadie was aware of the psychological power of maternal influence, so Jeannie becomes aware that in order to perform in the "business" world of the cultural sector, she must exploit whatever influence she has, even if she is no longer able or willing to actually fulfill a maternal role. Simons' depiction of Jeannie's personal power is therefore conflicted; she is at once socially powerful and personally corrupt. She is a so-called "strong woman" who has nothing but contempt for her public role.

Throughout this part of the monologue, Jeannie applies make-up and while it appears that she is using it as women conventionally do, to appear younger and more vital, the visual irony is that the make-up that is applied changes the actress and ages her, even as she performs its application to do otherwise. The didascalia reveal that Jeannie's social mask is assumed at a cost:

JEANNIE puts on lighter lipstick and applies makeup to the lines in her face as though to erase them, but in fact the actress is accenting her age. She pulls out the perfume flask which now contains whiskey, and a bottle of pills. She shakes several pills into her hand and washes them down. (34)

Jeannie's success in performing her role as cultural matriarch depends upon her sedation with alcohol and drugs. Her material success is thus depicted as corrosive and untenable.

Jeannie appears to be as much a victimizer as a victim, and as the play progresses she

becomes increasingly unsympathetic. She explains in the later stages of the monologue:

I'm a liberal, small l, always have been, but those people [in the arts organizations she's a part of] *want* to be terrorized a little. And likeminded persons must be deterred. It's for their own good. Not that we ever get any gratitude. We're obliged to lead. It's our tedious responsibility. . . . I'm not popular, but then again I never have been. What I say is . . . if you want to be a fat cat, grow claws. (35)

Aside from her public role and her mercenary attitude in relation to it, she is unable to relate intimately with her family, mistaking their concern for greed:

If they sing Happy Birthday to me I shall tell them all to shove it. I've become a fad among my grandchildren, increasingly so as I become less interested in them. I've published how I intend to leave my money so I wonder why they keep bothering me. Hoping I'll change my mind, I suppose. (36)

As a result of her involvement in public life, Jeannie has become co-opted by materialist concerns and moves far from her rebellious youth into an entrenched position. In the end, much like Sadie, Jeannie becomes alienated from friends and family, and becomes acutely aware of her own emotional isolation and abjection. Jeannie's final moments involve her preparation for her physical death (one might argue she has already experience a psychic death). She acknowledges her body's failings, saying, "I drop scales now like an old fish" (36). In response to the community's acknowledgement through the naming of a new theatre after her, she retorts, "It makes no difference to me what they do. Fuck'em all" (37). Her final reflections on her family also illustrate her disengagement from them:

One of the children hanged himself, the youngest one, the sweet fool of the family. The others are all very successful, even happy. Or so they say.

Preparing for the future. Probably at home now making lists of questions for me. My advice. I only allow them in every three months. Keep them eager, thinking I don't want them. And I don't. Fuck'em. All. I've never cared for establishments or institutions, but it seems I've spawned one. Hurry, old woman, you're always late. For what? (37)

The didascalia describe Jeannie going to a mirror and looking into it, then placing its face down and walking to centre stage, covering her head with a shawl and becoming a shroud. The last line from the playwright is "*Her preparation is over*" (37). To the end Jeannie has rushed to prepare for something she does not understand and has no power to resist. Initially, she conforms to gender type, but her attempt to do so is unsuccessful. Following her divorce, she adopts the values of patriarchal society, but finds them unsustainable. Ultimately, Jeannie seems unable to articulate accurately what she believes in, having become nothing more than what others want from her, having been constituted through her performances, but having little sense of her identity/subjectivity beyond a negation of that.

Simons' depiction of Jeannie's performance in relation to the rituals and passages in her life represents the obstacles that women face in establishing their own identity and the particular challenges of a privileged woman who has a degree of self-awareness, yet seemingly no ability to act on it. Jeannie's lack of compassion is particularly noteworthy and makes it difficult for a reader or audience to clearly identify with her. Despite the fact that much of what Jeannie is criticizing reflects many women's experience of being overwhelmed by the roles that they are forced to play in relation to the demands of a patriarchal society, her specific circumstances are such that many would be repelled by her. The fact that Jeannie attains wealth and influence over her community and her family and yet resents this position of power makes her all the more puzzling, but perhaps, as Raby suggests, Simons is

underlining her philosophical position that society forces individuals to adopt value systems that are “meager justifications for ambition, greed, and cynicism,” and that the play is an illustration of “the existentialist angst of powerlessness and despair and the sense of being alien in one’s own world” (160). Certainly the play reflects aspects of mainstream feminist thought circulating at the time, from de Beauvoir’s critique of women’s exploitation at every life stage, to Friedan’s description of the lonely housewife who cannot find fulfillment through her static domestic role, to Millett’s condemnation of a patriarchal society that exploits women sexually, emotionally, and economically. The most interesting aspect to her narrative, however, is its anticipation of Butler’s critique of the performativity of gender, as it clearly illustrates the unconscious construction of a gendered subject, rather than revealing a straightforward assumption of gender role.

Preparing: Critical Reception

Preparing premiered at Simon Fraser University Theatre on September 12th, 1973, directed by Hagan Beggs and Keith Pepper. Most of the reviews of the production focus on either the depiction of the various stages of women’s lives or the universal human dilemma of having to conform to social expectations; however, few of the reviewers regard Jeannie as a woman who struggles to adapt to a patriarchal system that demands compliance and exacts particular consequences. They ignore the fact that Jeannie’s particular struggle also arises as a result of her experience of female roles, both biological and social.

Writing in the *Vancouver Sun* on September 13th, 1973, Christopher Dafoe reviewed the production favourably, suggesting that Simons has “cast a strong light on various female roles and makes a number of sharp comments on various aspects of the lives of women.” He accurately identifies Simons’ focus on women’s experiences, yet does not recognize her

critique of how women are forced to enact restrictive gender roles:

We meet the young woman who has broken family ties; we meet the bride, the woman in labor, the young mother, the tough committee woman, the resourceful and independent divorcee and the elderly but hardly meek grandmother. The play, I suppose, can be taken as a panoramic view of a single female lifetime or as a collage of many lifetimes and modes of life.

While outlining the play's plot, Dafoe is unable to offer a definitive perspective on the play or comment on the two alternative visions he does present.

Bob Allen wrote a preview piece on *Pepper and Beggs* for the *Vancouver Province* on September 8th, 1973, focused on the directors' intent to challenge their audiences to engage with their work in an experiential way. Beggs states that his purpose in mounting these three plays was to introduce students to their work: "Sort of, 'Here's what we do. Can you dig it? If not, that's cool, but if you can, join us and we'll get you doing it.'" Allen's subsequent review in the *Vancouver Province* on September 12, 1973, suggests that he believed *Preparing* was a play that was not limited to feminist concerns: "One could look at the play as simply a feminist statement, but it would be a gross simplification to do so." He argued that it offered an "incisive look at the games people play, the roles they accept and adopt, and the ultimate waste of it all" (qtd. in Raby 169). Allen's focus on the universality of a performative imperative and his mention of a "feminist statement" suggest that he regards a feminist message as a diminution of a larger philosophical issue. His review, in effect, undermines Simons' provocative critique of a woman who is devastated by her adherence to gender roles and who eventually seeks emancipation through mainstream values. Despite his focus on the universality of limiting roles, he does not recognize Simons' scathing condemnation of women who are co-opted by a patriarchal social and economic

system.

Michael Sidnell's review, "Simons' Short Plays," in *Canadian Theatre Review's* Winter 1976 issue describes *Preparing* as an example of the "impassioned Simons," offering "sensitive perceptions of a woman's phases of life" (19). Sidnell argues that the form of the play "has limitations and these may be symptomatic of finding the appropriate action to embody these perceptions of womanhood; the difficulty of finding substitutes for the forms that predominantly masculine themes have engendered" (19). Sidnell's review seems to imply that the action of the piece, its tight focus on rites of passage in female life, is problematic and that it somehow cannot measure up to the more powerful action of masculine themes. He also suggests that the play is derivative and regards its protest as unfocused:

The woman's life (or lives) is "a constant preparation for something that never happens" (Yeats, not Simons) beginning and ending with "fuck'em all", the sense that the female roles are imposed by "them" (not specifically men and not, as in *Crabdance*, God) to occlude an essential freedom. (19)

In much the same way as the previously mentioned reviews, he rejects the specific feminist argument against gendered role play and instead universalizes Simons' message, seemingly to endorse it, but ultimately undermining the value of her feminist critique.

Boyd Neil's article, "Stage One: Social Scrutineers," reviewed *Preparing* in 1976. Neil described the play as exploring "individuals coming to grips with menacing social conditions, external definitions of themselves, or implacable movements of time" (15). He suggests that *Preparing* is "a painful portrait of the predictability of life and, especially, death. Jeannie, the sole character, is shown going through life physically and mentally preparing herself for others – parents, husband, children, social institutions, and finally,

Death” (15). He, too, stresses the universality of Jeannie’s experience, obscuring the gender-determined nature of Jeannie’s painful preparations.

In contrast to the male reviewers of the play, Rota Herzberg Lister appears to applaud the feminist content of the play. In “Beverley Simons, Canadian Playwright of the Pacific Rim,” Lister notes that it “takes up the painful issue of a woman’s inability to chart her own destiny” (9). However, Lister also argues that it examines the roles of women and how they “have again functioned as surface actions in the essential deep Leela²⁶ with death, the philosophical notion that the whole of life is preparation for death. The rites of passage of her life cycle, despite their contemporary North American concreteness, are those of women’s time or monumental time, cosmic and anterior to cursive historical time” (10). While Lister identifies Simons’ critique of women’s socialization, her extended focus on the notion of the essential feminine and of life cycles dilutes a more political feminist reading of the piece. To suggest that Simons’ message is about the rites of passage in a life cycle that is beyond historical time limits the relevance of Simons’ social message.

Although *Preparing* is both provocative and arresting, the characterization of Jeannie is disturbing and her resignation to death after a seemingly dissatisfied life is unsettling. The play is highly theatrical and compellingly structured, and while it seems to endorse a strong feminist argument for women’s liberation from traditional roles and to resist women’s abject status, it offers no prescription for radical social transformation. The play re-examines many of the themes present in *Crabdance*, yet it is equally ambiguous about how women can escape the roles and rituals that restrain them. Like *Crabdance*, *Preparing*’s feminist protest

²⁶ The term leela refers to the notion of “play,” an idea explored in Simons’ subsequent work *Leela Means To Play*. In an interview with John, held in the Raby Collection, Simons explained the concept as follows: “It’s a Sanskrit word which means to play. But on the most profound level. To experience existence as play. The Hindu concept of illusion. When one accepts that, then the seriousness of life, (although on one level it can be extraordinarily serious,) at the root is recognition that it is only for the moment that I play this part. In all of life, in all of time, this is one moment. How shall I choose to play it? Or be played?” (12)

is disturbed by the ambivalent nature of Jeannie's characterization and preoccupations and by its seemingly tragic, but also inevitable, conclusion. The fact that both *Crabdance* and *Preparing* end with their heroines' death underlines Simons' conflicted feminist message, for both Sadie and Jeannie struggle to find fulfillment through a variety of feminine roles, yet each ultimately succumbs to a sense of futility, their protests silenced by forces beyond their control.

III

Carol Bolt: Politics and Murder, No Laughing Matter

Carol Bolt is unquestionably Canada's top female playwright, but she'd undoubtedly object to this sexist qualification.

For her, her identity as a playwright is quite divorced from her identity as a woman, a wife and a mother. And her identity as a playwright is becoming established quite nicely, thank you.

“Carol Bolt: Queen of Our Playwrights”
Scene Changes, July/August 1974

Carol Bolt was perhaps the most renowned female playwright in Canada during the period 1966-1976. She had more than thirteen scripts produced during that time. In 1977, Martin Knelman wrote, "At thirty-five, she has already assembled enough of a body of work to furnish a festival of her very own" (96). Robin Endres remarked that "Carol Bolt is the only Canadian playwright, to my knowledge, who actually makes a living writing plays" (38). Bolt is credited for helping to create the burgeoning Canadian drama of her time, and for her involvement with the alternate theatre movement, her exploration of myth, and her use of satire and irony. Endres suggests, however, that Bolt oversimplifies complex political ideas; in *Red Emma*, for example, "[t]here is no serious exploration of either feminism or anarchism" because "too much liberty is taken with history" (38). She suggests that this contributes to a play that has a "hasty, unfinished feeling" (38), something that Knelman also acknowledges: "there is an unfinished feeling to her work, as if she had stopped before completing her thought" (15). This sketchy quality is significant because it suggests that despite Bolt's early success in theatre, she was still coming to terms with her theatrical voice.

The plays that Bolt wrote that deviated from dominant cultural expectations and focused more directly on feminist themes, *Shelter* and *One Night Stand*, were not always recognized for their groundbreaking content, perhaps because they, too, offered too hasty a reflection on contemporary Canadian social history. In both works, Bolt adopts a strategic use of genre, in the first instance with farcical humour and in the second with horror, satirizing genre expectations and presenting a vexed feminist message. The undeniable feminist content of the work was often overlooked in favour of Bolt's genre explorations. Like Ravel and Simons, Bolt couched her feminist critique so that it would appear less polemical. In *Playwriting Women: Female Voices in English Canada*, Cynthia Zimmerman

notes that the playwrights in her study, including Bolt and Pollock, prefer not to be called feminist playwrights because “they have come to consider it a danger to be so labeled” (25). Zimmerman suggests that Pollock, Bolt, and the other playwrights in her study “have been influenced by feminism. However, not wanting their work summed up as only being about feminist issues (as if women’s issues are not universal), or written only for an audience of women, and not wanting their venues restricted to all-women theatres, they prefer their profession to be identified without the modifier female, feminine, or feminist” (25). Certainly, Bolt identified herself as a feminist, yet she also realized that she had to be careful about how she addressed feminist issues in her plays.

Bolt began writing plays in the late 1950s while a student in a Dramatic Writing class at the University of British Columbia. Some years later, in 1963, she and some friends created a small theatre group called “The Wesley Players” who performed out of a theatre on St. Luke’s Street in Montreal. She began writing children’s plays for them, then moved to Toronto where she began doing “prop-making and stage managing instead” (Zimmerman 33). While working more directly in theatre, she continued to write plays for both children and adults. She also met and married actor David Bolt in 1969.

Daganawinda, a play about Native and French populations in Quebec, was her first professional work.²⁷ It premiered at Toronto Workshop Productions in 1970, but it was not published. The following year, Bolt joined other Toronto playwrights to found the Playwrights Co-op. Over the next five years, she wrote a number of plays, many of them as part of the process of collective creation facilitated through Toronto Workshop Productions and Theatre Passe Muraille. Her early plays for adults included *Next Year Country* (1971);

²⁷She did have a collection of one-act plays entitled *One Plus One Plus One* performed at the Toronto Central Library Theatre in 1966. They were considered highly imitative, yet were reviewed and said to show promise (Zimmerman 33).

the first version of *Buffalo Jump* (1973), which explored the tensions that emerged during the unemployed workers' trek to Ottawa in 1935 and was created with Theatre Passe Muraille's company of actors; *Gabe* (1972), about Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont; and *Red Emma – Queen of the Anarchists* (1974), exploring Emma Goldman's early involvement in revolutionary work. In her interview with Judith Rudakoff in *Fair Play*, Bolt explains that she wrote these plays as an attempt to create a Canadian mythology: "All the early plays were rooted in history. That was partly a political decision. At Passe Muraille and at Toronto Free, we felt it was important to create myth for our country" (178).

Certainly, Bolt's feelings about creating a Canadian theatrical tradition were informed by her involvement in the process of collective creation. Her interest in Canadian social history likely also affected her explorations of feminist issues. In both *Shelter* and *One Night Stand*, Bolt asserts her belief in the importance of social and cultural change in relation to women. In her interview with Sandra Souchette, Bolt explains why she is interested in promoting societal change and what it seems to offer her as a playwright, underlining how effective this type of critique can be: "Myth is more appealing than fact. It postulates that heroism is possible, that people can be noble and effective and change things. Maybe that's why I'm interested in myth" (qtd. in Souchette, *Playwrights in Profile* 8).

In the program notes for the St. Lawrence Centre's production of *Shelter* in 1975, Bolt develops the idea of her interest in the ameliorative potential of theatre. The notes, apparently written by director Eric Steiner, include the statement that "Carol disclaims any didactic intent," and yet proceeds to address the fact that "she does feel that her work can be politically effective" and supplies the following quotation from Bolt as illustration: "I think there are certain injustices that people shouldn't have to live with and that maybe by looking at them on the stage we can come a bit closer to solving them" (Steiner 1). Certainly, with

both *Shelter* and *One Night Stand*, plays whose initial scenes were sketched out in the same notebook, Bolt examines what elsewhere in the *Shelter* program is described by director Eric Steiner as the issue of “women coping with the change around them.”

In 1975, after a number of successful collective productions, Bolt began to personalize her work to a far greater degree than she had previously. She moved away from co-productions and developed her scripts independently, focusing not on historical lives, but on her own experience. She explains that this decision was based in her realization that drama did not need to focus on extraordinary lives in order to arouse interest:

[E]ventually, after a number of those history plays. . . . I said, “Well, this is a bit cowardly. I’m putting another person’s story on stage.” I’d concluded that audiences were more likely to be interested automatically because they’re hearing about a “famous” person. . . . But I decided that if I really wanted to write, then I’d have to put something of myself in the plays, really take a risk. I thought that would be a real challenge: to see what happens when you write about yourself. (Rudakoff, “Interview” 178)

The two plays that Bolt wrote immediately following this realization were *Shelter* and *One Night Stand*, which both addressed Bolt’s engagement with a personal, feminist politics. *Shelter* examines the lives of five women from the prairies and a local M.P.’s widow’s decision to run for Parliament. The play also explores how a group of young women cope with the complicated emotions of jealousy, fear, and grief that emerge in the midst of important transitional events in their lives, including a funeral, wedding shower, and election. Bolt’s interest in grand historical myths was thus replaced by a focus on the social construction of gendered roles, the myths associated with women’s experience. As Zimmerman notes, this play “represents a new direction in her work” and is “a piece of pure

fiction set in the present, includes no music and suits a realistic production style” (43). Bolt’s next play, *One Night Stand*, emerged out of her interest in the “thriller form” (Rudakoff, “Interview” 179). It was, according to Bolt, “successful in a very commercial way” (180). However, Bolt’s comments about this play belie its serious critique of gender relations. Unlike other of her earlier plays, both *Shelter* and *One Night Stand* seem to have emerged out of Bolt’s decision to focus on personal experience and a prominent, if often disavowed, feminist conviction.

In an interview for *World Literature Written in English* conducted by Rota Lister in 1978, Bolt shies away from identifying herself and her characters as feminist. Lister identifies the ambiguity in Bolt’s position: “What you seem to be doing is closing in on your central character, especially the Bolt heroine. You make her emerge from the context, you show her as a kind of feminist” (152). Bolt’s response acknowledges her desire to be recognized as egalitarian *rather than* feminist:

I’m interested in writing about men or women who perform the heroic act, but certainly I’m interested in writing good parts for women, it seems to me to be fairer, in a way. The women in *Buffalo Jump* and *Gabe* were paper thin and not very interesting and I was avoiding any use of my own insights. (152)

Bolt suggests that she regards men and women as equals, yet she also implies that the characters she created in her earlier plays do not reflect this belief. In the interview, she reveals that after this point in her career, she tried to “consciously create characters who were closer to [her]: women, or people, who don’t have . . . historical personae draped around them” (10). This, she says, made her “much more vulnerable” as a playwright (152). Bolt’s anxiety about her vulnerability to criticism is also apparent when Lister suggests that Bolt’s writing about “women as winners” is “a feminist concept,” particularly illustrated by Jory in

Shelter (10). Bolt's reply reveals her sense that to identify as feminist was to make herself vulnerable to a feminist critique:

Yes, but the last time I talked to a feminist about that play she was absolutely incensed because she didn't like the way the women were treated. She didn't like the women's flaws. This is an all-female cast and I don't like writing plays about gods and goddesses. I'm more interested in the characters' flaws. (152).

Here, Bolt distances herself from identifying as a feminist, as she distinguishes between "she," the feminist, as opposed to "I," the playwright.

Nevertheless, the fact that *Shelter*'s characters are deeply troubled by marital discord and personal anxiety and that these struggles reflect socially imposed limitations is evidence of Bolt's liberal feminist orientation. Bolt's interest is in the conditions that give rise to inequalities in power and inconsistent behaviour. Despite her resistance to the feminist label, her reflection on the tenets of the women's liberation movement is apparent from an examination of feminist issues in her work, particularly in the two plays discussed here. What began in *Red Emma* as an articulation of Emma Goldman's conviction, informed the more focused feminist plays that followed:

Woman's development, her freedom, her independence must come from and through herself. . . . by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities, by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation. Only that will set woman free, will make her a force hitherto unknown in the world, a force for real love, for peace, for harmony – a force of divine fire, of life-giving, a creator of free men and women. (*Red Emma* 46)

While Bolt sympathizes with feminist concerns, and this comment echoes the assertions of prominent feminist theorists of the period, it appears that she did not want to have her personal politics limit her creative freedom. She may also have anticipated that to acknowledge an allegiance to feminism would somehow limit her opportunities as a playwright.

Like the other plays in this study, then, the feminist content of both *Shelter* and *One Night Stand* is undeniable, yet also veiled. Bolt does this in a number of ways. In *Playwriting Women* Zimmerman describes *Shelter's* focus on “petty rivalries, gossip mongering and so forth” and argues that “the serious issues are overwhelmed by mockery and absurd events” (44). These observations point to some of the ways Bolt ironized her female characters and their conditions. *Shelter* and *One Night Stand* both focus on the experiences of women and their struggle to adjust to social-role expectations. In these plays, Bolt explored and imitated theatrical forms and events, but she did so in order to problematize women’s experience in relation to dominant patriarchal discourses. Thus, despite her resistance to identifying herself with feminism or with feminist theatre, she nonetheless was actively engaged in promoting feminist interests. She was also well aware of the specific challenges facing women in Canadian theatre. When Judith Rudakoff asked her whether “being a woman affected [her] influence or success” (188), Bolt’s reply was telling:

Sharon Pollock once said in an interview we were doing together that in a way, we were both really lucky because when we started writing, theatres could produce our plays and get both a Canadian and a woman in their season in one shot! So we were a minority, but it didn’t necessary [sic] work against us. That was part of our “charm.” (188)

Conscious of her and Pollock's differential status as female playwrights, Bolt's comments reveal her awareness that in order to establish a place for themselves and their work within a male-dominated theatre industry, they had to be strategic.

Among Carol Bolt's papers held at the National Archives of Canada is a copy of Maureen J. Orton's report entitled "Problems of Women Playwrights in Canadian Theatre," dated March 10, 1976. This report on a panel discussion to which Bolt contributed recorded that the ratio of female to male plays produced annually in Canada was 1 to 13 in 1972, 1 to 6 in 1973, 1 to 12 in 1974, and 1 to 4 in 1975. However, the report also noted that in the case of the 1975 numbers, the ratio "is somewhat illusory – amongst the 12 plays by women 3 were produced by their authors, 2 by the Redlight Theatre whose goal is specifically to produce women's plays, leaving only 7 instances where a non-feminist, non-author, production group took a flyer on a play by a woman – a fe/male ratio of 1:8" (3). These recommendations distinguish between the work of female playwrights and feminist theatre, which indicates that Bolt and her co-authors did not regard her work as feminist drama. She highlights the importance of work produced by women that is not widely recognized as feminist. What seems important to her is that women's plays are produced by mainstream stages. The report concluded with five recommendations that included the following:

- a) That public funding bodies should advise theatres they have a social responsibility to offer equal opportunities for skill development to women as well as men.
- b) That public funding bodies should strongly urge the top four most heavily funded Ontario theatres to assume greater responsibility to produce Canadian playwrights, both men and women.

- c) That the Ontario Arts Council establish a special programme to subsidize the training of women directors.
- d) That public funding bodies urge theatres to make a special effort to alternate men and women, whenever possible, in such theatre functions as dramaturge, play readers, artistic directors, play adjudicator, workshop director, etc.
- e) That, in encouraging the development of women directors, care be taken to avoid ghetto-izing women directors into directing solely the work of women playwrights. (6)

These recommendations illustrate that Bolt was actively engaged in promoting feminist interests: she recognized that women were under-represented in theatre and that this was an issue that had to be redressed through public funding. The recommendations indicate that she and the others on the panel felt that women's plays deserved to be produced alongside the work of male dramatists, not because they were feminist, but because they were female-authored *and* addressed universal concerns. This suggests that Bolt did not want her work considered feminist because she believed that it represented a distinct and necessary contribution to Canadian theatre and that it may not have been as favourably received had it been so identified. This may in part explain why her plays project such a vexed feminist message.

The most revealing illustration of this comes from the review article that Bolt wrote for *The Canadian Forum* in 1987. In "Female Leads: Search for Feminism in the Theatre," Bolt underlines the importance of irony in the depiction of female characters and their conditions. In her discussion of Erika Ritter's *Murder at McQueen*, for example, she explains, "Of course women often live through and for men. These characters remind us of

an enduring and rather endearing feminist dilemma, instantly recognizable to most women in the audience. . . . Perhaps our focus on the story needs adjustment before we can really enjoy the irony of these thoroughly modern women with thoroughly old-fashioned love affairs”

(40). Clearly, Bolt is aware that female playwrights strategically employ irony in order to highlight women’s negotiation of gender roles. She mentions the Shaw Festival’s revival of Claire Booth Luce’s *The Women* and suggests, “Perhaps it’s just as well the Shaw’s show is not precisely ‘feminist’ since feminist theatre will disturb many in its audience unless or until it preaches only to the converted,” which implies that Bolt understands that it is possible to be feminist without being labeled as such and still express a feminist message. She underlines her belief in feminist values in the next paragraph by explaining the term and why it is still necessary:

Feminism is an ideology that seeks equal rights for women and while there are few who would publicly espouse an opposing view (“I’m sorry, dear, but I believe in chauvinism”) there are all too many who prefer to believe that the game is over, the battle won, the struggle no longer necessary. There are those who think the struggle tasteless, who call feminist thought and writing “strident” and “humourless” when it touches them at all or suggests the world might change in any way. (37)

Bolt’s next paragraph skewers the notion that only men’s issues are worthy of “real” attention and are of universal interest:

There are those who’d like to believe that feminism is unnecessary. “Do you want to be considered a *woman* director/writer/actor?” one is asked. It’s a question that seems to imply that to be a woman, to write of a woman’s experience from a woman’s perspective, is to aspire to something less than the

“real” world where “real” men write of “real” concerns like how they fought with their fathers and what Daddy did in the war or the boardroom. (37)

Bolt’s irony in this passage echoes that found in her feminist plays. She is clearly aware that to describe oneself as a woman or a feminist writer is to have others diminish your work, and that this type of denigration is related to the sense of threat that women’s liberation instills: “It’s a boy’s club, the women are told, but nonetheless there are those who find feminism threatening” (37). Bolt’s early feminist plays, *Shelter* and *One Night Stand*, illustrate how successful she was in asserting a feminist message without identifying it as such and drawing the ire of those who believed that feminism had no place in “real” theatre. In response to the charge that feminism is “strident” and “humourless,” Bolt wrote plays that were ambiguous enough to be inoffensive and that intentionally parodied stereotypical depictions of women and thus passed off her social criticism as comedy. Her farcical humour, however, also complicated her more progressive social message.

Shelter: Personal Politics

Shelter was commissioned and produced jointly by the University [of Toronto] Alumni Club and The Young People’s Theatre. It was first performed at the Firehall Theatre in Toronto from November 21st to December 7th, 1974. It later toured to various other theatres across Canada. The play was well received, despite the fact that it was not typical of the plays that Bolt had produced previously. Its controversial content, the depiction of a young woman running successfully for a seat in federal parliament, however, was tempered by the playwright’s use of farcical elements and her assertion that it was a comedy. Sandra Souchette’s remark, “*Shelter* shields its concerns with comedy” (13), highlights the fact that

the play's comedic aspects conceal a far more serious contemplation of the realities of political power and representation.

The political representation of women was increasingly discussed during this year, 1974, as Grace MacInnis, the NDP MP for Vancouver-Kingsway, retired from politics after a long career in politics. In *Chatelaine's* September 1974 issue, Doris Anderson remarked on the election of nine female MPs and said, "and that's a big improvement over five, when the election was called in May. And five was a giant step ahead – for us – compared with the almost all-male House of Commons club of 1968-1972 with Grace MacInnis and 263 male members." Anderson's editorial observed that more women ran in the election – 135 – than in the previous one and that this doubled the number of women who had run in 1972. She added, "There were also a lot of women who got great grassroots experience working in ridings, running campaigns. In the next election, hopefully, we'll increase substantially the number of women candidates who run and win." Moira Armour's *Canadian Women in History: A Chronology* contains a breakdown of the composition of women representatives leading up to this year and provides an interesting perspective on women's participation in the political process:

Between 1921-1974 the largest number of women candidates in federal elections, 163 or 31.5%, were homemakers. The greatest number of women candidates, 181 or 34%, were members of the CCF/NDP. . . . Of 414 seats contested by women between 1929-1974 only 6 or 4% were "safe" or winnable. Predominate occupations for women elected to the House of Commons were: writing, journalism, homemaking followed by law and business. Of the 28 women elected in that period, 67% of them were single, separated or widowed. (111)

The fact that women were actively seeking careers in politics and becoming involved in the political process suggests their burgeoning sense of social agency and responsibility, and certainly this feeling is reflected in *Shelter*, despite its playful tone.

In many ways, *Shelter*'s exploration of politics and its sexual underbelly also reflects Millett's groundbreaking assertions in *Sexual Politics* (1970) about systemic oppression within patriarchal systems. For example, Bolt considers the complicated nature of sexual politics, not only in relation to women's domination by men, but also in relation to how women's sexual involvement with men leads to political maneuvering between women. In *Shelter*, Bolt turns ceremonies and tragic circumstances into farce, highlighting women's conflicts with role expectations and how they negotiate this among themselves. She dramatizes the "personal" experiences of women, exploring how they conform to and resist gender expectations, and she simultaneously elevates the "normal" lives of women into "heroic" ones by placing them on stage.

Bolt drew on her personal experiences in the creation of this play, noting how *Shelter* represented a shift away from her previous "history" plays. In her interview with Rudakoff, Bolt explained that *Shelter* reflected many of her own relationships:

A lot of my family is in that play. The relationship between the women is based in part on my relationship with my cousin Linda. We were a year and a half apart in age and we had a rivalry growing up. And my relationship with my mother-in-law too. And sorting out how women relate to each other. I also wanted to look at how women's identity was being associated with and depended on their association with men. (179)

This shift in emphasis from the historical plays of her early career to a more personal reflection on women, family, and sexual dynamics is important to understanding the play. At

its core, it reflects the two primary tenets of the women's liberation movement, both "the personal is political" and "sisterhood is powerful." In so doing, it also illustrates the tensions between liberated perspectives and those of a more conventional Canadian culture. If at this time women were exploring their sexual liberation, as a number of Bolt's female characters in these two plays seem to be doing, the repercussions of this investigation are shown to be potentially devastating. Bolt is not only illustrating the powerful potential of the women's movement, but she is also reflecting on the problems that accompany this type of radical shift in social values.

In the play, five women try to come to terms with changing social circumstances, specifically with how women are to negotiate their new roles and responsibilities to each other and their society. Vicky, the ambitious journalist, discusses the notion of shelter and suggests that it restricts women's freedoms and ambitions:

There are three kinds of women. There are those you can depend on. Like Calla. Mothers. Always ready to give help and shelter. And there are those who are always looking for help and shelter. Like you, Win. And there's Jory . . . somewhere beyond the stereotype. . . . (21)

The play then commences to examine how Jory is able to go beyond the stereotype of a political wife to become part of a solution to the dilemma of sexual politics by joining the political fray as an independent MP.

At the opening of the play, the women are in Jory's living room, which is "filled with flowers in funeral arrangements and plates of fancy cakes" while "Jory sits very still in a chair" (1). In the first scene, Win, who tries to look on the bright side of things, and Vicky, who "takes nothing lightly," try to decide what to do with all the flowers after the funeral for Jory's husband, Howard, their local MP. Meanwhile, Jory has withdrawn into a "catatonic"

state, which at first appears to be comic, as an extreme response to grief, yet it is later revealed as her particular and periodic expression of emotional distress. This particular moment of despair is reminiscent of Sadie Golden's experience of grief and loss in *Crabdance*. Howard's death has seemingly caused Jory to undergo a crisis of subjectivity, which has resulted in her state of withdrawal.

Win recounts that "The first time we lost Jory was just after her first anniversary" (4). She reveals that the last time Jory went mute was "three years ago, just after Howard ran for Parliament. Jory was just like she is now, looking three feet over my left shoulder" (5). Win suggests Jory is suffering from emotional trauma: "I don't know how long I'll last with her this time around, because emotional excess is one thing, but mental illness drives me crazy" (5). Bolt suggests that Jory's illness is the result of disturbances in her marriage to Howard, but her friends are exasperated with it. Vicky mentions that there are "silly rumours" about Howard that would hurt and embarrass Jory, which implies that his behaviour was a contributing factor to her depression. The mysterious circumstances surrounding both Howard's involvement with Vicky and his death also seem to be responsible for Jory's muteness, which the other women treat as a perverse self-indulgence. However, as the play progresses it becomes obvious that her silence reflects her difficult negotiation of a new subjectivity.

While her friends discuss Howard and their own complicated relationships with men and each other, Jory silently listens until their speculations about her future begin at which point she interrupts their banter with a rhyme that reflects her true feelings about her late husband's political involvement:

There are men like the pirates of days of old
Who murder and cheat for yellow gold

Seduce the people right out of their socks
With their taking ways and their watered stocks
So if you're not blind or foolish or deaf
You will cast your vote for the C.C.F. (13)

This interjection, while deliberately humorous, nonetheless underlines Jory's political ambition as well as her own state of abjection or unintelligibility. While Jory decides to run independently rather than for the Commonwealth Cooperative Federation, her outburst illustrates that behind her silent façade her struggle to reconcile herself to Howard's death has led to her decision to run for Parliament. She sees herself as a viable alternative to the type of partisan politics practiced by her late husband.

Jory's friends initially seem to support her by acknowledging Howard's attributes, yet their image of him is shown to be highly inaccurate. Win rejects Vicky's depiction of him: "Good old Howard, the hope of the West, speaking straight, thinking clean, finding lost property. Some kind of model Howard, flying like a kite" (3). Win also highlights the suspicious circumstances of Howard's death and accuses Vicky of misrepresenting what happened to him: "You're the only person in the world who could make driving a car into the Saskatchewan River sound like an heroic act" (3). With this phrase, Win underlines how deceptive journalism can be and insinuates that Vicky is equally duplicitous, a notion that is developed through the course of the play and that is extended to include all women of Vicky's ilk, notably ardent feminists.

It is clear that Jory is far more aware of her late husband's failings than her friends are. Apparently, Howard had been drinking and may also have been having an affair with Jory's friends Vicky and Calla, among others. As Jory recounts, "Howard told every teen-aged girl in Saskatchewan she was special, she was beautiful. . . ." (20). She acknowledges

her husband's political corruption, saying, "He courted everyone in South Saskatchewan. He loved adulation. He would cheat and steal and lie all to get your respect" (14). Jory clearly recognizes that her relationship with Howard was compromised by his insecurities, both political and sexual. She also recognizes that Howard's narcissism is characteristic of politics generally. From her experience of being socially abject, especially in relation to Howard, Jory is able to imagine how her life may be different, given the specific circumstances of her immediate experience. Since she is a political widow, she has the opportunity to participate in political life in a wholly unexpected way, by taking advantage of her position and running for his seat in office.

While her friends parrot conventional statements of condolence, and bicker among themselves, Jory regards Howard's death as an opportunity for political reform in their riding. Despite her initial shock, she quickly recovers, and it is her interest in the public good that helps her overcome her personal anguish. Similarly, her interest in making a contribution is not motivated by ego, but by a concern for fair representation. While working on her campaign, Jory explains to Vicky that she does not necessarily want a high public profile, but instead hopes to address the personal concerns of her constituents. When Vicky asks Jory, "You don't want me to work on your campaign, do you?" Jory replies, "I don't want to campaign. I just want to go from door to door to try to find out what I should be doing . . . what people want me to do in Ottawa" (45). Jory also challenges her friends to imagine the public potential for women: "You compare what men are with what women can be" (15).

Despite her faith in her own integrity, Jory is confronted with opposition at every turn. Win notes that aside from Vicky, "The only other real enthusiasts want you dressed up in black boots and bunny ears." This allusion to the popular playboy image illustrates both how feminists were depicted by mainstream media and the opposition that women faced

when challenging sexist practices in a public forum. Indeed, this segment echoes Steinem's 1963 article "I Was A Playboy Bunny." Jory's reference to Steinem seems to justify the fact that consciousness-raising actions by women must sometimes sensationalize in order to interrogate restrictive norms. Thus, Bolt suggests that women entering the political sphere are more likely to be dismissed as sexual objects, rather than regarded as legitimate policy representatives.²⁸ She reinforces this with Jory's later remark that "No matter how tough I talk, no matter what I say about prisons or welfare or corporations, people say I'm blond" (39). Interestingly, Steinem's article, which exposed the seedier aspects of Hugh Hefner's playboy clubs, attempted to deconstruct the myth of women's sexual power and how it was used to subordinate and exploit women. In Steinem's postscript included in her 1983 *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, she writes that one of the long-term results of her article was the realization that "all women are Bunnies" (69). Bolt's depiction of Jory's determination to run for political office emphasizes that despite the appeal of attaining a certain measure of influence through their association with powerful men, women can claim their own place in politics without playing to patriarchal stereotypes of convention or liberation.

Bolt's examination of the political process, particularly as it related to women in the 1970s, reveals the complications of both patriarchal power structures and the internalization of social roles and relationship patterns that women were becoming aware of through the writings of prominent feminists. Millet's *Sexual Politics* established the direct relationship between women's subordination and their lack of representation in politics: "it is precisely

²⁸As I write this, on December 6th, 2005, I note that an article in today's *Ottawa Citizen*, "Female politicians held to different standard: Stronach," includes Belinda Stronach's remarks to the Canadian Club in Toronto that address a similar sexism in contemporary politics: "I think we are held to maybe a different standard. I've often been asked, 'What clothes am I wearing, what shoes am I wearing, where do I get my hair cut?' I don't think men get asked those questions" (A5).

because certain groups have no representation in a number of recognized political structures that their position tends to be so stable, their oppression so continuous” (32). Millett also revealed that “[h]owever muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power” (33). In *Shelter*, Jory realizes that in order to have a “voice” she must have a public platform. The various degrees of support she receives from the women around her illustrate how difficult this process is for women who have been socialized to be passive and to see themselves as important only in relation to the men with whom they are sexually involved.

In depicting Jory running for political office, Bolt was providing a powerful and groundbreaking image of a woman’s self-empowerment. She was also exploring how this type of decision would be resisted by other women, particularly women from older generations who had been socialized by patriarchal norms, such as Auntie Luel, who tries to dissuade Jory from pursuing a political career in a number of ways. However, Luel’s beliefs are consistently undermined by Jory’s assertions, which suggest that her biased perspective is inaccurate.

In the first instance of this, Luel dredges up incidents from Jory’s past, including a possible abortion, which could undermine her credibility. Auntie Luel’s attempts to discredit Jory, however, are ironized. Not only is Auntie Luel sexually inhibited, but she dismisses Jory’s political ambitions during Vicky’s wedding shower as some form of Freudian neurosis: “I don’t see why Jory wants to run for Parliament. I suppose it’s penis envy. . . . Jory is an aggressive and masculine woman, still searching for approval from her father” (43). This superficial adoption of Freudian psychology is ridiculed by the inconsistency of this reading with Jory’s earnest and assertive political intent. Later, Auntie Luel’s discussion

of women's suffrage reinforces her inability to recognize what constitutes personalized political action:

The franchise is a privilege. You girls take it much too lightly. Brave women many years before you were born, endured years of ridicule and hardship for women's suffrage. These women didn't struggle so that you girls could vote for your best friend in Parliament. (54)

While Auntie Luel explains, "It wouldn't seem right" to vote for Jory because she is "female," she praises her daughter, Vicky, for helping Jory: "You helped Jory because she was your friend, of course. I'm very glad that you decided to do that because it was a very ladylike thing to do" (51). Bolt uses Auntie Luel to articulate the resistance a woman might face when running for office, while also ridiculing the superficiality and inaccuracy of such opposition. Luel thus provides Bolt with the opportunity to dismantle social prejudice based on conventions of social-role expectations.

Shelter's interrogation of the idea of women's role-playing is also linked to a series of social events that constitute examples of how women's experience is staged at significant times in their everyday lives. The idea of ceremony and the performativity of women's experience are evoked through the references to Howard's funeral, Vicky's shower, and Jory's election campaign. Women's involvement in both public and private life and their adoption of prescribed roles in relation to these rites of passage are explored throughout the text. At the funeral, Jory does not conform to stereotype by idealizing the merits of her deceased husband; she remains silent and yet engaged in a complex renegotiation of her subjectivity that results in her decision to run for office. At the shower, Auntie Luel tries to direct the event for the women, enthusing over the presents and teacakes and games, enacting a traditional femininity, while Jory and Vicky discuss politics, their own ambitions, and the

limitations placed on them by external expectations, performing themselves as empowered women, although following distinctly different scripts. Vicky explains, “I hate domesticity. I want my own identity. I want my own work. What’s wrong with that?” (45). The election campaign in the latter part of the play also illustrates Jory’s successful adaptation to being front and centre in a political campaign, rather than in a support role. She is able to perform herself as an accomplished political candidate and to withstand the high-pressure environment and her friends’ infighting with aplomb. Vicky accuses Jory of selling out and hobnobbing “with the wheat kings and the oil barons and the potash potentates,” yet Jory’s response underlines her commitment to the community: “I’ve spoken to thirteen Women’s Institutes and eighteen Rotary Clubs and the Elks and the Sons of Scotland. . . . We talked about wheat” (52). Despite Vicky’s and her mother’s accusations, Jory asserts her right to be a political representative and make a significant, public contribution to the world (57).

Throughout the play Vicky and Jory are also contrasted based on their different conceptions of feminism, success, and achievement. Vicky is depicted as an ardent yet unrealistic feminist who believes in the power of the press and persuasion, while Jory is shown to be a realist, a liberal feminist who defies stereotypes and believes in practical issues rather than a radical, unattainable cause. Vicky is also contrasted to her mother, Auntie Luel, who seems to be ruining her life and forcing her to conform to conventional roles. Eventually, the play suggests that Jory is a reasonable middle-ground alternative between Luel’s old-fashioned values and Vicky’s ambitious extremism. Vicky’s own sense of profound self-deception is emphasized when she overdoses on sleeping pills. Following this incident, which is treated in a disturbingly farcical manner with Vicky first locking herself into and then falling out of a wardrobe in a comatose state, Jory undermines the validity of Vicky’s strident feminist convictions and chastises Vicky for being too idealistic:

“You want the world to be perfect. . . . Everybody tall and graceful. Without gender” (69). Bolt seems to be suggesting that Vicky’s profound feminist desire for a perfect world (69) is what is at the heart of her despair. In contrast, Jory, who wants to contribute to a new society but to do so within certain limitations, is seen to represent a more reasonable alternative. At the play’s conclusion, she admits, “I can change the world, but it won’t be perfect” (69). Auntie Luel then provides the conservative counterpoint: “Well, of course, Jory can change the world if she likes, but don’t expect anyone to notice” (45). This final exchange between Jory and Auntie Luel is another example of Bolt’s ironic treatment of Luel’s conservatism, as her refusal to acknowledge Jory’s achievement and her glib dismissal of her ambition appear humorous, but objectionable. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of this final statement also reinforces the vexed feminist tone of this play, as it suggests that women who attempt to achieve institutional change may never be recognized for their efforts.

Shelter emphasizes that while women may desire a place in politics and be capable of attending to the concerns of their constituents, they are often undermined by their own lack of confidence and the lack of support/shelter provided by their “sisters.” Bolt is careful not to suggest that men are limiting Jory’s access to power, for she wins the election. Instead, Bolt suggests that the obstacles to Jory’s success are women who share Auntie Luel’s jaded and outdated perceptions about “females” and their innate inability to be politically effective.

Another factor that prevents women from supporting each other is their sense of sexual competition with each other. Both Vicky and Calla are depicted as adulteresses who manipulate men and see them as little more than sexual playthings. Calla is having an affair with Win’s husband, just as Vicky had an affair with Howard. Calla deludes herself into thinking that the men she has had affairs with have needed her comfort, while Vicky believes she is providing more substantial support, but both sabotage their friendships with their

women friends because of their relationships with their friends' husbands. However, neither woman is entirely committed to men, either. Calla is committed to the image of herself as a giver and Vicky is only with her fiancé, Arthur, because he "is the only man [she] ever met without an insurmountable problem" (46). The women apparently regard their involvement with men as necessary, but not highly significant.

While presenting Jory as a strong and independent woman who defies sexual stereotypes and seems politically committed and competent, *Shelter* reflects a conflicted feminist vision because it shows Jory to be a victim of other women's competitive nature and contempt. It complicates our understanding of feminist ideals by depicting the most stridently feminist of the characters, Vicky, as morally corrupt, self-absorbed, and suicidal. Bolt's use of farcical humour undermines the seriousness of her exploration of the potential for women to have a political impact, as they are shown to suffer from insecurity and infighting, even as they express political agency. However, the fact that Jory wins the election and is determined to succeed where her husband fails mitigates the negativity expressed by her friends and acknowledges the potential for women to achieve power and influence and to redefine their own subjectivity.

***Shelter*: Critical Reception**

When *Shelter* first premiered in Toronto at the Firehall Theatre, reviews appeared in the city's major newspapers, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The Toronto Sun*. While these reviews are predominantly positive, their response to the vexed feminism of the play was to read it as unqualifiedly anti-feminist. Indeed, Kaspars Dzeguze of *The Toronto Sun* believed the play would *embarrass* feminists. What these reviews emphasized was not the promotion of women's political representation or the critique of women's roles, but

instead the novelty of the theme of women in politics, the underdevelopment of Jory's character, the intriguing characterizations of Vicky and her mother, Auntie Luel, and Bolt's satiric humour.

Herbert Whittaker's review, "*Shelter* Has Blithe Political Spirit," appeared in *The Globe and Mail* on November 22, 1974. In this piece, Whittaker praised the "theatre-minded band of women" that had produced the play, which he called "a highly facetious study of women in politics." This comment in itself suggests that the idea of women's serious involvement in politics is undermined by the play, while at the same time acknowledging the "band" of women who had produced it, using an adjective that undermines the serious intent of the producers. Interestingly, the review focuses on Bolt's exploration of the conflicts between the female characters in the play:

From its open burlesque beginnings, *Shelter* moves on to trace the conflict between the widow and her campaign manager, an imaginative magazine writer who forces another personality on the unwilling candidate.

His observations note the prominence of Bolt's satire and her focus on the problematic relationships among the women in the piece. It also highlights the idea that Vicky is attempting to control Jory's political image. In fact, Whittaker is picking up on the essential feminist dilemma in the play, but is not acknowledging it as such. In an aside, Whittaker also makes a curious comment about the limits of Bolt's satire: "Perhaps because there are no men in her cast, Mrs. Bolt seems cheated of much of the opportunities for satire." Whittaker suggests that the dramatic potential of the piece is limited simply because its cast is comprised mainly of Jory's women supporters who "take over the play with some quite unabashed piracy."

Because *Shelter* was one of Bolt's first plays following her apprenticeship in collective creation, it retains a sense of the collective in terms of its structure and thematic concerns, but in this case it is focused on women's collective political action. Whittaker focuses much of his attention on Auntie Luel as a representative of "all the values and attitudes women loathe in their nearest and dearest relatives," without acknowledging that she is the single representative of an older female generation in the play. Luel is also not simply the representative of attitudes women loathe in relatives, but more particularly perceptions of women aligned with patriarchal values. Ultimately, Whittaker concludes that "[w]hile the political subject is ripe for satire so is the Good Old Canadian Mum, and somehow a great character ranks above a noble play in the commercial theatre." His review does not address the promise of his review's title to discuss *Shelter*'s "blithe political spirit." Instead, the title seems to be a reference to the play's lack of effective political intent. Rather than focus on the social content of the piece, Whittaker implies that Bolt's exploration of the theme of women and politics, while admirable as an exercise, does not achieve anything more enduring than poking "fun at the political women" who try to support their friend Jory in her bid for political representation. He fails to recognize that in satirizing Auntie Luel and portraying Jory as the one reasonable character in the play, Bolt is endorsing the promise of women's liberation and women's political representation.

Urjo Kareda's review, "A Truly Canadian Comedy Explodes With Wit," asserts that the major conflicts in the play stem from the relationships between the women and not their struggle with Jory to promote women's representation in politics. He writes that Jory runs the gauntlet of "four women friends who help, challenge, complicate, threaten and misunderstand her campaign." Kareda does observe that the political content of the play

satirizes a number of organizations on the Canadian cultural scene, but he focuses on the women's own insecurities as the play's primary interest:

Carol Bolt astutely gathers together Jory's campaign and Vicky's wedding, a woman's public and private roles, into an interesting paradox of idealism and pragmatism. She has many devastating things to say about politics, the media, the West, and women's love-hate relationship with themselves.

Kareda agrees with Whittaker that the play "falters only about Jory herself, who is given neither the psychological depth of Vicky or the merry outrageousness of the other three. She leaves a gap in the play's centre." The satiric presence of Jory's psychological "absence" in the opening scene is acknowledged, but unexamined. Like Whittaker, his emphasis on the failure of female friendships prevents him from acknowledging the full extent of the play's feminist critique, although he does acknowledge Bolt's interrogation of women's performativity.

Kaspars Dzeguze's review for *The Toronto Sun* is perhaps the most revealing of the Toronto media responses to the premiere of *Shelter*. Dzeguze clearly identifies the feminist politics of Bolt's play: "Bolt's comedy is a five-ring circus that turns every character into a spokesperson for the several positions females occupy, between enslavement and enlightenment." While he suggests that feminists would be embarrassed by the play, he refuses to endorse its potential to inspire social and political transformation: "Parliament pink will be the color of those women libbers, who think the play was meant to vindicate their position in the corridors of power." Dzeguze's review, if not entirely sympathetic to Bolt's personal politics, recognizes the divided nature of her feminism, and yet fails to see the irony in her portrayal of Auntie Luel and others. He identifies Auntie Luel as the play's

primary interest, saying that she “physically and ideologically walks off with the play.” Citing one of Luel’s most demeaning remarks – “Women aren’t built for the strains of political life. They have, you know, ‘headaches’” – Dzeguze misses the irony of the statement. Instead, he argues that the “schizophrenic” play slides from “its examination of the younger generation of women who clamor for ‘full rights,’ to the depiction of women unmarked by neurosis, who live according to a clear-cut scheme in which rank, rights and romance each have their prescribed place.” Contradictions in the play’s feminist message are certainly present. Yet if Bolt’s satire is designed to diminish the threat of competent women potentially challenging the political and social status quo, it nonetheless postulates a challenge to the existing political system.

In contrast to the reviews of the initial production of *Shelter*, reviews of the production at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts in October 1975 seemed more responsive to the play’s satire and political content. This may be due to the fact that Bolt had revised the play for the second production. Based on archival research into the play’s development, it appears that the initial production of the play was substantially changed prior to the production at the St. Lawrence Centre. The revisions made to what appears to be the first bound copy of the script developed Jory’s character and her political conviction. For example, in Act 3 of the original script Vicky responds to her mother’s suggestion that Jory’s friends have simply voted for her in order to have their best friend in Parliament. Vicky’s line, “Jory is a serious candidate, mother,” is changed significantly in the revised version. The line is given to Jory, who asserts, “I am a serious candidate.” Auntie Luel’s response to that in the revised script is one of the most notable lines from the published version of the

play:²⁹ “women were not built for the stress of public life. They have, you know, ‘headaches.’” Jory’s response, “We have headaches. We have each other,” illustrates her sense of solidarity and political commitment. This is contrasted to Luel’s reinforcement of stereotypical misconceptions about women. Bolt also emphasized the significance of these changes in her revisions by placing stars next to these new lines. The philosophical differences between the two women are also apparent in another handwritten revision to the dialogue in the original script:

Jory: I used to think that politicians were people, that it
didn’t matter if they were men or women

Luel: Because they were always men.

Jory: You make me wonder. Aunt Luel . . .

Luel: You know I’m right . . .

Jory: Because you’re a woman. You see yourself as a woman. You
believe that women have a special contribution to make to the
world.

Luel: Of course dear.

Jory: And I wonder what it is a woman feels about power and
property . . . if you feel as I do

Luel: We have a special private contribution

Jory: Why does it have to be private?

(written on the back of page 3.6 in file 8 of 10, *Shelter 1974-1975*)

The revisions to the original script also emphasize its farcical elements by contrasting them more directly with Jory’s serious political intent. For example, a handwritten revision

²⁹ The published version of 1975 is based on the revised version of the play.

appended to the séance scene in the third act has Jory attempting to get Luel to take them all more seriously:

Jory: (Taking the flashlight) You don't need spiritual guidance.

Win: We need a light in the wilderness.

Jory: Please. Aunt Luel. Let's stop playing Campfire girls. Let's talk to each other. Vicky will try to tell you what she wants. You and I can talk politics. Anything. (written on the back of page 3.14, file 8 of 10, *Shelter 1974-1975*)

Later in this scene, Bolt adds the business of Vicky, in a drug-induced stupor, entering the armoire in her wedding dress:

During this scene, Vicky, wearing her wedding dress enters and climbs into the armoire. Ideally, she is visible as a white, unrecognizable shape. (3.15, file 8 of 10, *Shelter 1974-1975*)

In the scene from the original production Vicky was already in the closet, but by showing her slowly approaching and entering the armoire, Bolt highlights the psychological tension in the scene and the contrast between farcical and serious moments in the play and seems to be attempting to heighten the irony of these scenes. Vicky's suicide attempt in this scene, for example, is a poignant reminder of Luel's ineffectiveness as a mother and Vicky's reluctance to marry. In this way and others, the revisions add depth to Vicky's character. In the original script, many of her lines are given to Calla, who is depicted as a major source of support for Jory. By accentuating Vicky's role in the revisions, Bolt makes her character a more vivid contrast to Jory. These revisions to the original script seem designed to make it more feminist in tone; however, elements of conflicted feminism still predominate. One might

argue that the feminism in the text was still veiled but differently accented, perhaps due to the responses that the playwright received following the original production of the play.

McKenzie Porter's review of the St. Lawrence Centre's production in *The Toronto Sun* stands out from the reviews of the earlier production for its engagement with the play's feminist message. At the outset, he argues that Jory is compelling for her balanced perspective on women's issues:

The heroine of the show, as played by Jayne Eastwood, is the widow of a federal MP who decides to run for election to her late husband's seat. This character is bitterly conscious of the other committee women's limitations and of the fact that she herself is not much superior. Out of this circumstance, Eastwood wrings a comedy composed of indignation and resignation and a most affecting display of common sense in attitudes towards women's liberation.

Auntie Luel's character, in contrast, is described as "a vivid study of female sentiments that have been routed and of a lingering preoccupation with the importance of pancake mixes, brownies, lacey raisin wafers, date rolls, nut chubs and other delicacies to farinaceous feeders." However, despite his recognition of the feminist aspects of the play, Porter spends an inordinate amount of time objectifying actor Wendy Thatcher, calling her "perhaps the most nubile young beauty on the Canadian stage today" and explaining, "In a woman of Thatcher's configurations and coloring an intellect is rarely discernable. But Thatcher's dumb sexpots palpably are the product of acute observation and prolonged reflection. The fact that she has not yet appeared on the centrefold of Playboy suggests that Thatcher is a saint in matters of principle and a genius in the art of evasion." Porter's blatant sexual

objectification of Thatcher reveals that while he is aware of the play's political and social intent, he cannot apply that recognition to the sexual politics of the 1970s.

For the most part, however, the reviews of the second production of *Shelter* stress the farcical humour of the piece, while also praising its feminist content. The evasive quality of the play is not seen as a liability, but as a strength. The use of broad humour is regarded as a successful means to attract an audience to a more serious underlying issue. The success of this appeal to entertainment value with *Shelter* may have led Bolt to the more extended exploration of this method in her next and most commercially successful play, *One Night Stand*.

***One Night Stand*: “Commercially Successful”**

On April 6, 1977, *One Night Stand* premiered at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto. It was directed by Eric Steiner, who also directed *Shelter*, and it starred Brent Carver, Chappelle Jaffe, and Carole Strypchuk. The play ran until May 8, and was remounted more than 100 times across Canada, at such theatres as the Tarragon Theatre, Theatre New Brunswick, and The Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver. In 1978, CBC-TV and Allan King co-produced a film version that won three Canadian Film Awards. In 2000, the Canadian Press Newswire's obituary notice for Carol Bolt observed that *One Night Stand* appeared to be an anomalous play in her oeuvre: “Ironically, her best-remembered play was her most commercial, and unlike anything she wrote before or after. . . . Sharing some of the milieu and themes of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, it told of a young urban woman who picked up a drifter at a bar, only to discover he was a psychotic killer.” While the play does draw heavily on thriller conventions, it is nonetheless a drama that focuses on social issues and has strong

feminist undertones, something that is noted but remains relatively undeveloped in critical commentary on the play.

According to Bolt, *One Night Stand* was a formal experiment with the thriller genre; she called the play “a technical exercise in structure” (Rudakoff, *Fair Play* 178). Thrillers, according to Jerry Palmer’s book *Thrillers: Genesis and Structures of a Popular Genre*, are characterized by “mystery and disruption” (53) and a hero who averts the conspiracy. This process, Palmer explains, “is what provides the thrills that the reader seeks” (53). While *One Night Stand* originated as a thriller, it also seems to emerge out of a sense of social disillusionment and personal uncertainty. Daisy is pitted against Rafe, who challenges her to re-examine her life and avenge herself against the malignant forces he represents. In her interview with Lister, Bolt insisted that the play was “written in a classic form, the thriller. There is no issue; I wrote it as a technical exercise, to see if I could write a play about nothing” (8). Lister replies, “But this isn’t a ‘who-done-it’ thriller at all. It raises problems of identity, of who the characters are” (8). Despite Bolt’s dismissive response – “Many thrillers are like that” (8) – *One Night Stand* certainly investigates how women negotiate changing sexual mores and roles, as well as a troubled subjectivity, and the violent ending of the play is an important revision of both conventional thriller structure and of conventional dramatic depictions of women.

In terms of its theme, the play, like *Shelter*, reflects the feminist issues circulating at the time, many of which focused on women’s sexual expression in the swinging climate of the “Me Generation” and the flip-side of those experiences, as victims of sexual abuse and violence. It was during this period of liberal sexual practice that many rape crisis centres were founded in Canada and that the National Day of Protest against violence against women was established on November 5, 1974. As Roberta Hamilton observes in *Gendering the*

Vertical Mosaic: Feminist Perspectives on Canadian Society, the climate regarding sexual expression seemed to change drastically from the beginning of the decade, when feminists stressed the importance of women's sexuality and pleasure, to the time when they came to a radical new understanding of women's oppression. She explains that "after proclaiming women's right to sexual pleasure. . . [feminists made] a shocking "discovery" during the mid 1970s: the systemic nature of male violence against women – rape and battery, then incest and sexual harassment" (62). Hamilton summarizes this change as follows:

If, in the first years of the 1970s, women's right to abortion symbolized feminist hopes for sexual emancipation, by the middle of that decade the focus on the danger of rape came as a grim message that sexual emancipation involved more than becoming active players in the sexual encounter. (62)

This change in climate was also noted in *Chatelaine*, especially following its coverage of international women's year, when the magazine began to investigate more thoroughly women's dissatisfaction with marriage and single life under the pressure of the new sexual morality ("Roles Reversed" [March 1976]; "Marriage Reform: Breaking the Tie That Binds" [June 1976 and July 1976]; "'Twosies' Marriage'" [November 1976]), and to look at more serious issues of wife battery ("The Woman in the Crunch No. 4 – 'He Beats Me'" [January 1976]), alcoholism ("Drinking Women" [March 1976]) and rape ("Anatomy of a Rape" [August 1976]).

One Night Stand is a play that reflects many of the tensions emerging in the women's movement at the time. It responds not only to the new sexual morality of the age, but also to the very real threats that attended women's sexual experimentation. The play opens in a highrise apartment in downtown Toronto, with Daisy and Rafe returning from a bar and playfully bantering about which of them picked the other up. In fact, the reason Daisy has

brought Rafe home is because her friend and roommate, Sharon, and her married lover, Nick, have both abandoned her on her birthday. Feeling distinctly abject, Daisy wears her insecurities on her sleeve. When Sharon eventually calls to check in on her, Daisy pretends to be having a party, and affecting a distraction, soon hangs up on her. However, a few minutes later when Nick calls, Daisy breaks down. Bolt implies that Daisy has picked Rafe up at a bar because she is lonely and disempowered. While Daisy appears to be financially and emotionally independent, an example of a liberated and self-assured young woman, in reality she is highly vulnerable. Her rapid involvement with Rafe illustrates how cavalier she is regarding her sexual liaisons and her safety. The play thus emphasizes Daisy's experience of identity crisis in the face of rapidly changing social values. Her crisis of subjectivity is directly linked to her "outcast" or abject status in relation to dominant social and cultural expectations.

The conflict in the drama stems from the fact that Daisy is undeterred from her desire for a sexual liaison with Rafe, despite his obvious predilection for violence. Her insecurities, combined with her heedless desire, reveal Daisy to be a victim of her own warped sense of sexual liberty, something Bolt underlines throughout the play. She is, it appears, compelled by *his* abject status, even as it also seems to horrify her. When Rafe asks her why she is picking up a stranger on her birthday, she asserts, "Because I'm adventurous" (3). She explains her interest in sex in similar terms: "Sex is not the only thing in my life, but it is the only thing right now, that's all. I'm very single minded" (17). In response to Rafe's hesitation to engage in foreplay, she persists in her sexual agenda: "We're going to bed together, that's all. What is it supposed to be, Great Moments from the 20th Century?" (37). When Rafe suggests during the scene leading up to the seduction, "I scared you. You don't trust me," she agrees, saying, "I don't trust anybody" (14). A lack of trust is taken in stride

and seen as one more component of sexual excitement. Rafe, it seems, is as abject as Daisy feels herself to be and because of that, she is drawn into his dangerous game, literally watching herself perform her identity as “sexually liberated woman.” Just before they begin kissing Rafe asks, “Why don’t you kick me out if you think I’m such a phoney?” and Daisy responds, “Phoney is not the word” (30). Bolt’s stage directions, or didascalia, reveal that “The word is ‘crazy’ but DAISY doesn’t care” (31). The audience is thus aware not only of Daisy’s sexual desire, but also of the danger that accompanies it, a threat that she blithely embraces.

Yet Daisy’s bravado is undermined by various contradictions. It appears that she is assuming a classic sexual “feminine” or victim role, even as she attempts to enact the role of an adventurous and liberated woman. Her performance of this role is underlined by various references to her sexual role-playing that occur throughout the play. For example, when Daisy realizes that Rafe has previously made an audiotape of a sexual encounter with another woman, she asks him, “Do you want to turn your tape recorder on . . . we could try for the top ten” (15). Instead of objecting to the tape or rejecting him, she accommodates him, yet she does so with resentment and sarcasm. Another example of her attempt to appear sexually cavalier is her response to her next-door neighbour’s “shrieking.” Daisy explains to Rafe that Riva is not in trouble, that she is simply engaged in a sexual performance: “Can’t you tell the difference between a scream and a shriek? They are in bed together. Or she’s swinging from the shower rail. It’s showtime” (12). Later, when they are about to begin sexual intercourse, Daisy asks, “Do you want it like the movies? In slow motion or what?” (33). Daisy is aware of performing sexually and is willing to enact the simultaneous role of sexual adventurer and sexual object/victim, even at significant risk to herself. Throughout the play, Bolt critiques Daisy’s sexual role-playing and suggests that she is accommodating

herself to social constructions of both masculine and feminine stereotypes. She is seduced by Rafe's movie-star mimetics and by her own self-styling as a liberated sexual adventurer. However, Daisy's willingness to accept these socially constructed roles is both self-effacing and dangerous. She is, in effect, acting out her role under duress and the consequences of doing so are especially dire.

Unbeknownst to Daisy, in a blackly comic scene, Rafe kills Sharon, who has returned home unexpectedly. In an unrelenting scene of thriller dimensions, Daisy then kills him in self-defence. This horrific conclusion emphasizes how wrong Daisy's judgement has been and yet, the fact that Bolt has Daisy kill Rafe instead of being killed by him suggests that she is not being held responsible for an immoral act, but that she is driven to commit one in order to protect herself from a threatening and violent society (and from her own socially sanctioned self-destructiveness). This scene also underlines the notion of abjection that is threaded throughout the play. After Rafe pulls Sharon's lifeless body from the sofa bed (again, a disturbingly farcical stage direction that is perhaps intended to distance the audience's critical faculties as much as titillate them), he offers a bleak summation of human inter-relations: "The trouble with modern life is that people don't trust, do they? Paranoia. You know, if you go out on the street, you're more likely to get killed by a car than you are to get murdered" (48). Of course, this is the issue that Bolt's play is addressing, the notion of sexual trust and how women are especially prone to violation in a culture that intimidates them through social marginalization and sexual violence. Her depiction of Rafe as a serio-comic killer is confusing, yet illustrates her attempt to engage with a popular culture cliché in a way that demands her audience critically evaluate their own desire to be entertained by sexual violence.

The conclusion to *One Night Stand* is also a provocative response to *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1975), the best-selling novel by Judith Rossner that was turned into a film in 1977 starring Diane Keaton. In her interview with Judith Rudakoff, Bolt said that she was intrigued by the book and saw it as “a book about punishing a woman for her morality, for picking up a guy” (180). Bolt told Rudakoff that after reading *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* she “wanted to write about an ordinary girl behaving in an ordinary way” (180), which suggests that her depiction of Daisy is intended to counter the notion that a sexually assertive and independent woman is in any way abnormal. Bolt also added, “the play is really about loneliness rather than morality” (180). In *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, set during the heyday of the sexual revolution in New York City, Theresa Dunn, the title character, spirals into a pattern of self-destruction until she is murdered by a sadistic homosexual whom she has brought home for a fling. In *One Night Stand*, Daisy, acting out of both genuine desire and her own insecurities, succumbs to Rafe’s sexual charms, but is able to turn the tables on him and survive his grisly designs. While Daisy is not killed, Sharon is, which makes Daisy realize Rafe’s psychopathology and how much she has taken her safety for granted.

In many ways *One Night Stand* is the flip side of *Shelter*, for it explores how a young, single, urban woman negotiates issues of sexual representation *without* a sense of shelter. The title of the play can be interpreted in two ways. In the colloquial sense, it refers to a brief sexual liaison, yet in the figurative sense it refers to a woman’s protest against sexual exploitation and violence. As a parody of the thriller genre, the play explores both these resonances, as it suggests that sexual liberation is a right that can potentially be exploited to a woman’s detriment.

Interestingly, Bolt also appears to have begun *One Night Stand* at approximately the same time as *Shelter*, as its initial scenes are interspersed with scenes from *Shelter* in one of

her undated notebooks from the period. *One Night Stand* shares with the earlier play a preoccupation with feminist issues, in particular, the notion of sexual liberation. Daisy is sexually liberated and economically independent, but she is also genuinely lonely and confused about her identity. Thus, like *Shelter* and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *One Night Stand* reflects the drastically changing role expectations women experienced as a result of the women's movement and illustrates the identity conflicts that arose as a result of women's negotiation of feminist values and their own subjectivity.

The play also illustrates Millett's assertions about the role of force in patriarchy, as it stresses the notion that brutalities against women "are regarded as the product of individual deviance, confined to pathological or exceptional behaviour, and without general import. And yet, just as under other total ideologies . . . control in patriarchal society would be imperfect, even inoperable, unless it had the rule of force to rely upon, both in emergencies and as an ever-present instrument of intimidation" (60). The link between individual deviance and control in patriarchal society is certainly explored in Bolt's play, since Daisy's attraction to Rafe is directly linked to her sense of personal disempowerment. Thus, the play reflects Millett's assertions about the role of violence in patriarchal cultures:

Patriarchal societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and with power. . . . The rule here associates sadism with the male ("the masculine role") and victimization with the female ("the feminine role"). Emotional response to violence against women in patriarchy is often curiously ambivalent; references to wife-beating, for example, invariably produce laughter and some embarrassment. Exemplary atrocity, such as the mass murders committed by Richard Speck, greeted at

one level with a certain scandalized, possibly hypocritical indignation, is capable of eliciting a mass response of titillation at another level. (62)

Millett speculates that this *frisson* in response to sadistic sexual crime may in some way serve as a ritual act with a cathartic effect, and Bolt's play exploits this powerful current in patriarchal culture. Bolt uses the thriller genre to examine the experiences of young women attempting to come to terms with a changing social value system that forces them into uncomfortable and threatening accommodations. Yet she also has her liberated sexual character, Daisy, survive.

As Millett writes in *Sexual Politics*, the one form of violence that is most prominent in contemporary societies is sexual assault: "Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape" (61). In *One Night Stand* Bolt transforms the story of the rape and murder of a woman (*Looking for Mr. Goodbar*) into the story of a woman's murder of an attractive but dangerous man with whom she has enjoyed consensual sex. Bolt's critique of "modern" life seems to lie in its readiness to condemn women for participating in a culture that encourages their sexual exploitation. Daisy's alienation from her family, her neighbours, her friend, and her lover makes her vulnerable to Rafe. The fact that she is successful and self-sufficient does not provide her with a sense of security. If one reads *One Night Stand* as the representation of one woman's stand against sexual violence and intimidation and her assertion of self in the face of it, then her actions suggest that women must take a stand against all forms of sexual politics, both in their diffuse and overt manifestations.

Admittedly, the play's message is not straightforward. On the one hand, Daisy's behaviour appears reckless and self-indulgent. On the other, the play suggests that contemporary culture does promote social alienation and does leave individuals, particularly

women, prone to sexual exploitation and assault. It also emphasizes that the media plays a role in promoting these values. If Bolt was attempting to “write back” to *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, then *One Night Stand* suggests that although women like Daisy and Sharon are vulnerable to sexual violence, they nonetheless have the ability to take a stand against it and to expose the nature of systematic sexual exploitation and intimidation. By exposing both Daisy’s sexual role-playing and the validity of her sexual desire, Bolt complicates her audience’s understanding of female sexuality and morality. She portrays Daisy as an independent woman whose desire is legitimate, yet who has been conditioned to stereotypical roles in terms of both sexual liberation and sexual victimization. The challenge, Bolt suggests, is for women to discover the true nature of their desire independent of this sexual posturing.

Bolt set out to write a play that confronted the notion that a woman should be punished for her “morality,” even though she insisted at other times that it was a play about “nothing” (Lister 8). In fact, her play challenges generic expectations by positioning Daisy as a victor and it also critiques social expectations of conventional morality where women are punished for sexual transgressions. However, the play can be read as a work that entertains and satisfies as much as one that challenges and problematizes conventional sexuality because of its associations with the thriller genre. For this reason, the progressive message of the play was often missed by its reviewers.

***One Night Stand*: Critical Reception**

For the most part, reviews of *One Night Stand* focused on how the play conformed to the thriller genre. Unlike the playscript for *Shelter*, the content of which was undeniably political, *One Night Stand* was regarded as anything but political because of its status as a

genre piece. As a result, the play was not held up to high literary standards nor was it seen to be particularly critical of societal conventions.

John Fraser's review appeared in *The Globe and Mail* on April 11, 1977. In it he praised the show as an entertaining genre piece: "It's a real winner and as it wings its way to a shocking conclusion that has been carefully and meticulously mapped out right from the beginning, the message becomes very clear: Mrs. Bolt is a good playwright getting better and better all the time." However, Fraser also qualifies this praise by emphasizing the play as an entertainment rather than a work of high artistic merit:

I don't think anyone, least of all Mrs. Bolt, would claim that *One Night Stand* is a "great" piece of stage literature. Too many of our playwrights have been out stalking greatness and returned home with only pretentious mediocrity. But here, she has cleverly set her sights on small quarry and the subsequent shot almost makes the bull's-eye. For a comedy thriller, there hadn't been anything locally to match *One Night Stand* for ages and, indisputably, it is the best thing the Tarragon has put on all season.

While Fraser recognizes the underlying social context and conflict of the play, he does not acknowledge its social critique:

The setting for this high-rise shack-up seems dead on. The sounds of weekend trysting are all around and the neighbours, oblivious to the yelps and little screams of eroticism, disport themselves in their own singles' games. In the bosom of a big city apartment building teeming with night-time activity, Daisy is ominously alone like everyone else.

Instead of addressing the play's exploration of these changing sexual mores, Fraser stresses the play's *lack* of controversial content: "*One Night Stand* isn't a huge statement by any

means, but what it says is said remarkably well.” Fraser’s review focuses on the play as a contemporary thriller that acknowledges Daisy’s social isolation without attributing it to anything more than urban living.

Gina Mallet’s³⁰ review in *The Toronto Star* on April 11, 1977, “New Thriller is Suitably Macabre But Improbable,” begins by acknowledging the familiarity of details in Bolt’s thriller. She calls the opening titillating and notes its ability to accurately establish “the confusion and desolation of those who struggled to survive in a society they neither understand nor are really part of.” This statement suggests that Mallet is sensitive to the depiction of a “young woman, alone on her birthday and momentarily abandoned by her love”; however, the critic’s interest in the psychological aspects of the play are limited. Instead, like Fraser, she focuses on the play’s generic merits and does not consider its social critique to be in any way related to Daisy’s particular circumstances.

Unlike Fraser, Mallet recognizes the play’s allusion to Rossner’s novel, calling it a “suitably macabre and original variation on the Mr. Goodbar theme,” yet she also suggests that it lacks credibility: “Increasingly, the play becomes a series of improbable coincidences.” In much the same way that Fraser evaluated the play according to genre expectations, Mallet ignores Bolt’s parodic intent and focuses instead on her tendency to veer away from the thriller formula, which Mallet regards as a weakness: “[t]ime and again she papers over cracks in the play’s construction rather than building in character and motivation. The result is that *One Night Stand* is yet another example of premature production. A great deal more work is needed to make this play crackle the way it should, threatening us with horror, lulling us with pop sociology.” Bolt’s reference to the Kitty

³⁰ Bolt had a longstanding grievance against Mallet and even created an unflattering character modeled on the critic in a subsequent play, *Escape Entertainment* (1981).

Genovese case in the play,³¹ which Mallet explains involved “a young woman [who] was stabbed to death while her neighbors watched and did nothing,” seems to Mallet “an awkward overreach of a justification” for why “nobody in this cardboard building raises a fuss at the 4 a.m. shenanigans.” However, Mallet does not consider that Bolt’s allusion to that case and her self-conscious re-working of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*’s conclusion indicate that she is attempting to raise awareness of women’s vulnerability rather than simply justifying stage business. The fact that she suggests that Bolt has written a failed thriller, “One clumsiness succeeds another,” reveals that she is judging it according to the “iron logic” of that genre and not the awkwardness of real-life dilemmas.

McKenzie Porter’s review in *The Toronto Sun* also considers the play a failed thriller. Most notably, Porter’s remarks indicate his discomfort with the social context depicted in the play, particularly the context of 1970s counter-culture:

Rafe seems to be just another of those young men with shoulder length hair who wears tartan shirts and tight jeans and as they wander around the welfare agencies all over Canada carrying a guitar in one hand and a tape-recorder in the other. . . . Daisy fancies Rafe physically and because she is feeling “adventurous” takes him back to the apartment for a one night stand.

Curiously, Porter, who enjoyed *Shelter* for its vital sexuality, finds *One Night Stand*’s depiction of liberated sexuality unsettling. Like the other reviewers, he is quick to condemn Daisy and excuse Rafe’s violence as anomalous: “It is difficult to sympathize with Daisy because she is so dull, so incredibly blind to Rafe’s palpably psychotic condition. And it is difficult to be hostile to Rafe because his criminality is lunatic.” While Porter notes the

³¹ On page 28 of the published version of the play, Rafe emphasizes Daisy’s alienation from her neighbours, shouting out “Where are all you people? Daisy was screaming! She could have been dying in here and you all want to pretend it’s a K-tel commercial. . . . In memory of Kitty Genovese!”

play's potential for social intent, he believes it fails to deliver any significant message: "As a social document the play fails through its lack of message. It represents little more than a morbid interest in commonplace sex crimes. All author Bolt says to the audience is 'beware of one night stands.'" Ironically, Porter ignores the fact that Daisy's stand is inexorably linked to her attempt to establish her identity in relation to a culture that both celebrates and punishes female sexual liberation.

Unlike the Toronto critics, Joseph Erdelyi's review in *The Ottawa Citizen* judges the play according to the ominous tone of Bolt's oeuvre rather than thriller expectations. He begins by noting the similarities between *One Night Stand* and Bolt's previous plays:

Bolt's latest effort bears all the characteristics of her previous audience pleasers: simple characters in [a] down-to-earth situation, blessed with a sharp dialogue and wrapped in mild humor, adding up to a combination which seldom fails to entertain.

However, Erdelyi suggests that Bolt's conclusion does not allow her audience to remain at ease:

This surprise conclusion, however, is so out of character with the rest of *One Night Stand* that it is practically a new play. It sends the audience home with a chill down everybody's spine and if Bolt's sole aim was to catch everybody off guard, she succeeded perfectly. Otherwise we would have been better off seeing only the first part.

Erdelyi states that Bolt's conclusion is a "needless piece of violence and violent emotions, without a well laid foundation and particular dramatic need, which seems to have only one purpose: to shock the audience with the unexpected." He regards the ending as a "needless shock, which leaves one angry at the author for ruining one's pleasant mood and

disappointed in the play because it did not end when it should have.” His review suggests that Erdelyi was resistant to Bolt’s portrayal of feminist disaffection, wanting, instead, a more traditional “happy” ending. However, his review illustrates the fact that Bolt’s play can be read in radically different ways, as a failed romance, an unexpected thriller, or a social drama. Each reading elicits a different sense of success. For an audience expecting an entertainment, Bolt’s venture into the murky blend of social drama/thriller could be confusing and dissatisfying.

Doug Ord’s review of *One Night Stand* for *Toronto Theatre Review* picked up on Erdelyi’s frustration about the conclusion: “What an infuriating play this is, to begin so well, and to end so badly. Carol Bolt is such a good writer, her ear for dialogue is so acute, her sensitivity to her characters’ dilemmas is so pronounced. How then could she possibly have consented to so blatant a sellout of their interests in the second act of this play?” Like Erdelyi, Ord focuses on the human drama of the play, rather than on its manipulation of the thriller genre: “The complications of the very real human relationships she’s introduced us to are suddenly dropped” in the second half of the play when Sharon’s body is uncovered and “Whap, goes the wet towel across the collective face of the audience.” Ord’s review personalizes his response and stresses his emotional reaction to the play. He reveals that the first act of the play touched “a very sensitive chord in me; I identified with these characters, and opened myself up to them, hoping perhaps that there was something here that could guide me the next time I found myself in a similar situation.” He also explains that “that’s why I’m now so exasperated about the way the play ends.” He calls the conclusion a “cheap cop-out” and suggests that “when theatre chooses to pander to such basically dishonest (and in this case destructive) illusions, it loses its value as anything but an apologia for the basest sort of conservatism.” Ord’s response to the violent subtext of the play is to dismiss it as

unrealistic fear-mongering. He fails to recognize that Bolt's complicated portrait of contemporary sexual mores includes a critique of how these new role expectations leave women vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation. Bolt is not portraying Daisy as sexually immoral, but as sexually naïve. Ord implies that Bolt's play refuses to engage with the complex realities of the contemporary sexual scene; however, he himself seems to see that scene in an extremely idealistic, and arguably opportunistic, way:

Okay, so the singles scene is pretty tough sometimes. And maybe lots of people pausing outside The Gasworks have baroque fantasies of being violated and murdered if they venture inside. But not many people are! And those bars are host to thousands of people who, if they do decide to turn and continue on their lonely way, do so most probably because they aren't sure what they'll do in the morning with this latest dilemma of pink flesh, that also happens to be a person. That's a problem that a lot of us face, and that Carol Bolt chose to ignore in *One Night Stand*. In fact if anything, she urges us to go farther into ourselves, into our own protective shell, out of fear. After all, you never can tell who you might meet, if you make yourself vulnerable. And so all of the habits of this fear-ridden culture are just reinforced. People here are so afraid of opening themselves, of trusting, of giving. And plays like this don't make matters any better do they.

Ord's frank comments are an ironic echo of Rafe's own social critique, but they also highlight the perplexing nature of Bolt's play. Daisy (and Sharon's) fate *can* be read as a condemnation of promiscuous sexuality. Indeed, because of Bolt's use of a recognized genre, the suspense thriller, the powerful social reflections of the play are often undermined. Hence, Bolt's use of the thriller genre disturbs Ord and he regards the violence of the play's

conclusion as contributing to the reinforcement of conservative sexual values rather than illustrating the reverse. Ord's reaction suggests that he interprets Rafe's death in much the same way that Porter does, as a warning to "beware of one night stands." If judged according to genre conventions, *One Night Stand* fails to live up to what Gina Mallet referred to in her review as the thriller's "iron logic." The play fails as a thriller because of plot inconsistencies and as a drama because of thematic inconsistencies, yet it succeeds as an entertainment because it conflates the most compelling parts of both dramatic genres, suspense and emotional identification. If considered in relation to Bolt's other socially conscious, entertaining, and crowd-pleasing plays, it fails to leave the audience with a sense of hope. However, this is evidence that the play succeeds in both interrogating genre conventions and promoting social consciousness in an entertaining and parodic way and as such is exemplary social critique.

For the most part critics agreed to assess *One Night Stand* as a genre play, and while the underlying social critique is sometimes noted, it is given only fleeting attention. Bolt, who was attempting to use the thriller to explore female sexuality in the context of the sexual revolution and its attendant problems and complexities, exploited her audience's interest in the genre in order to promote a socially provocative message without arousing outright antipathy. Ironically, her success at veiling her social critique contributed to a decidedly ambiguous feminist message.

IV

Sharon Pollock: “Women can’t be direct”

During thirty years of continuous playwriting, Pollock has variously been called a Canadian nationalist historiographer, a regionalist, and a feminist. She has also often been called (in the best sense, I think) a shit-disturber. Pollock is clearly one of Canada’s seminal dramatists, and one of only a very few from the early 1970s still active in theatre today.

Jerry Wasserman, *Theatre Research in Canada*

Sharon Pollock is widely renowned and continues to produce critically acclaimed work. In the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Beverly Rasporich called her “an icon of the theatre establishment” (888). Most of Pollock’s plays investigate the conflict between social and personal politics and explore how individuals reconcile this dilemma. While her earliest plays initially explored this relationship from the perspective of male characters, she gradually introduced female characters into her work in a way that illustrated the personal compromises that women must make to accommodate patriarchal society. However, these early “feminist” plays, much like the work of Ravel and Bolt from the same period, display an ambiguous feminist perspective.

Pollock began working in theatre after moving to New Brunswick in the early 1960s. There she became increasingly involved in all aspects of production and eventually began acting. In 1966 she met actor Michael Ball and moved to Calgary with him. They began to tour with the Prairie Players that same year, and she turned to playwriting a few years later. In an interview with Zimmerman, Pollock revealed her motivation for writing plays:

I began to write because I felt I had no voice, even though I was working as an actor and playing in plays. I was always assuming the voice of somebody else, telling somebody else’s story. I moved into writing out of anger and frustration, and out of a need to confirm that the work I was doing was important. It’s destructive to the soul to do stuff that is *never* grounded in your own reality. . . . (Zimmerman, *Playwriting Women* 64)

Pollock’s belief that it is important to write about her own experience led her to create plays that are expressions of her own struggles with social conventions and restrictions. In her 1982 interview with Robert Wallace for *The Work*, she explains, “If I hadn’t come from the

middle class and had a certain kind of education and certain kinds of opportunities, I believe that my act of saying, 'This isn't good enough' would, since I'm female, take the form of destroying myself" (211). She, like both Ravel and Bolt, made the personal political by writing plays about women's roles and the restrictions imposed on them. She describes her thematic preoccupation to Rita Much as follows:

All of my plays deal with the same concern. I think I write the same play over and over again. It's a play about an individual who is directed to or compelled to follow a course of action of which he or she begins to examine the morality. Circumstances force a decision, usually the authority (family, society, government) is removed emotionally or geographically from the protagonist, and it usually doesn't end very well. It doesn't resolve in happiness. I think that is a very Canadian thing, actually, that comes from living in Alberta or the Maritimes and feeling that Ottawa never seems to understand what it is that is required in these places. It also has something to do with being a woman. Male society defines appropriate behaviour and action for women and I can never conform to that without denying aspects of myself. (Much, "Interview" 210)

Pollock's statement underlines that her plays come out of a sense of speaking from a marginal social position, whether as an easterner, westerner, or a woman. She implies that her plays address her own sense of role restriction in relation to a "male society" that opposes her individual sense of morality and autonomy. In her 1982 interview with Wallace she acknowledged that her early plays might indeed have reflected a growing feminism:

If I took two steps backwards and looked at the plays I would have to agree. . . . Certainly I feel stronger and more able to write plays involving women, or

to write from the point of view of women, or with a woman as a major character. (118)

While *Blood Relations* (1980) is considered the play that marked a turning point in her oeuvre and is “the one play that the playwright concedes to be ‘feminist’” (qtd. in Zimmerman, *Playwriting Women* 73), it is arguably not her first or only “feminist” play. Zimmerman contends that “since *Blood Relations*, there is an overt feminist dimension” (88) in Pollock’s work; however, earlier plays, such as the unpublished *And Out Goes You* (1975), *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976), and *My Name is Lisbeth* (1976), already begin to address feminist concerns and to offer an integrated political critique of Canadian society from a feminist perspective. However, just as Ravel and Bolt masked their early feminist critiques, so too does Pollock obscure her examination of sexual subjugation through a strategic use of form, which allows her to assert a feminist argument in a way that situates it at a historical distance from her audience.

Much like Bolt, Pollock recognized the particular challenges of being a female playwright in a patriarchal society:

As for being a woman playwright, well, playwrights who are just starting out are generally powerless and women are powerless. So a woman just starting out might actually not see the inequities because the role is a powerless one anyway. What happens to her is cloudy, not always clear. I certainly believe that I always thought I had to have a lot of reasons to back up my work. I always had to know more than anyone else in order to put my case forward. I didn’t have legitimacy in my very person, which I think a man has. I also think that the more successful a woman playwright becomes, the more powerful she is and the more she works within the power structure of the

theatre, the more obvious to her the sexual discrimination is. . . . It seems to me that men are applauded when they demonstrate assertiveness and vision and move towards that vision, but women are compelled to do things more obliquely. Women can't be direct, they can't show off. (Much, "Interview" 214)

Again, Pollock's awareness of the differential status of female playwrights and her sense of having to strategize in order to assert her own authority and vision are clear. She acknowledges that women working in Canadian theatre do experience sexual discrimination and that their response is often, necessarily, masked as a result.

When asked if she likes to be regarded as a feminist playwright, however, Pollock's answer is somewhat different than the previous playwrights discussed here:

"Yes, it is important. I certainly don't understand how a woman with any sense of justice can not be a feminist, but I object to those people who think that 'feminist playwright' means that there is a hidden ideology by which aesthetic choices are being governed. I don't see it as a limiting term at all" (215). Pollock thus asserts a feminist intent while insisting that her work is not didactic.

Pollock also recognizes that women are especially sensitized to role-playing and the restrictions that accompany it. When Much asks her, "What first drew you to theatre?" ("Interview" 212), she responds by highlighting the fact that she felt quite comfortable with the process of role-playing: "I felt that I was performing all the time anyways, so going on stage was natural" (212). She also explained that when she was a university student she believed that her behaviour would be restricted by conventional role expectations: "I thought I would get married. . . . I'm appalled when I think about it but that was the reality for me. . . . As far as a career goes, I believed, and I think many women today believe this, that my

contribution was to dedicate my life to making it all better for a man” (212). Later, she explains that the role of wife and mother was not wholly satisfying: “There *was* a certain amount of resentment against the children’s father and patriarchy in general for the child-bearing burden imposed on me, but I got rid of the resentment eventually by living alone” (215). Pollock’s sensitivity to role expectations and her eventual decision not to conform to them are reflected in her early plays, which depict women as bound by cultural expectations that prevent them from living self-determined lives, as being especially conflicted about motherhood, and as confined in domestic spaces that restrict their autonomy, but that do not, ultimately, constrain them.

Pollock’s way of avoiding direct treatment of sexism in the plays under investigation here is to employ what Sherrill Grace and Gabriele Helms refer to as historiographic docudrama, a term that refers to rewritings of patriarchal history that exploit theatrical and presentational power and mix “‘actual’ reality (identifiable attitudes toward race and gender, actual immigration policies) with theatrical reality (circus, magician, spectators, objects on display) to illuminate the artificiality of both” (88). Grace and Helms discuss the example of *The Komagata Maru Incident* and stress that this particular play is “about real life and real events as staged, manipulated, masterminded acts, acts that inscribe, naturalize, validate, and perpetuate the racist, sexist construction of Canada as a country of and for dominant white men, who hold all the cards and make all the rules” (88). Pollock’s revisioning of history in both *The Komagata Maru Incident* and *My Name is Lisbeth* (her early version of *Blood Relations*, also written in 1976) allows her audience to become critically engaged with the idea of restrictive social conventions by examining how past events reflect the injustice of racial and sexual biases. Both works are based on historical incident, yet address underlying feminist concerns and personal, psychological histories. In this way Pollock exploits her

audience's interest in "history" plays to parody both the dramatic genre and the notion of history itself. In her interview with Wallace, Pollock asserts that her plays evolve out of historical fact, but that they move beyond it to address larger social issues: "I feel that good work should transcend whatever you're basing it on" (119). Pollock's work transcends its historical context because it deals with individuals and their subjective experience of "actual" events. This powerful use of personal perspective allows her audience to engage with the issues that emerge out of the historical event without feeling overwhelmed by their contemporary implications. For example, it is easier for audiences to identify and condemn a racist incident from the past than to critically examine racism in their own environment.

In a newspaper article about *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock explains that she uses this process of emotional identification strategically. She tells Max Wyman of *The Vancouver Sun*, "If people learn anything, they learn through their emotions – you can rationalize anything, but you learn by being touched. I like [George Bernard] Shaw – I like to listen to him – and that's very telling, that I said listen. I'm not touched by his people. I appreciate the rational arguments and the cleverness, but I don't feel his characters." For Pollock, creating characters that her audience can emotionally identify with is an important way to reach them and to promote social transformation from a personal perspective. This is precisely what makes her work powerful, in that she brings an intensely-felt personal perspective to the stage that comments critically on the challenges of our social conditioning and the ambiguities of right and wrong for an individual trapped within an inequitable social system.

In her interview with Much, Pollock discussed how she felt about being labeled a "social playwright" in much the same way as she discussed being labeled a feminist playwright. Again, she clearly identifies the dilemma she experiences in relation to being

categorized as someone with an unacknowledged agenda, yet also reinforces her belief in the importance of personal and political commitment in her writing:

I feel that every play should be committed to social comment. . . . I sense when people defined me as a social playwright that they seemed to be saying that a social playwright is not quite a real one – that the real one is not a political playwright. They made me feel that I had a hidden agenda or ideology, and that my artistic choices were being determined by my adherence to a specific political ideology. I think it's strange that when I moved from the public to the more private arena, the label was dropped, yet I think *Doc* is full of social comment, as is *Blood Relations*. (Much, "Interview" 211)

Pollock also, however, asserts that theatre can be an instrument of social reform, saying, "Of course, nothing happens overnight. But I believe that if it's not a critical eye that's being brought to bear on the subject, it's a wank-off, that you're not doing what you should" (211). Clearly, Pollock sees herself as contributing to a progressive social agenda, even though she dreads having her work dismissed or resisted because of it: "I think of myself looking at the world around me saying, 'This isn't right.' In my head is the image of what the world is supposed to be" (211).

The plays leading up to *Blood Relations* demonstrate Pollock's interest in the conflict between the personal and the political. *A Compulsory Option* was written in 1971 and produced by The New Play Centre in Vancouver in 1972. The play is, according to Robert C. Nunn, "a lightweight farce about the funny side of the paranoia of the New Left," but it includes elements that have become important to all of Pollock's subsequent work: "the force exerted by oppressive institutions on individuals, discrimination against minorities, [and] the

power of myth” (27). In 1973, *Walsh* was produced by Harold Baldrige, the artistic director of Theatre Calgary. It is named after the superintendent of the North West Mounted Police, James A. Walsh, who met with Sitting Bull, and it explores Canada’s complicated relationship to Native people. With both these plays, Pollock conducts historical “revisioning,” but she does not apply that concept to women’s experience. In both plays under examination here, Pollock modifies the documentary form to interrogate history in order to encourage her audience to engage critically with past events, but she also investigates women’s personal, psychological dilemmas within that historical frame, which is what compels interest in her work and anticipates the more powerful psychological character portraits of her later work. In both *The Komagata Maru Incident* and *My Name is Lisbeth* she explores the varied psychological responses women have to oppression through distinct female characters, yet encourages emotional identification with her “feminist” heroines. In addition, these early plays begin her interrogation of role-playing and suggest that it is tied to a subject’s sense of powerlessness and repressed rage. It was in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, in 1976, that Pollock introduced an extended feminist critique of gender relations and of a patriarchal system that subjugates both racial minorities and women, but because of this dual focus on an issue from Canada’s past, and because of the ambiguity and stereotypical nature of her play’s female characters, the play’s feminism is not straightforward.

The Komagata Maru Incident: Patriarchal Patterns of Submission

The Komagata Maru Incident premiered at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre in January 1976 and was directed by Larry Lillo. It is based on the 1914 decision by the Canadian government not to allow a boatload of Sikh immigrants to land in Vancouver

harbour. Pollock's script reconsiders this historical event from multiple perspectives including that of an unnamed widow and her child on the ship; an official from the Department of Immigration, William Hopkinson; his mistress and local madam, Evy; her employee, Sophie; a German informant, Georg; and a circus ringmaster T.S., who some critics believe is a slightly veiled characterization of "The System." As Richard J. Lane notes in his article "Performing History: The Reconstruction of Gender and Race in British Columbia Drama," the play allows its audience to experience various points-of-view, which encourages identification with these different perspectives. Pollock also challenges her audience to critically examine how and why individuals struggle with institutional responsibilities. The Canadian government, depicted by the insensitive bureaucrat T.S., is a racist, oppressive regime that conceals its agenda behind apparently dispassionate policy. However, T.S.'s address to the House of Commons is a blatant example of xenophobia and an eerie echo of the actual words of Sir Richard McBride,³² the Premier of British Columbia at the time:

I fear for my country, and I fear for my people . . . I am not ashamed, nor should you be, to state that this is white man's country! And I can tell you that our British legacy, our traditions, those things that we hold dear, that we have fought and died for, is placed in jeopardy today by a massive influx of colored foreigners! (33)

In the program to this first production, Pollock included "A Comment From the Playwright" in which she clearly states her reasons for writing the play. Her focus is social reform, and for this reason it is worth reproducing the statement in its entirety:

³² McBride said, "To admit Orientals in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white people, and we always have in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country" (qtd. in Grace and Helms 86).

The Komagata Maru Incident is not a documentary account but rather a theatrical impression based upon it and seen through the optique of the stage and the mind of the playwright. . . . I am not interested in detached theatre; one which exists only to distract our leisure. Theatre which serves this purpose is decadent and doomed to extinction. My theatrical concerns are current. I wrote *The Komagata Maru Incident* because I believe, pure and simply, that much of our historical past has been misrepresented and even hidden from us. To state a not particularly profound, but nevertheless true thought, to know where we are going, we must know where we have been and what we have come from. Our attitudes towards the non-white peoples of the world and of Canada is one that suffers from the residual effects of centuries of oppressive policies which were given moral and ethical credence by the fable of racial superiority. The Komagata Maru Incident occurred in 1914. I feel that the attitudes expressed by the general populace of that time, and paraphrased throughout my play, are still around today and, until we face this fact, we can never change it.

Pollock's statement highlights her sense of the relevance of her play to contemporary Canadians and her desire to encourage social change. She takes it upon herself to inform her fellow Canadians about a history that she believes has been whitewashed and encourages them to consider the implications of not only their past, but also their present circumstances. Included in her notes for the play held in the Sharon Pollock Papers at the University of Calgary are handwritten references on the back of several pages of excerpts from Robbie L. Reid's book *The Inside Story of the Komagata Maru*, which include the following: "awaken in its audience a conscious knowledge of the process of creation, choice, and change";

“every power scenario is based on patriarchal patterns of submission, domination, seduction, betrayal”; and “women – free to abandon sado-masochistic relationships” (54.7.11). These citations reveal Pollock’s consideration of the link between racism and sexism in patriarchal culture and her desire to challenge her audience to see the connections between the two within her play.

These handwritten notes also point to Pollock’s awareness of certain ideas associated with the women’s liberation movement. They stress the idea of consciousness-raising and the dangers of patriarchal patterns. In particular, the notes suggest Pollock’s interest in how women are subjugated through sado-masochistic relationships. The concerns about women and their experience of violence, as previously noted, became increasingly important during the mid-seventies. Pollock’s critique is especially progressive in that she suggests that women who are economically and racially marginalized/object are particularly vulnerable to violence. Pollock’s concerns thus reflect the complex interconnection between feminisms that the women’s movement of the time was also attempting to understand.

The growing awareness of the relationship between racism and feminism in the 1970s undoubtedly informed Pollock’s critique. Millett’s treatment of race in *Sexual Politics* recognizes it as a caste system (49) but also acknowledges that “the priorities of maintaining male supremacy might outweigh even those of white supremacy” and suggests “sexism may be more endemic in our own society than racism” (54). Millett’s comments on force in *Sexual Politics* touched on the links between sadistic force and women of ethnic minorities:

The rationale which accompanies that imposition of male authority euphemistically referred to as “the battle of the sexes” bears a certain resemblance to the formulas of nations at war, where any heinousness is justified on the grounds that the enemy is either an inferior species or really

not human at all. The patriarchal mentality has concocted a whole series of rationales about women which accomplish this purpose tolerably well. And these traditional beliefs still invade our consciousness and affect our thinking to an extent few of us would be willing to admit. (64)

These remarks by one of the period's most controversial feminist writers are echoed in Pollock's poignant portrayal of the unnamed Sikh woman on the *Komagata Maru*. She is doubly abject, both as a woman and as a member of a race considered "inferior" and "really not human at all" to those on the shore in the port of Vancouver.

In her interview with Wallace and Zimmerman, Pollock explains her decision to use a structure that reflected how the actual event was sensationalized and how those individuals on the boat were portrayed :

when I read the newspaper accounts of the day I discovered the wonderful circus or carnival atmosphere of the dock area with the marching bands and popcorn, the apples and balloons. . . . Then I thought, if this is a carnival, or circus, I could have a Master of Ceremonies. Then who would be the wild animal? . . . Well, of course, the savage beast is the person sitting out on the *Komagata Maru*. (199-200)

The savage beast in her play is the unnamed Sikh woman, facing the audience behind "an open grill-like frame" that "gives both the impression of a cage, and of the superstructure of a ship" ("A Comment", *The Komagata Maru Incident*). The fact that the woman is depicted as an important focal point in the spectacle underlines Pollock's emphasis on the link between racist and sexist biases and the fact that the root cause of these beliefs seems to rest in an individual's own crisis of subjectivity. The play's structure also highlights the performativity of what is considered "real."

The Komagata Maru Incident explores the tension between individual integrity and social expectations primarily through the character of William Hopkinson, who is based on the chief interpreter for the immigration department in Vancouver in 1914. Hopkinson is torn between professional allegiance and his own sensitivity to racism and justice because of his mixed-race heritage (he is half Punjabi). Grace and Helms believe that despite Pollock's anatomization of racism and the construction of Canada in the play, it "has less to tell us about gender" (95). They suggest that the story's main interest is Hopkinson: "To be sure, Pollock has added three women to this otherwise male story – she has written them back into history – but all three women are stereotypes who serve the central human drama, which is firmly located in Hopkinson" (95). Hopkinson's dilemma, however, depends upon coming to terms with the influences that each of the female characters represent. If the play's through-line concerns the "return of the repressed," which Nunn argues in his article "Sharon Pollock's Plays," then Hopkinson's relationships with the women in the play, and particularly the feminine, are critically important.

The abject nature of the play's female characters makes them comparable to the women in Ravel and Bolt's plays, for Evy, Sophie, and the unnamed Sikh woman are marginal, disreputable women who do not always act in their own best interests. However, despite these qualities and the relative lack of attention given to these characters, the play does critically investigate the notion of the restrictions of women's roles. Grace and Helms suggest that "the two white women have little agency beyond their roles as whores on the broader-stage of their lives" (95), yet they do contribute to a strong feminist critique within the play. Nor is the unnamed Sikh woman powerless, despite the fact that she is "even more marginalized" (95) than the two white women. Instead, the Sikh woman provides perhaps the most powerful indictment of the racist system and racist prejudice by acting as an

indomitable source of strength and self-determination in the face of intensely hostile circumstances. The fact that she is also a mother is significant because her position echoes that of Hopkinson's own mother. All three women in the play illustrate the marginalization of women within patriarchal systems and thus expose the links between sexism and racism that Pollock suggests are still a problem for Canadian society. They are alternatively whorish and Madonna-ish, yet despite the fact that they conform to these broad female stereotypes, they also dismantle them. Of them, Evy is the most developed, because she eventually makes a moral choice to leave Hopkinson. However, because the female characters are vulnerable and conflicted, as well as compelling and threatening, they can also be easily dismissed, which contributes to the vexed nature of Pollock's message.

Hopkinson's disavowed mother haunts the play. In an effort to impress Evy and Sophie, Hopkinson regales them with stories of his father's powerful control over those in the Punjab, yet neglects to include any description of his mother:

Hopkinson: My father was a big man, blond curly hair, wonderful moustache he had, looked like a prince in his uniform. A prince – surrounded by little being people.
(laughs)

Sophie: What about your mother?

Hopkinson: "Quai Hail!" That's all, and they'd scuttle like bugs.

Sophie: Did your mother like it there?

Hopkinson: She never said. . . . (9)

Eventually, Evy realizes that Hopkinson's mother is the root of his "thing about race, about colour" (31). When she asks him, "Your mother's eyes, now what were they?" he replies,

“My mother’s eyes were blue, you bitch! I’ll kill you” (33). When she realizes that she has touched a nerve, she taunts him, saying, “And Billy’s mother’s brown,” and he replies by slapping, throwing, and shaking her, repeating, “Don’t say that! I’ll kill you if you say that to me!” (33). His violence towards Evy is evidence of his internalized loathing for the mother he cannot acknowledge. Hopkinson’s attempted abjection of his non-white mother thus confirms Nunn’s observation about him, that “the racist denies a part of his own humanity in denying the humanity of others” (31). The fact that Hopkinson’s feelings for his mother, and for women generally, are conflicted illustrates that he cannot move from his awareness of racial marginalization to identification with those who are similarly subjugated. Instead, much as Millett suggests, Hopkinson resorts to asserting his male supremacy as a socially acceptable show of dominance within a white racist society. He “acts” the part of a successful “white” man, while orchestrating the “drama” of the boat people’s plight in order to instruct both the “white” and “black” populations of Canada about their respective positions in Canadian society. In so doing, he attempts to shield himself from criticism and racial bias. His performance, however, is, as Evy notes, imperfect, because his role-playing reveals the inadequacy and fear he feels in relation to white culture.

Hopkinson’s abuse of Evy and her racially-directed interrogation of him also complicate the audience’s understanding of her marginalized position. She is seemingly powerless in relation to him and yet is able to both enrage and entice him, and she is particularly powerful because she intuits his sense of abjected racial inferiority. As the stereotypical whore with the heart of gold, Evy nonetheless actively resists Hopkinson’s control and is never overtly or exclusively sexual with him. Hopkinson is apparently in love with Evy, yet he is unable to be truly intimate. Her reactions to him seem far more maternal than sexual. Significantly, as Evy becomes more aware of the racial tension in the city, she

refuses to help Hopkinson run his business. Evy is initially disdainful of Hopkinson's association with Bella Singh, his Sikh informant, calling him a "brown rat" (5) and a snitch, despite Hopkinson's protestations that he is "a loyal British subject" (5). However, Evy's apparent racism slowly undergoes a shift when on a tram ride, she catches the eye of a Sikh man, whom she describes as looking "solid." She smiles at him, only to watch in horror as the men in the line the man is standing in knock him down and beat him. She explains, "I should have done something" (31). Her gradual sensitization to the plight of minority people begins with this incident. Hopkinson tries to explain that the reason for his decision to send the *Komagata Maru* back is so that "things like your fight won't happen" (32) and elaborates by stating, "All I know, Evy, is my father didn't die in the service for the world to be overrun by a second-rate people." She protests, arguing pointedly that his thinking is deeply flawed: "You don't make sense. Who's second-rate when you run out of brown people?" (32). Eventually, in disgust, Evy intercepts and destroys a missive from Singh to Hopkinson because she is disgusted with his work as an informant: "I'm a whore and what you do is offensive to me!" (37).

Evy's own history, as part of an unidentified minority group in Manitoba (perhaps Hutterite) whose family experienced persecution for their communal land ownership, has led to her own distrust of the government and therefore of Hopkinson's position. Ultimately, she appeals to Hopkinson not to continue with his persecution of those on the ship, yet he persists in executing government orders, insisting that he is on "The winning side" (41). Despite Hopkinson's decision, Evy supports him until she can no longer accept his inability to walk away, and she eventually leaves him, saying, "I can leave ... And I will" (45), and exits off stage. Ultimately, Evy's only power lies in not colluding with Hopkinson. Her actions in this scene are a direct illustration of Pollock's previously mentioned note: "women

– free to abandon sado-masochistic relationships.” Despite her identification with Hopkinson, Evy is unable, finally, to save him, but she does save herself. She is a compelling portrait of a woman who recognizes her own position of marginality, encourages others to escape theirs, and eventually frees herself from an unbearable situation. Although her fate is unknown at the conclusion of the play, she is a vivid illustration of how an individual can experience consciousness raising and work to change what they cannot accept, even if only to a small degree. However, the portrayal of Evy is vexed because she is a stereotypical fallen woman in many regards – she seems to love Hopkinson and because of her low self-esteem, she allows her lover to abuse her. However, she is also of the ruling class in terms of her race, and this allows her a certain degree of power over him which she exploits by baiting him with racial taunts. She is thus inconsistent and somewhat unsympathetic. She is a difficult character to understand and she does not provide a model of feminist behaviour, but only speaks to the desperate measures that women resort to when trying to survive in a racist, sexist society. Her negotiation of her own subjectivity, inflected by her sense of abjection in relation to dominant patriarchal culture and Hopkinson in particular, parallels Hopkinson’s own difficult process of negotiating his subject position.

Sophie is a far more abused woman than Evy. Sophie claims that she is happy to have escaped the servitude of her family – “My back’s not breaking from too many kids and carrying milk cans” (26) – yet she cannot evade her circumstances and dependence on prostitution, even when Evy encourages her to escape. Instead, Sophie latches on to Georg, Hopkinson’s newly acquired German informant. Initially, Sophie is only interested in a business relationship with Georg, but she eventually becomes his mistress, believing perhaps that this is the only way she can attain a measure of security: “Isn’t he smart, Evy? Georg is going places – and so is Sophie” (43). As a pliable and naïve young woman, Sophie’s

mercenary attitude illustrates not only the restrictions of her conditioning, but also her desperation. Sophie also reflects conventional racist sentiments and self-interestedness. Unlike Evy and the unnamed Sikh woman, Sophie is passive and disempowered, which makes her more susceptible to Hopkinson. However, in a tirade against Sophie, Hopkinson reveals his own shaky sense of superiority:

Hopkinson: In this stinking world there's two kinds, there's the ruler and ruled – and when I see the likes of you, I know where I stand!
(he begins to weaken)
Some people talk, and some people listen, but by God, I act, and if . . . it weren't for people like me . . . people like you . . . would still be down in the slime . . . I have my . . . I have my. . . (44)

Hopkinson's realization that he, in fact, has nothing, is profound. His self-esteem is rooted in a mistaken belief in his authority over women like Sophie and Evy, "coloured" immigrants, and "the system." Sophie's similar faith in her ability to thrive through association underlines the futility of both characters' plans.

The unnamed Sikh woman aboard the *Komagatu Maru* provides the most graphic illustration of women's subjugation in patriarchal culture and the most powerful moral contrast to Hopkinson. Like Hopkinson's mother, the Sikh woman embodies the abject through her ability to fascinate and horrify. She is visually depicted as constrained and yet continually articulates her resistance to her marginalized position. The didascalia also call attention to the audience's culpability as passive observers of her debasement. As Grace and Helms note, this staging allows her to watch those on shore watching the stage and "we are positioned as voyeurs spying on the brothel and as fairgoers observing the spectacle of one

group of people treating another group as if they were caged animals on display” (93). The discomfort the audience feels in relation to the Sikh woman underlines Hopkinson’s own unease in relation to her. When on the ship for inspection, Hopkinson also admits to being struck by the image of the woman and child and promises to grant the ship one week’s provision, yet he denies their impact on him: “I never think of the woman and child . . . they never enter my mind. . . ” (19). Clearly, Hopkinson *is* haunted by the woman on the ship, but he is unable to acknowledge it. He is struck by her devotion to her child, perhaps because she reminds him of his disavowed relationship with his own mother. The unnamed woman also defies the stereotype of a submissive and peaceful “Madonna.” She is particularly protective of her son and aggressive in his defense in relation to the men on the ship, as she rails against them for stealing her son’s food: “I saw what you did! Do you think because I have no man you can steal food from my child? If you steal again I will come when you sleep and I’ll kill you!” (12). Throughout the play, her unwavering devotion to her child coupled with her enraged responses to the circumstances they encounter both on the ship and in Vancouver offers a stark commentary on the twin evils of sexual and racial discrimination. Her gaze, leveled at the audience, unsettles, as she reacts with increasing anger to the way those on shore depict the ship and its occupants. As the didascalia describe her, she registers the horror of experiencing oneself as objectified, abjected, and despised. As the play progresses her initial optimism turns to defiance and then to acceptance, but it does not end in defeat: “I am not a possession, a thing. I am myself and I will fight for myself and my son and my people. I am strong” (78). However, Pollock complicates her role as female victim by focusing on her dual identity as a minority woman. When Hopkinson attempts to board the ship to give it the formal notice to sail, it is the woman who, according to the stage directions, throws “the missile of coal which knocks Hopkinson down” (37). This incident

underlines her association with Hopkinson's mother and his own internalized racial inferiority. Hopkinson is literally blackened by her, identified as that which he despises and forced to accept his own marginalized position. His power begins to wane after this point, and he realizes that he is a marked man because the Sikh community has turned against him and his informants. It is at this point that he begins to lose confidence, as he recognizes his own vulnerability and the fact that "the system," the Canadian government, will not protect him, despite how much he has sacrificed for it, and his performance falters.

In the final court scene, Hopkinson goes on trial to testify against those who killed the Sikh informers he worked so closely with. From this point on, he resigns himself to his death, a move that Pollock argues is heroic:

Hopkinson is a person who has a guilty secret that is used against him by people in power. He atones for his actions by the manner of his death. When he says, yes, I'll testify, he accepts fatalistically the manner of his death in the nature of a Sikh, his mother's religion. He accepts responsibility for it and, to me that's not despairing; that's a high point. That's why I have him say, "I open my arms" towards death, and speak the verse that is that part of his background. (Wallace, *Work* 121)

In accepting his fate, therefore, Hopkinson finally reconciles himself to his background, and to his mother. However, the unnamed Sikh woman does not escape the ship. She is sent back to an uncertain fate, yet it is her voice that concludes the play. In a rapid denouement following the departure of the *Komagata Maru*, the unnamed woman offers her perspective from the ship, which reinforces her endurance and resolve:

We dock at Budge fourteen miles from Calcutta. We are to be herded aboard trains and returned to the Punjab although many of us have not been there for

years. We resist. Police, reinforced by soldiers, open fire. Men who shared their rancid flour and brackish water with my son are dead. (a threat) We will remember them. (44)

The woman's speech is directed at the authorities who are responsible for mistreating the Sikh emigrants. It is not obviously an articulation of gender inequity. Instead, the woman focuses on the fact that she is part of a community of men who did support her and her son and she pledges her allegiance to them. The threat mentioned in the didascalia indicates what Pollock states in her interview with Bob Allen from the *Vancouver Province*, that those who are oppressed will eventually rise up against oppression. Yet in this instance that oppression seems to focus on the group's racial marginalization, whereas the woman herself is a reminder of Hopkinson's shame in relation to his mother and reflects the powerful psychological underpinnings of racist behaviours.

The vexed nature of the conclusion is also underlined by the fact that the final part of the woman's monologue is her reiteration of the words of Mewa Singh as he is being executed for killing Hopkinson, not her own:

Mewa Singh will be hanged by the neck till he's dead. Mewa Singh says on the gallows: "I am a gentle person, but gentle people must act when injustice engulfs them. Let god judge my actions for he sees the right and the wrong. I offer my neck to the rope as a child opens his arms to his mother." (47)

Like Hopkinson, Singh appears resigned to death. The metaphor of Singh going to his death as a child to his mother highlights Pollock's interrogation of Hopkinson's conflicted subjectivity and emphasizes an individual's psychological vulnerability to abjection. Hopkinson's own experience of abjection leads him back to the terror and comfort of the primary relationship with his mother. Certainly it complicates the understanding the audience

would have of the Sikh woman's character and the play's message. The unnamed woman is depicted as voicing the concerns of the Sikh community, but is it she who will avenge Mewa Singh's death? Is it God? Who are the gentle people who must rise up in rebellion against injustice? Are they racial minorities or women? Pollock blurs the lines between them and in doing so challenges her audience to see connections between the two and respond to whatever group they feel most aligned with. The play's conclusion is unsettling and prevents a straightforward reading of its message.

This ambiguity is reinforced by the final image in the play. Following the Sikh woman's speech, T.S., according to the stage directions, "does a soft shoe shuffle to centre stage" and "stops, looks out, raises his arms, pauses for a beat, and makes a large but simple bow" (47). The audience is therefore left to contemplate the staged event in a blackout, with the Sikh woman's brutal but poetic words vividly contrasted to the ringmaster's final theatrical bow. Events may be staged, Pollock suggests, but even staged events cannot necessarily be controlled or contained. At this point, Pollock implicates the audience in the play's action, challenging them to come to terms with both the historical past and their present reality.³³

The Komagata Maru Incident: Critical Reception

The premiere of *The Komagata Maru Incident* was preceded by articles in *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Vancouver Province*. These introductions to the play and the playwright focus on the play's message and Pollock's determination to draw parallels

³³ As I write this on June 19, 2008, I recall the discussion about Air India Flight 182 this morning on the CBC, where Sturla Gunnarsson, the director of the documentary *Air India Flight 182*, suggested that the tragedy was virtually ignored by the Canadian public because it affected mainly Punjabi Canadians, a group that mainstream Canadians felt they had little in common with.

between the racism surrounding the 1914 event and contemporary experience, but they do not address its feminist content. The articles provide background information about the play and include quotations from Pollock that address the work's broader context.

Max Wyman's article "*The Komagata Maru Incident: You Can Look for a Message Made Palatable*," begins by suggesting that Pollock is well aware of the controversy her play will provoke:

Sharon Pollock can already see the reviews for her new play – Pollock's Paranoia Grows the headlines will say. She laughs, but there is an implicit defensiveness: anyone who has been keeping even a cursory eye on Canadian theatre in recent years knows that Sharon Pollock's work grows out of political commitment and social concern.

Wyman also includes Pollock's summary of the show as "a racist sideshow" and yet notes that "She is wary of defining a convenient theme for the play." Her statement about the play's intent is also inserted into his text, and it is remarkable for its breadth: "One of the things it says is that people you attempt to put down rise up and destroy you: oppression makes the oppressed strong." Wyman argues that Pollock's critique of "the system" – "that old Pollock whipping-boy" – is at the heart of the play. He ends his comments by suggesting that Pollock is aware that despite her good intentions "the new play, particularly in its structure – may not work," and he explains that "she defends fiercely her right to experiment and fail." Throughout the interview Wyman characterizes Pollock as defensive, zealous, and uncompromising. He notes her opposition to "the system," yet does not question the source of that opposition. However, he does devote most of the article to her statements about the play, allowing her the opportunity to assert her own perspective.

Bob Allen's article, "Play Reveals Shame of Komagata Maru," similarly frames its discussion in terms of the historical incident and not the broader implications of the play. He provides background information about a number of the play's characters, but focuses on Hopkinson: "William Hopkinson is Sharon Pollock's special topic of interest. While her play is titled *The Komagata Maru Incident* she stresses that it is not intended as a piece of documentary theatre." Allen includes Pollock's justification for not having a documentary focus:

Theatre should hit people emotionally, in my opinion, and that is my intention with this play. That is why I'm trying to avoid the documentary flavour because to learn and understand, the people of the situation must be put across. A barrage of documented data gets in the way.

Pollock's discussion of Hopkinson in this article speaks to one of the most compelling issues that the play raises, the notion of his anxiety and sense of internalized racism: "I think of it as a kind of racist side show with Hopkinson as a sort of M.C. [the M.C. is actually a distinct character from Hopkinson]. He's a fascinating character. His mixed blood raises an interesting perspective. I see him as having denied his Asian background and put full trust into the other. Considering that, by exposing his double life, the government appeared to ultimately sell him out. A whole other slant opens up." Pollock's comments illustrate that her interest in Hopkinson rests in his internal conflict with his own background and the fact that it prevents him from living freely. She also hints that T.S. is a projection of Hopkinson himself, perhaps what he has repressed, that is, The Sublimated rather than The System, or perhaps a combination of the two. The issue is not the government's racism so much as the fact that racist structures force those who are marginalized to adopt strategies of survival that trap them into destructive patterns of self-imposed racism and personal isolation.

These two preview articles outline the historical/documentary aspects of the *Komagata Maru* story and discuss Pollock's intent, without regarding the play itself as offering either an objective account of the event or a critique that addresses the feminist resonances associated with racism.

Reviews of the Vancouver production focus on both its historical source and its indictment of racism. The broader implications of Hopkinson's behaviour are rarely addressed, nor is the issue of sexism ever raised, except by feminist critic Margo Dunn, even though Pollock's own statements about the nature of oppression in the play clearly address its origin in patriarchy.

Max Wyman's review of the play in *The Vancouver Sun*, in much the same way as his article, focuses on the play's exploration of racism: "*The Komagata Maru Incident* is an angry, idealistic statement of what race prejudice is, and Sharon Pollock has made it quite clear that her aim, in writing the play, is to let us know that race hate exists in our recent past and is still alive today." Wyman goes on to label Pollock an "angry lady" and claims that because of her anger the play lacks complexity and portrays issues in a black-and-white fashion. He fails to notice how Pollock links her critique of racism with a feminist critique through her female characters, for he views them as nothing more than universal symbols:

Pollock's tendency to politicize does mean human failings fall into the background and individual characters take on the form of personified abstractions: the Indian woman who symbolizes the would-be immigrants, for instance, is Group Suffering rather than an identifiable individual, and the two women in the brothel in which the action takes place embody, respectively, Ignorant Bigotry and Humanitarian Decency. (43)

Wyman does not regard the women in the play as individuals who nonetheless share a position of marginality because of their gender. Like Allen, he regards Hopkinson as the play's primary interest: "The closest the play comes to creating a credible character – and, even here, we are often dealing more with generalized racist injustice – is in the central focus, Hopkinson, whose actions under order of the barker/system precipitate the tragedy." Wyman's review, focusing as it does on Pollock's social agenda and implying that the play is simply a generalized rant against racism, is an illustration of exactly the type of dismissive attitude that she resisted when labeled a "social playwright." He fails to see the drama in terms of Hopkinson's personal conflict, and minimizes Pollock's depiction of the tragedy of repressive patriarchal systems.

Laurence Seligman directed the play's second production by the Western Canada Theatre Company at the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton. Stephen Hopkins reviewed the play for the *Saint John's Edmonton Report* on March 21, 1977. He begins his article by suggesting that the play's attempts to deliver a message diminish its dramatic power:

The problem with this production is that at many points the drama does not quite move. A number of its "cuts" lack dramatic tension. Perhaps this is because so much of the larger physical action takes place off stage, and we just hear about it from the m.c. Maybe it's because Hopkinson and Evy are the only characters developed sufficiently to seriously engage one's interest and sympathy. . . . In any case, while many scenes are saturated with enough elements of deceit, selfishness and racism to make the audience thoroughly uncomfortable, their effect is often more wearying than gripping.

Unlike the other reviewers, Hopkins finds Evy's character compelling, yet he does not discuss why. Instead, he suggests that most of the other scenes in the play are tiresome and

inadequately paced. Interestingly, Hopkins attributes the success of the production not to Pollock's writing, but to the work of her actor/husband Michael Ball, who plays Hopkinson:

In less competent hands *The Komagata Maru Incident* might well have become a mere caricature of the manipulative "system" which uses anyone it can to do its dirty work. But in the end, Mr. Ball's convincing portrayal of Hopkinson ensures that the work delivers more than a tirade against racial injustice and bureaucratic deceit. Mr. Ball gives us a human being who finds himself trapped, finally, by his moral failure.

Hopkins' description of Ball's performance recognizes the ambiguity that Pollock herself described as the most intriguing part of Hopkinson's characterization. The underlying issues associated with Hopkinson's failure are depicted predominantly through his association with the female characters in the play, like Evy, who struggle with similar decisions regarding their own sense of morality.

As in previous articles, Ian Weir's review in the *Kamloops Daily Sentinel* on February 1, 1977, focuses on the play's critique of racism: "In a rather unsettling sense, the racial discrimination *The Komagata Maru Incident* represents is no more distasteful than the racial discrimination that's alive and well in Canada today." He also calls the show "Brechtian in style" and suggests that the play keeps the audience on the outside of the problem: "The plight of the would-be immigrants on the *Komagata Maru* is never really depicted – it is talked about, hinted at, and glimpsed briefly by the audience, but never held up for a close look." Weir's review suggests that the unnamed Sikh woman on the ship does not inspire identification. He is also troubled by the ambiguity of the play's conclusion: "There are also quite a few serious problems at the end of the play, which winds down rather erratically and slightly enigmatically." Although Weir recognizes the relevance of Pollock's

theme, the conclusion unsettles him because it does not offer a secure sense of resolution, which is ironic considering the fact that he sees the issue of racism, at least, as an ongoing challenge to Canadian society.

The Great Canadian Theatre Company produced the play in Ottawa in July 1979. It was directed by Kate Lushington and was performed at the Alumni Theatre of Carleton University. Betty Swimmings' review, "Play About Canadian Cruelty Recalls Plight of 'Boat People'" in *The Ottawa Citizen* called the production "poignant" and linked it to the "plight of the Vietnamese" boat people. She focused on the issue of racism yet noted the "thoughtful, natural performances and carefully-developed characters," including the "rather shadowy" figure of the woman on the ship. Interestingly, the character of T.S. was played by a woman in this production and Swimmings remarks that the actress "displayed more than the required versatility as well as a fine flair for the dramatic, with each segment of her multifaceted role . . . developed with a sensitive regard for detail." However, she does not reflect on what this casting choice might imply in relation to the play's theme. Phil Shaw, writing in the *Ottawa Revue*, called this production "meagre" and "conventional"; however, he notes that it makes a fascinating point:

Curiously it parallels politics and erotics, attempting to see the morality of one reflected in that of the other. It achieves this by being set in a brothel which the head of security forces allows to stay open because he uses it as a meeting place for his spies. At one point the madame comes right out and says the morals of spying are worse than those of her hookers.

Shaw then remarks, "It is an odd tone to set for a play dealing with this subject matter – people starving on a boat, victimized by racial fears." While he fails to understand how

Pollock parallels racial and sexual oppression in the piece, he does identify the unnamed woman on the ship as functioning as an important symbol:

One actress representing the boat people performs behind a net rigged from a mast above and behind the main stage. It's [sic] masterful symbolism is [sic] woman trapped by something that represents the sea.

In acknowledging that whatever is restricting the woman is significant, Shaw's review identifies her oppression as the result of more than just generalized racism, yet he does not follow through with this analysis to see how Pollock links racism and sexism under patriarchy.

Brian Freeman's review in *Scene Changes* praised the factual details of the play, yet also dismissed it as polemical: "Sharon Pollock's new play about racism in Canada is filled with fine moral sentiment. . . . But great polemics, however well-researched – do not great plays make." Freeman suggests that Pollock's characters are little more than symbols and singles out the woman on the ship as "the lone representative of the victims." He describes her as "dramatically gratuitous" and writes, "Reclining on the ship's prow like a figurehead, a sari-clad East Indian woman bemoans her fate in an imaginary conversation with her dying child. . . . A far more interesting East Indian representative would have been the often referred to but never seen informer who keeps arriving at the garden gate with messages for Hopkinson." Although his comments sexualize the Indian woman, Freeman directs his focus to the overt racist critique of the piece and its failure as a drama. He calls it "more pageant than play" and suggests that the production was "simply premature." He does not regard Pollock's use of female characters as anything more than gratuitous.

Margo Dunn's discussion of the play in her *Makara* article directly contradicts most of the male critics' readings of the production. She singles out the woman in the play and argues that despite her symbolic function, she is also a powerful dramatic character:

Characters loaded with symbolic connotations as rich as those surrounding The Woman in *The Komagata Maru Incident* change and grow as real human beings as the action progresses. In this case The Woman moves from her position of powerlessness in a culture where women are assigned a particularly subordinate role (she can only vote on her destiny because she is the mother of a male child) to a position of real strength as the ship is attacked. (5)

Unlike other critics, Dunn regards Pollock's characters as individuals whom the audience can easily identify with as "part of the collective unconscious" (5). She also cites Pollock's defence of her own characters: "Sharon Pollock's characters are not symbols and it annoys her when critics judge them so. Each character in each play functions as a person in those circumstances would function" (5). Dunn's recognition of the play's feminist concerns and her validation of its feminist critique make her an anomalous voice among the critics who responded to initial productions of the play.

My Name Is Lisbeth: A Woman's Point of View

My Name is Lisbeth debuted at Surrey Centennial Arts Centre in Vancouver on March 31, 1976. It was produced by the Douglas College Theatre department and was directed by Dorothy Jones. Pollock herself played Lizzie Borden. Interestingly, a letter dated December 17, 1974, from Jones to Pollock indicates that the College commissioned the play as an original Canadian work intended to salute "the contributions of Canadian women."

While this early version of *Blood Relations* does mark a shift to a female protagonist and a domestic setting, it is based on the actual historical case of the infamous American, Lizzie Borden, and the events that led to the axe murders of her father and stepmother in 1892. Unlike the undeniably more accomplished later version of the play, this early script does not include the complex play within a play structure that gives *Blood Relations* a powerful sense of metadrama and ambiguity. However, *My Name is Lisbeth* clearly reveals Pollock's conflicted engagement with feminism in her early work. Like *The Komagata Maru Incident*, the play explores her interest in staged events and the performativity of socially sanctioned roles. It investigates the issue of domestic abuse of women within the family, highlighting how patriarchal values contribute to the expression of violence against women and children and how women, in turn, perform as an expression of their sense of powerlessness and repressed rage, and, under extreme conditions, resort to violence themselves. One compelling media article which links girls' experience of violence to their awakening sense of personal liberation was published in *Chatelaine* in May 1972. "How Fathers Turn Daughters on to Women's Lib" was an autobiographical piece by Maggie Siggins that described how the author, because of her experience of her father's abuse, turned towards the women's liberation movement for some sense of succour: "The reason I'm so deeply into women's lib now is because of the domineering bully of a man" (25). This sentiment could certainly be applied to Lizzie in the play. *My Name is Lisbeth* critiques the limitations placed on Lizzie by her father and her strong desire both to accommodate his ideal image of her and to succeed on her own terms.³⁴

³⁴ Pollock's conflicted relationship with her own father is reflected in her later autobiographical play, *Doc*.

Pollock's intense personal connection to *My Name is Lisbeth* is highlighted in Margo Dunn's article in the August/September 1976 issue of *Makara*. Dunn includes a quotation from Pollock about the play's being her most personal to date and the "only one written from a woman's point of view." In the play, the realist treatment of the Lizzie Borden story and the straightforward depiction of Lizzie's guilt for the murders make her a troubling character, despite Pollock's sympathetic reading. As she did in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock strategically employs the historical/documentary mode in order to compel interest, yet the play is not rooted in fact, but in a less tangible emotional truth that Pollock describes as involving "the purity of emotion and motivation in any kind of extreme action, which gives you insight into the very clouded things of your own, emotions you feel but can't handle. You gain insight because someone else has gone the whole way" (qtd. in Dunn 4). As in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock's attempt to get at the emotional truth of an historical incident creates a play with a mixed feminist message, mostly because of her manipulation of genre, which capitalizes on the notoriety of the case and a graphic depiction of violence, and the ambiguity of her characterizations and conclusion, which leave the reader/audience to question whether or not Pollock excuses Lizzie's actions as the inevitable consequence of a repressive patriarchal system. The moral problem set up by the play thus bears some similarities with Carol Bolt's *One Night Stand*. Like the other plays under examination here, this drama is also an exploration of how women are forced to perform roles that are dissatisfying and deadening to them, which highlights the artificiality of those roles and of accepted history.

The historical event underlying the play sets up expectations that it will be a classic murder mystery or documentary-type revelation of fact, and yet, just as in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock focuses on Lizzie's subjective experience rather than any sense of

objective reality. In her discussion with Dunn, Pollock clarified the differences between *My Name is Lisbeth* and her other plays: “Sharon sees *My Name is Lisbeth* as a step forward in her stagecraft. She omits subplots and moves still farther away from the ‘well-made play’ than she did in *Komagata Maru*” (4). *My Name is Lisbeth* is far more about emotional truth than details of the actual incident, even though many of those are incorporated into her script. In an “Afterword” written for Michelene Wandor’s third volume of *Plays by Women*, Pollock claims to have begun the play as an exercise:

As a playwright I have very little interest in writing naturalistic plays that take place in box sets with a unified time span. However for some reason which escapes me now (the reason I see now was not a conscious reason then) I decided in 1975 to write such a naturalistic play based on the Lizzie Borden case of 1892. I did not intend to offer it for production. I thought of it more as an exercise to hone my craft. (123)

The “Afterword,” however, illustrates how strongly the issue of domestic violence resonated with Pollock and underlines the extent to which the early play’s preoccupation with that topic reflects her own process of healing:

Prior to working in the theatre I was married for some years to a violent man. I spent a great deal of that time devising, quite literally, murderous schemes to rid me of him. I implemented none of them for none struck me as suitably foolproof. Eventually I crept, with my children, into the night, when it was forcibly brought home to me that in all likelihood I was cast as the murderee, not the murderer in my drama. A tragedy at the time, a comedy in retrospect. Had I been more inventive and less irresolute, I might now be the beneficiary of a large insurance policy, and the owner of quite a nice house in the country.

I would not have killed for money and real estate, I would not have killed to prevent injury to myself although it was that that brought me to leave. I would have killed to maintain my sense of self, to prevent a violation that was far more frightening and threatening than any blow, and of which physical violence against my person was only the outward manifestation. And so it is with Lizzie. (123-24)

This description of Pollock's personal experience of domestic violence powerfully reinforces her conviction that Lizzie's actions were, in part, understandable as a reaction to overriding pressure from a patriarchal culture that restricted her freedom, subjected her to abuse, and denied her a viable means of escape. The play thus echoes Millett's argument that the patriarchal family "is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity" (45).

The play is also, in part, a contemporary feminist reworking of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Lizzie shares Miss Julie's narcissism, dreaminess, and fascination with violence. Where she differs is in her choice of action. As Susan Stratton notes in "Feminism and Metadrama: Role-Playing in *Blood Relations*":

Mr. Borden's destruction of Lizzie's birds recalls Jean's destruction of Julie's bird in *Miss Julie*. Pollock keeps the outcome of Strindberg's play before us, as Lizzie considers the possibility of taking her own life. . . . As death looms ever larger, the only options are Julie's – suicide – or murder. . . . So the murders can be seen as an act of strength, an assertion of Lizzie's own value, of the repressed woman's right to life. (70)

In alluding to Strindberg's iconic play about sexual relations and underlining Lizzie's resistance to male control and masochism, Pollock is challenging traditional dramatic representations of women.

Pollock's use of the murder mystery/historical dramatic form also obscures the fact that she is more interested in subjectivity and emotional truth and less interested in Lizzie's guilt or the suspense associated with the murders. Nevertheless, Pollock capitalizes on the very real and gory aspects of the case, including two violent scenes, the murder of Lizzie's birds and Lizzie's murder of her stepmother and father, in order to draw attention to the consequences of seemingly mundane emotional abuse and psychological repression.

As in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, the female characters in *My Name is Lisbeth* display the varied ways that women react to their disempowerment in patriarchal society, except that in this play it is Lizzie whose crisis of subjectivity is heightened through comparison to her stepmother, her sister Emma, and her maid, Bridget.

Pollock portrays Lizzie as an intensely conflicted character, which prevents a straightforward reading of the play. Lizzie is dreamy, charming, and independent, yet also extremely frustrated and bitter, eager for her father's love and approval and angered by his lack of concern for her welfare. Throughout the play, Lizzie describes herself as playing games, acting according to social expectations in accordance with her father's wishes. Indeed, Lizzie seems to feel extreme pressure to conform to her father's demands because the consequences of non-compliance in the Borden household are grave. In Act II, after Emma decides to leave the house because she fears an altercation between Lizzie and her father regarding the inheritance, Lizzie seems despondent and says, "I would like to die. . . I would like to die but some part of me won't let me. . . Inside something says no" (73). The

rest of her monologue emphasizes that despite her despair, she is unwilling to submit to it, sensing that for her to self-destruct would simply reinforce her stepmother's agenda:

[W]hen I was little and thought it was my farm and I loved it, we had some puppies, the farm dog had puppies. . . . and one of the puppies got sick, I didn't know it was sick, it seemed like the others, but the mother, she knew. . . . she would push it aside. It would lie at the back of the box, she would lie in front of it while she nursed all the others. They ignored it, that puppy didn't exist for the others. . . . I think, inside it was different, and the mother thought what she sensed was a sickness – and after a while – anyone could tell it was sick. It had nothing to eat! And papa took it and drowned it. That's what you do on a farm. . . with things that are different . . . you kill them. . . (she becomes aware of Mrs. Borden starting down the stairs, she watches her for a moment) . . . She would like to kill me. (73-74)

Lizzie, although ostensibly her father's favourite, feels particularly vulnerable in his household. She senses that Mrs. Borden is intent on destroying her in order to take advantage of her father's fortune, and Lizzie cannot passively accept that fate.

While Lizzie's anger and resentment cast her in a critical light, and echo the portrayal of the female protagonists in Ravel's, Simon's, and Bolt's plays, Pollock also wants us to empathize with her feelings of entrapment. Lizzie believes that marriage would force her to become nothing more than a man's domestic slave. When her father mentions the widower John MacLeod, and the fact that "he's trying to raise three boys with no mother," Lizzie retorts, "He's looking for a housekeeper and it isn't going to be me!" (44). Pollock's Lizzie experiences the same anxiety as the women Friedan described in 1963, women who feel "a vague undefined wish for 'something more' than washing dishes, ironing, punishing and

praising . . . children” (61). Pollock’s play, written in 1976, emphasizes the contemporary relevance of Lizzie’s personal dissatisfaction with prescribed female roles.

Instead of following this conventional social script, Lizzie wants to escape her father’s home and work to support herself:

I hate this house with these walls. I want out. Try to understand how I feel.

Why . . . why can’t I . . . Do something? Eh? Why can’t I . . . I mean . . . I could go into your office and . . . learn how to keep books. (46)

Her father, however, dismisses this idea as unreasonable. Lizzie wants out of her father’s house, but avows she “won’t get married to do it” (46). Eventually, she gets so frustrated by him and her stepmother attempting to control her that she offers to leave the house if he will give her money: “But give me enough that I won’t ever have to come back!” (47). Hearing this, her stepmother comments, “She always gets round to money,” and adds, “She’s crazy . . . She should be locked up” (48). At this point, Lizzie “begins to smash the plates in the dining room” and screams “There! There! Now lock me up! Lock me up!” (48). Lizzie’s anger is attributed to the fact that she cannot accept a compromised position within her stepmother’s household, nor is she able to live an autonomous life because she does not have the financial means to do so. The fact that Lizzie’s father refuses to allow her to work and live independently is similar to Bob’s situation in Pollock’s later and highly autobiographical play, *Doc* (1984), and it highlights Pollock’s conviction of the destructive consequences that attend such social restrictions.

Lizzie’s anxieties bring together the influences of many of the feminist theorists of the period, who campaigned for women to assert their independence and not seek approval and identity through predefined social roles. One monologue in particular provides an interesting response to de Beauvoir’s “One is not born a woman” argument. The second book

of *The Second Sex* begins with perhaps the best known quotation from the volume, a description of a young girl's socialization: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (267). In *My Name is Lisbeth*, Pollock has Lizzie herself problematize this notion of inheritance and socialization in a poignant statement that underlines her sense of marginalization:

I've decided there's a formula, a magic formula for being a "woman," a magic formula; every girl baby receives it at birth, just before birth . . . it's the last thing that happens. It's stamped, the formula . . . KA-THUD! . . . indelibly on the brain . . . and through some terrible oversight, maybe the death of my mother, I didn't get that . . . KA-THUD! . . . I was born defective. No not defective. I don't like that word . . . I was just . . . born. (38)

Through Lizzie, Pollock suggests that women's identity, even before birth, is defined by formulaic thinking that limits their freedom, and yet to live without that socially sanctioned feminine identity makes them vulnerable to abuse in patriarchal society. Lizzie, for all her supposed madness, articulates an argument that is reminiscent of some of de Beauvoir's most powerful descriptions of how women are conditioned to passivity:

In woman . . . there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her "being-the-other" she is taught that to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp

and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject. (280)

Lizzie's impassioned defence of herself also addresses the challenges of an objectified subjectivity. Lizzie says, "I'm supposed to be a mirror, I'm supposed to reflect what you want to see, but everyone wants something different. If no one looks in the mirror, I'm not even there. I don't exist" (45). De Beauvoir refers to this "mirror stage"³⁵ as the time when the child's ego becomes so fully identified with its reflected image that the child begins to see herself as a projected form (269) and that this sense of separation leads girls to identify with objects outside themselves, like dolls, and to develop narcissistic tendencies and passivity (269-79). Clearly, Lizzie is struggling with similar issues and despite her narcissism, strives not to be crippled by typical feminine passivity.

The passages above also point to the fact that like Hopkinson's mother in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Lizzie's biological mother haunts the play. Her absence seems to cause Lizzie to experience herself as particularly outcast in her father's household. Just prior to the murders, Lizzie's father notes that she resembles her mother and Lizzie remarks: "I remember you said she died because she was sick. I was born and she died. . . . Did you hate me for killing her?" (81). He replies, "It was just something that happened. You don't think of it that way." (81). Lizzie's response to that statement reveals her own discomfort in relation to her parents' seemingly loveless relationship and her mother's psychological legacy:

³⁵ This is not the same "mirror stage" identified by Lacan, who theorized that the infant's first encounter with itself in a mirror leads to the formation of the ego and a crisis with respect to what existed prior to that concept of a unified whole. Instead, de Beauvoir suggests that a girl encounters herself as a projection of other's desires and sees echoes of this in objects outside of her.

Perhaps she just got tired and died. She didn't want to go on. And the chance came up and she took it. I could understand that. Maybe she was like a bird, she could see all the blue sky and she wanted to fly away and she couldn't, she was caught, papa, she was caught in this horrible snare, and she saw a way out and she took it. Perhaps it was a very brave thing to do, papa. Perhaps it was the only way, and she hated to leave us because she loved us so much, but she couldn't breathe all caught in the snare. (82)

Raised without her mother, Lizzie seems unable to define her adult-female identity and experiences a crisis of subjectivity so profound that it eventually leads her to kill. As Kristeva observes in *Stabat Mater*, women's identity in contemporary society is defined primarily by her function as mother: "we live in a civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood. If, however, one looks at it more closely, this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized – an idealization of primary narcissism" (*Kristeva Reader* 161). Lizzie's particular dilemma seems to be rooted in her fantasy of the relationship she has lost with her primary caregiver, her father, in absence of her mother. She also has a conflicted relationship with her older sister Emma because of this. However, it is Mrs. Borden's presence in her father's home that negates Lizzie's claim to both her father's property and his love. Indeed, the end of Lizzie's monologue about being born "a woman" emphasizes her particular anxiety about both her love for her father and his threatening behaviour: "I love my father. . . he's a good man, he tries to be good, and I love him" (38). Lizzie's insistence on her father's effort to be good underlines her unease with him. Lizzie's stepmother is also a poor emotional substitute for

the idealized mother that Lizzie can't name, a mother whose absence contributes to Lizzie's profound identity confusion and anger, which further explains her resistance to Mrs. Borden.

Mrs. Borden, as the stereotypical "evil" stepmother intent on securing her own financial security, provides another illustration of Pollock's vexed feminism. In an early letter to an unidentified recipient, Pollock discusses the play and mentions that she has to "beef up considerably the characters of Emma, Mrs. Borden, and Harry I think," which points to her recognition of the fact that these minor roles were less developed than they could have been. Indeed, Mrs. Borden appears jealous of Lizzie and intent on characterizing her as manipulative and mentally unstable. She is therefore an easy target for Lizzie's anger and a one-dimensional characterization that seemingly justifies Lizzie's actions. Pollock presents the antagonism between Mrs. Borden and Lizzie in a way that undermines her feminist critique because it prevents a nuanced reading of the relationship between the two women and their individual motives. The apparent competition between the two for Mr. Borden's resources makes Mrs. Borden as unsympathetic as Lizzie.

Emma, Lizzie's older sister by twelve years, performs the role of the "good girl" (37). As Stratton notes, she is a representative of "old values" in the play (75). Emma refers to Mrs. Borden as "mother" and she encourages Lizzie to be a "nice little girl" (37). Yet, as Stratton also observes, Emma contributes to the pressure on Lizzie to act out, as "[t]he good girl needs the feminist" (76), and Emma's decision to leave Lizzie alone in the home at the point of crisis seems "to give Lizzie more opportunity" to commit the murders (77). In the reworked *Blood Relations* script, Lizzie's final words are altered to stress Emma's complicity in the murders: "It was you who brought me up, like a mother to me. . . . I was like a puppet, your puppet. . . me saying all the things you felt like saying, me doing all the things you felt like doing" (70). However, in both *My Name is Lisbeth* and the later *Blood*

Relations, Emma seems particularly disempowered, as she tells Lizzie that their situation is helpless: “There’s certain things we have to face. One of them is we can’t change a thing” (72). The fact that Emma is resigned to her fate and reluctant to participate in any kind of confrontation with her father makes her a dramatic foil to Lizzie and at least emphasizes Lizzie’s sense of abandonment and distress on the day of the murders, potentially provoking her uncontrollable response to Mrs. Borden. Emma is potentially the most interesting figure in the play, as Malcolm Page notes, because “she had the same experiences, but didn’t turn murderous” (*Committed* 109); however, the feminist message in *My Name is Lisbeth* is complicated by her passive presence, as it makes Lizzie’s actions seem even more loathsome, if less inexplicable.

In *My Name is Lisbeth*, Pollock suggests that Lizzie’s experience is different from Emma’s because of her mother’s death. If this fact is her apparent justification for Lizzie’s decision to choose violence, it seems that the loss of her mother leaves Lizzie to struggle with how to define herself in relation to a violent and inflexible father, a hostile and selfish stepmother, and an ostensibly passive, yet persuasive older sister and that Lizzie’s negotiation of her own subjectivity in relation to those influences causes her to experience such psychic distress that she sees murder as her only option. In fact, Lizzie does have the option of defying her father and leaving his home, yet she is unable to do this.³⁶ In *Blood Relations*, *The Actress*³⁷ provides a more progressive feminist option than Lizzie’s in the previous play. Instead of resorting to violence, *The Actress* defies social expectations and

³⁶ I am reminded here of my experience of teaching *Doc* to my second-year Canadian Literature survey class. Many of the female students found Bob’s mental decline and subsequent suicide particularly difficult to understand, asking, “Why doesn’t she just leave?”

³⁷ *The Actress* is based on Nance O’Neil, an actress and friend of Lizzie Borden’s. In *Blood Relations*, *The Actress* re-enacts the events leading up to the murders, in order to determine whether or not Lizzie is guilty.

lives independently, a choice that intensifies Pollock's feminist statement in the later play, as it diminishes Lizzie's apparent heroism in choosing a more gruesome solution.

Bridget, the Irish maid, also provides an interesting contrast to Lizzie, as a portrait of domestic subservience. She is vulnerable to the sexual advances of Harry (Mrs. Borden's brother and co-conspirator) and feels so disempowered that all she can recommend for Lizzie is to exercise a passive-aggressive resistance to her stepmother's power:

before I worked here I worked up on the hill and the lady of the house . . . she swore by her cook. Finest cook in creation – yes, always smiling, and givin' up her day off if company arrived, bowin' and scrapin', ah the lady of the house, she loved that cook. . . Before eatin' the mastere'd serve drinks in the parlour – and out in the kitchen – [that cook] be spittin' in the soup. (52)

As yet another stereotypical character, Bridget nonetheless emphasizes the marginalized economic position faced by many working women in the nineteenth century, and perhaps what Lizzie fears might be her fate should she be forced out of her father's home without an income.

Unlike Emma and Bridget, Lizzie refuses to perform the role that is expected of her and to act out passively. While she may be regarded as a stereotypical hysteric, Pollock clearly regards her actions as understandable. She depicts Lizzie as a woman who is obviously constrained and yet who refuses to remain passive and accept the restrictions imposed on her. Lizzie also displays at least one characteristic of sound mental health, an intense desire for an honest and progressive relationship with her father. She tells Emma that she wants to explain her position to her father, to "really talk to him, make him understand that we're people, individual people and we have to live separately, different lives, and his will should make it possible for us to do that" (72). The impossibility of Lizzie's wish is

emphasized by the fact that Mrs. Borden, Emma, and Bridget illustrate the extent of the choices available to women of their time in order to survive in a repressive domestic environment.

The fact that the female characters in the play all, to a certain extent, conform to stereotypes contributes to its veiled feminism. Pollock may be consciously providing her audience with stock types that they have come to expect, yet she does so, seemingly, in an attempt to illustrate how artificial stereotypical female roles are. This is most obvious in terms of her depiction of Lizzie, who could be classified as irrational and hysterical, yet who can also be seen as behaving in a rational and empowering manner by taking action to change her situation.

The family context provided within the play helps highlight the odds against which Lizzie struggles. Lizzie's father is an authoritarian figure, a patriarchal industrialist who is controlling, inflexible, and often violent. He is a one-dimensional figure who indulges Lizzie, yet also displays an uncontrollable anger towards her and her stepmother. This is most graphically illustrated when he kills Lizzie's pet pigeons in a fit of rage, an incident that foreshadows Lizzie's own violent acts and contributes to Pollock's underlying social critique. The episode with the birds ends Act I of the play and underlines the issue of domestic abuse that simmers beneath the surface of the drama. Lizzie is wary of her father and visibly intimidated by his violence and aggression. Following the death of her birds, she initially contemplates suicide, but that is redirected to murder when she thinks of her stepmother's life in relation to her own. She muses to her friend and confidant Dr. Patrick, "If one were a bad person and the other was good, was trying to be good, would you help the one who was good and let the bad person die?" (86). In contemplating her alternatives, Lizzie reaches an epiphany: "Everything's clear. I've lived all of my life for this one moment

of absolute clearness” (87). Realizing the value of her own life, she decides that “Not all life is precious” (96), and begins to plot her stepmother’s murder. It is her own life that Lizzie deems worthwhile and she defiantly claims, “My life is precious!!!” (96), a belief that Zimmerman claims is one of the “existential questions which will be raised again by so many other Pollock protagonists: what is worth fighting for, what is worth dying for?” (*Sharon Pollock iv*).

The play’s conclusion leaves no doubt as to Lizzie’s responsibility for the murders; however, it does suggest that Lizzie did not originally intend to kill her father and only resorts to it out of desperation when he stumbles into the murder scene. Preparing to protect him from discovering her, Lizzie says, “I could never stand to have you hate me, papa. Never. I would do anything rather than have you hate me, papa” (107). If *The Komagata Maru Incident* is about the return of the repressed, *My Name is Lisbeth* is an illustration of that same theme in a domestic setting. Pollock suggests that Lizzie’s violent axe-murder of her father and stepmother is the result of both her psychological desperation and her exposure to violence. In much the same way as Bolt’s *One Night Stand*, Pollock’s play has a young woman aggressively defend her own interests, to the point of murder.

Ultimately, Pollock does not judge Lizzie but views her participation in the murders as a significant act that humanizes her. As she explains in her interview with Robert Wallace in *The Work*, “I’m saying that all of us are capable of murder given the right situation” (123). However, one might argue that by depicting Lizzie as she did, Pollock presents an ambiguous feminist heroine who asserts her independence, but also elicits a sense of alarm because of the brutality of her actions, which are never satisfactorily explained. This element is still present in *Blood Relations*. As Zimmerman argues, even that play, “committed as it is to the socially critical feminist dimension, . . . ignores the savagery of the deed” (*Playwriting*

74). Unlike the later *Blood Relations* script, however, which heightened the ambiguity of Lizzie's character and hinged on the ambiguity of her guilt, in *My Name is Lisbeth* Lizzie is clearly responsible for the murders. Her emotional truth is clear: she kills in order to survive.

Pollock was obviously dissatisfied with this conclusion, however, as *Blood Relations* suggests that Lizzie is not solely responsible for the murders. In the final scene of that play, The Actress concludes that Lizzie actually did commit the murders: "Lizzie, you did." Lizzie's response and the didascalia provide a pointed riposte: "I didn't. *The Actress looks to the hatchet – then to the audience.* You did" (70), signaling the fact that both The Actress and the audience might have made similar choices if they found themselves in Lizzie's place. *Blood Relations* also highlights a number of elements that strengthen Pollock's feminist critique: the unconventional relationship between Lizzie and her lover, the unnamed Actress figure; a doubled time-frame, depicting both the incidents leading up to the murders in 1892 and the aftermath of the trial and its effect on Lizzie's life in 1902; and the extended exploration of role-playing that has The Actress play Lizzie's role in a psychodramatic recreation of the events leading up to the murder. In this way, Pollock focuses the later play more directly on the power dynamics of relationships, the psychological consequences of Lizzie's previous actions, and the nature of theatre itself, creating a highly resonant and unarguably more complex meta-theatrical exploration of female experience.

My Name Is Lisbeth: Critical Reception

There exist few reviews of the original production of *My Name is Lisbeth*. There was one preview article in the Douglas College *Pinion*, which included a number of Pollock's comments, but few mainstream reviews, perhaps because it was a college production. The

reviews that do exist tend to view the play in relation to the historical case of Lizzie Borden. They ignore Lizzie's experience of oppression and generally conclude that Pollock has not established a credible case for Lizzie's motive for murder. In her interview with Wallace, Pollock mentions that male reviewers of *Blood Relations* had difficulty understanding the play's underlying feminism:

[T]hey go to some trouble to state that this play has nothing to do with feminism. Some of them see it as a mystery play. Others see it as *maybe* making a statement about women today. *Of course* it says something about women today. It says something about me today, things that I've felt. It's just another example of the review revealing either the poverty of imagination or the lack of sensitivity of the man who's reviewing it. (*The Work* 123)

Nevertheless, initial reactions of this type to *My Name is Lisbeth* may have prompted the extensive revisions Pollock undertook of the play, which led to its reconstruction as *Blood Relations* (1980, published 1981), where the emotional reality of Lizzie's experience of living in a restrictive Victorian home and society is amplified via the framed narrative.

My Name is Lisbeth was reviewed by Bob Allen in the *Vancouver Province*, who correctly singles out Pollock's decision not to focus on the facts of the case, but instead to draw attention to "the elements that would motivate a 30-year-old spinster to such a deed." However, Allen then surmises that her motivations are "so cut and dried, it all becomes somehow simplistic." He regards Lizzie's motives as purely mercenary:

The mother was in fact a stepmother and Pollock's Lizzie detests the older woman. The predictable conflict of how Papa's estate will be divided after his death amplifies the problem. Mama Borden and her brother, Harry, in Lizzie's eyes, are obviously conspiring to get an extra piece of the pie.

Allen recognizes Pollock's sympathy for Lizzie Borden, but he does not attribute it to the social circumstances that force Lizzie into a position of subservience and dependence. While he notes Lizzie's father's violence, he does not regard it as especially significant: "Lizzie is an animal lover who had been keeping birds. In a fit of rage, just a few days before she struck him down, Lizzie's father had taken an axe to the birds." His comments minimize the impact of Mr. Borden's violent actions in the household and the impact and influence this has on his daughter. Allen also finds the ending of the play particularly disappointing, suggesting that it "seems more inspired by not knowing what to put on the next page than any definite resolution of events." Throughout his review, the feminist argument is obscured, although, ironically, he praises the production itself as "a progressive step for Douglas College."

The other contemporaneous reviews of this early play are included in survey articles by Malcolm Page and Margo Dunn. These critics, writing in the 1970s, have radically different ideological positions, which makes for an interesting contrast in their interpretations of the feminist content of this work. Page downplays Pollock's feminist treatment while Dunn advocates it.

Page's review article, "Sharon Pollock: Committed Playwright," includes an extended discussion of *My Name is Lisbeth*. He argues that the play's intention "was predictable, to show that Lizzie could not fulfill the daughterly role laid down for her" (108). Thus, while he recognizes Pollock's concern with women's roles, his use of the word "predictable" suggests his dismissal of Pollock's critique. Throughout, his discussion of the play discounts its feminist message. He also discredits Lizzie herself:

Lizzie proclaims that she hates her fat vacuous stepmother, for no apparent reason but that she is a *stepmother*. . . . Lizzie is shown as a rebellious misfit. .

. . We wonder, however, why this strong woman of 34 has not found ways of breaking out of the prison long before. (109)

Page accepts Lizzie's description of herself as defective at face value. He refuses to acknowledge the social context of the play and questions the plausibility of Pollock's feminist argument about the intolerability of the restrictions imposed on Lizzie. Page is particularly critical of Pollock's portrayal of Lizzie and the broader implications associated with her violent act:

No clear view of Lizzie, nor reason for writing, comes through. Lizzie Borden's is the best-known American murder. . . yet Pollock doesn't ask why this is one of the most widely shared myths. . . . She seems uninterested in a psychological study (attempted in a 1975 American television play about the infamous Lizzie), though the monologues occasionally suggest moments of insanity. Neither does she write of the problems of the actual case, for the real-life Lizzie was acquitted. Pollock's excited curiosity about the past, evident in the earlier plays, is almost absent this time. (110)

Ironically, Page identifies Pollock's stated intent to highlight the oppression of women, but argues that she fails to convey it: "While I had anticipated that the central point was to be the oppression of women in Victorian society, with a moral for the present, this is not emphasized" (110). He concludes that the play "comes out as a thin and tentative look at Victorian middle-class family life, by the Heiress out of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*" (109). Interestingly, Page concludes his article by citing Dunn's argument that "Pollock's evolution and purposes are defined as a growing feminism." However, he effectively undermines this claim by asserting that Pollock's concerns are in fact much broader than a commitment to women's political oppression.

Dunn's review article in *Makara* regards the play as decidedly feminist. She notes that while Pollock's early writing was inspired by external political events, *My Name is Lisbeth* was her first play to feature a female protagonist and with it, "[s]he seems to have achieved a consistent blend of private history, external influence and imagination that only playwrights as rare as Eugene O'Neill or Federico Garcia Lorca have maintained in their work" (2). Dunn includes a quotation from Pollock that underscores her belief that Lizzie's violence is a result of her "circumscribed life": "Women are forced to gauge reaction and conduct that isn't stated; we know if we aren't doing right because we get punished for it" (3). Dunn suggests that the play marks a new direction in Pollock's writing: "The play, for Sharon Pollock, presents another change, another growth. She does not concern herself with the much-debated question of Lizzie's innocence or guilt. It is a psychological given in the play that Lizzie murdered her parents; murder was the only way out of her typically female dilemma" (3). In contrast to Allen, Dunn argues that Pollock's examination of Lizzie's emotional experience is what is compelling about the piece, making violence "less mysterious and less perversely fascinating" (3). Throughout her article, Dunn charts Pollock's increasing commitment to feminist values and identifies "a marked progression in Sharon Pollock's use of women in important dramatic roles" (3). Dunn stresses Pollock's sense of identification with Lizzie and includes Pollock's anecdote that one of her daughters read the play and commented, "If I lived there, I'd have been crazy too" (6). This echoes Pollock's account in the letter accompanying the "Afterword" to *Blood Relations* that she sent to Michelene Wandor. Pollock writes that her audience's response to the play was undoubtedly linked to its in-depth depiction of women's psychological complexities:

The play's popularity with "middle-aged, middle-class" women has been cited against it. (What a world we live in!) I think the play releases, for some

women, their repressed feelings of rage, as it released mine, although I did not write and re-write it intending that to be so.

Dunn's discussion of *My Name is Lisbeth* concludes with her relaying that it is the "most personal of her plays to date" and that the play explores, in Pollock's words, "the purity of emotion and motivation in any kind of extreme action, which gives you insight into the very clouded things of your own, emotions you feel but can't handle. You gain insight because someone else has gone the whole way" (4).

Pollock's curious feminist positioning in *My Name is Lisbeth* is underlined by her evasive comments in response to Dunn's question, "Is Sharon Pollock a feminist?":

I don't know how to define it . . . I don't have to define feminism to answer why women characters are important in my work. I think, like other writers, I'm discovering all along. Part of the reason a person writes is to try to see some design, to create order out of chaos, to try to understand things about myself as well as the world around me. (6)

While distancing herself from the feminist label, Pollock nevertheless insists on the possibility for theatre to have real social effects. Zimmerman describes Pollock's approach as a form of "moral inquiry": "Behind and beneath the presentation itself, one can feel Sharon Pollock deliberating, debating, situating the issues in question around her own powerful centre of moral seriousness" (*Sharon* 11). In both *The Komagata Maru Incident* and *My Name is Lisbeth*, Pollock considers how women feel compelled to follow a particular course of action in order to preserve their freedom and dignity. Her personal engagement with feminist concerns in these plays, albeit veiled by an expanded focus on additional political and historical subjects, is a distinctive factor in her work.

Conclusion

[I]n our time, in the wake of feminism and the commotion about “roles” and the consequent sexual unrest, it’s now entirely possible for women to be both different *and* similar to men simultaneously, which promotes a certain confusion among the gal set, bouncing back and forth like tennis balls between competing theories of what women *naturally are* versus what women *can become*, or whether women should act more like men (“strong”) or more like powerful women (“strong”), at least once the remaining impediments to gender equality are finally overcome (society, bad self-esteem, the wage gap).

In other words, being female at this point in history is an especially conflicted enterprise, like Birkenstocks with Chanel, or trying to frown after a Botox injection. But we should be getting used to it, since looking back thirty years or so, you can see the same dichotomies already peeking out from behind contending brands of second-wave feminism.

Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing*

Vexed feminism may seem like a self-evident term. Certainly, contemporary feminism is noted for its complexity and plurality, which often evokes the idea of a troubled or disturbed state. Perhaps only because of this complexity feminism is able to address the problematic nature of women's position in the world in order to encourage change. The playwrights in this study were undoubtedly concerned with women's roles and changing conventional perceptions of women. Their characters are flawed individuals who are at least partly responsible for their own marginalization. In many ways their abjection compels, but it also repulses, for these characters are disturbed and unquiet and their attempts to adjust to the feminine role are difficult and problematic, not straightforward or heroic. This may in part explain why critics view the early work of these four groundbreaking playwrights as proto-feminist rather than feminist; however, this complex view of feminism is no less worthy of the *feminist* label than more radical or essentialist perspectives. Indeed, the ability to regard women and issues related to their roles and experiences in terms of their complications and contradictions in order to ameliorate their conditions defines my understanding of feminism.

The characters created by Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock struggle to adapt to predetermined feminine roles and transgress traditional expectations of women. They do so in ways that illustrate the complex role-playing that women must perform in order to conform to social expectations. Carol leaves her husband and children, ostensibly performing the role of "new woman," yet all the while feeling alienated and unhappy, to the extent that when she attempts to reconnect to her childhood friend, Toby, it is in an unacceptable, predatory way; Roochel has a passionate sexual affair with her boss and when she becomes pregnant and is abandoned by him, she tries to live it down by performing the role of Jewish mother to her mentally-disabled son and of good "wife" to her live-in lover, Seymour; Sadie Golden attempts to overcome her sense of powerlessness and abjection by engaging in

sexually titillating transactions with the salesmen who show up at her door, performing a highly choreographed crabdance in order to deal with a crisis of subjectivity; Jeannie, Simons' everywoman, protests the way women are pressured to perform for others, always preparing for and never enjoying the outcome of their efforts, enacting female rituals in ways that illustrate their coercive nature; Jory, having performed the role of political wife for far too long, takes on her husband's riding following his death, shirking her supporting role to perform in a new way as empowered woman in order to revitalize the political process; Daisy stops acting like a wallflower and acts in her own defence to kill her would-be killer. The three women in *The Komagata Maru Incident* each struggle independently to act according to their marginalized positions within Canadian society until eventually they find themselves having to act differently in opposition to cultural expectations; Lizzie Borden decides to stop acting the part of a good Victorian girl and chooses to claim her life by acting out her repressed aggression. While these characters make unconventional and sometimes abhorrent choices, they nonetheless willfully assert themselves in bold and surprising ways that challenge their audiences to come to terms with feminist issues that underlie their choices, such as domestic labour, violence, desire, political representation, and social marginalization. Each playwright asks her audience to engage with women's experience directly, and yet they do not always encourage direct identification. Instead, Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock all, to a certain degree, keep the female characters in their plays at a remove from the audience, suggesting that they are somewhat atypical, and often reprehensible. This approach masks the feminism of the characters' positions and enables the audience to assess them without provoking an impulsive or superficial negative response.

Other strategies that these three playwrights used in order to express these controversial perspectives are varied. Aviva Ravel produced her plays *Soft Voices* and

Dispossessed in Montreal. Both plays responded to the dilemmas facing Canadian urban women and engaged with themes present in classic plays such as *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House* while also reflecting the influence of the feminist movement. Ravel's play structure introduces elements of theatre of the absurd with lyrical verse forms and flashbacks to convey contemporary women's negotiation of changing social mores and cultural circumstances. In both *Soft Voices* and *Dispossessed* the ambiguity of her characters assuages her audience's fears about feminism by presenting feminist characters as doomed.

Beverley Simons' *Crabdance* was so controversial that it was an American company that first produced the play in Seattle. Thereafter, Simons became an advocate of Canadian drama and succeeded in having the play produced in Vancouver. Her subsequent one-act play, *Preparing*, distilled and directed the controversial content of *Crabdance* into a much more accessible form. Both plays confront the social pressures that keep women in a state of dependence and challenge the system that profits from their unacknowledged labour. However, Simons' protagonists are also women who are difficult victims, which prevent her audiences from relating to them directly. Simons' conclusions, in much the same way as Ravel's, appear to doom her protagonists, but it is unclear whether Sadie and Jeannie are victims or conquerors, and their position in relation to feminist thought is unclear.

Carol Bolt uses farcical humour and scrambles genre expectations to sell her social critique to audiences. In both *Shelter* and *One Night Stand* she sensationalizes her plots to arouse interest. Jory's sincere interest in politics is undermined by the farcical highjinks of her female supporters and particularly by Auntie Luel's sardonic critique of her ability. *One Night Stand* pointedly challenges the notion of sexual liberation by depicting Daisy's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, yet it does so in the guise of a traditional thriller. With both plays Bolt depicts women's personal experiences in terms of their political implications;

however, she does so in a way that entertains her audience. For Bolt, humour and entertainment-value seem to be a way to lull audiences into a state of receptivity so that they can see active feminism without finding it offensive.

Sharon Pollock's portrayals of women in *The Komagata Maru Incident* are poignant; however, they, too, are conflicted. The female characters are stereotypical portrayals and they are not the main focus of this "history" play. Like Bolt, Pollock uses a recognizable form, in this case documentary or historical drama, to incite interest in marginalization, extending her critique from overt racism to subtle sexism. In *My Name is Lisbeth*, Pollock uses both the idea of the documentary or historical form and that of the murder-thriller to arouse interest in the plight of a young woman marginalized by a strict patriarchal society, yet Lizzie, too, is a decidedly vexed character whom most women would not regard as a reasonable role model, despite her obvious dilemma.

All four playwrights employ a form of masquerade in order to conceal and promote feminist issues simultaneously. Their plays reflect their social and personal circumstances, yet do so in ways that can be variously interpreted. They suggest that these playwrights had to be circumspect in order to have their work produced, at least at this time, when female playwrights were attempting to break into the burgeoning Canadian theatre scene.

The response of these playwrights to the term "feminism" is also revealing. As we have seen, possibly because of the negative associations of the term during the period, but also because of their fear of being "ghettoized" as "feminist" playwrights, Ravel, Simons, Bolt, and Pollock all resisted being labeled as feminist playwrights. However, all four, in interviews and in practice, promoted the idea of women's equality and exposed the negative consequences of their gender socialization. The later works of these playwrights reflect their ongoing engagement with feminism and slight modifications of their feminist strategies.

While these playwrights continued to explore feminist issues using the strategies they initiated with their earlier work, these were modified in relation to a changing socio-cultural landscape and their own personal experiences and interests.

Ravel's work through her own production company, Cameo Productions in Montreal, has been wide ranging, including a number of plays that focus on Jewish experience, and others that, although feminist, seem less controversial than either *Soft Voices* or *Dispossessed*. She has also written a number of plays for children that explore Jewish history and folklore. Although she is still writing, her plays that focus on women's experiences, including *Second Chance* (1981), *Beautiful Houses* (1986), *My Rumanian Cousin* (1987), *The Courting of Sally Schwartz* (1989), *Moving Out* (1991), *Dance Like A Butterfly* (1993), and *Mother Variations* (1993), are lighter in tone than her earlier work and focus more directly on the concerns of women in the Jewish community.

Mother Variations (1993) is the most intriguing of Ravel's later plays, although it is a more comedic and less complex and evocative piece than either *Soft Voices* or *Dispossessed*. It considers the relationship between three generations of women in the same family who are each striving for self-fulfillment in her chosen career. The grandmother is an artist; the mother is studying toward a post-graduate degree; and the daughter is determined to become an actor, while juggling the care of her infant daughter. When the daughter leaves her husband and moves in with her mother, the three women, each without the support of their male partners, learn to live together and support each other's ambitions. *Mother Variations* examines women's relationship to motherhood and how the role of mother both fulfills and limits their potential to realize their own individual ambitions. In the play, the three women come together to support each other through career and relationship crises, yet ultimately

they return to their male partners as they continue to strive for a balance between traditional role demands and their individual desires.

Simons' self-professed masterwork, *Leela Means to Play* (1976), has not been produced in Canada. Following a disappointing workshop performance of the piece at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre in Connecticut, Simons decided to abandon play-writing. Raby argues that "the lack of a production for her most mature work has led Simons to despair in the theatrical medium which has become, as she has said, 'safe and predictable'" (203). In her conversation with Lise Ann Johnson, recorded in Johnson's 1992 thesis *Conversations with Western Canadian Women Writing for the Theatre*, Simons reveals that she was disillusioned with theatre following *Leela*:

I had no plans of getting back into the theatre. I had too much pain. Just too much pain. I stopped going to the theatre because it hurt me too much. For years I couldn't bear to look at it. The theatre means a great deal to me. I believe that theatre has been a primal expression for human beings. I see it as a vital and sacred form. I don't approach it lightly and I was – I was just too hurt. I just could not work with it, at least at that time. (140)

Johnson's interview with Simons also reveals that she was planning a return to the stage in the 1990s, after discovering that her ex-husband had fathered a daughter with another woman. The shock, Simons explains, was profound, and in the interview she reveals that it was particularly disturbing because it dredged up feelings related to the crib death of her own daughter, the event which had, in part, inspired *Crabdance*:

I had a baby die. A daughter. I had three sons. I had a daughter die at three and a half months of cradle death. And it was so terrible I couldn't talk about it. Now I can at least discuss it. So when I found out that my ex-husband had a

daughter that he had not told me about – the horror of him denying the existence of a child for all those years just knocked me out.

Simons' reaction to discovering her husband's secret life led to her beginning the draft of a new play based on that lost child. However, that play seems not to have been finished or produced.

Bolt's prodigious output of theatrical work declined following *One Night Stand*, as she focused on television writing. The plays that did follow include *Rosie Learns French* (1976), *Escape Entertainment* (1981), *Love or Money* (1981), the young-adult play *Icetime* (1988), and *Famous* (1997). In general, all of these plays address Bolt's interest in the conflict between individual women's liberal feminist aspirations and the personal costs and challenges that attend them, yet they do not have the depth or resonance of the plays under discussion here. *Icetime*, notably feminist in its intent to celebrate a young girl's victory over sexism in sport, won a Chalmers Award for its predominantly documentary depiction of the real-life case of Justine Blainey who went to the Supreme Court in order to win the right to play hockey with the Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League.

Famous, a black comedy loosely based on the murders of St. Catharines teenagers Leslie Mahaffey, Kristen French, and Tammy Homolka, is a more striking example of Bolt's later feminist work. It is a profoundly disturbing play in which the feminist message is almost entirely obscured by offensive, factual content. In the play, Kit is a friend of Sandy and Bobby, who are accused of murder. She is being interviewed by a videographer from Los Angeles, Sheila. At the beginning of the play, Kit is lazing about Sandy's pool, distracting the photographers who are gathered there. Kit raps, "Am I a feminist? Forget it. Feminism? Who can sweat it? Guys will always be preliminary to my work with battered women" (3). This cryptic self-identification is intended to confound the photographers, but it

is also characteristic of Kit's damaged psyche and her narcissism. The play then spirals downwards into an exploration of it. The play also explores Sheila's perverse desire to uncover the story of what really happened. *Famous* was nominated for a Dora award; it addresses the commercial or entertainment imperative in much the same way as Bolt's earlier plays, yet her feminist voice is overpowered by a sensationalism that seems distastefully exploitative.

Pollock's work has maintained its feminist focus, especially in the autobiographical *Doc* (1984), and her most recent plays included in the volume *Sharon Pollock: Three Plays* (2003) continue to explore feminist themes, especially the experience of the female artist. *Doc* is a moving autobiographical play commissioned by Rick McNair of Theatre Calgary. The play is structured as a memory play interweaving the stories of the adult Catherine and her father, Ev, with that of the author's childhood self Katie, her father, her mother, Bob, and her Uncle Oscar. It explores through a fractured memory the trauma Katie experienced in relation to her alcoholic mother's death and her attempt, as an adult, to come to terms with the factors contributing to her mother's apparent suicide. There is no overt sense of masquerade or feminist equivocation in this play; it is a thorough indictment of patriarchal values and the gender socialization of women.

The three plays in the 2003 collection, although less personal, are equally direct and powerful feminist critiques. As Sherrill Grace surmises, "All three plays centre on an individual woman who finds herself trapped by contemporary socio-political power structures that are controlled by men" (*Sharon Pollock* 1). Each of these plays explores a critical historical personage and allows Pollock to investigate the circumstances surrounding women whose stories compel interest and whose experiences reveal the complications that accompany women's self-empowerment. *Moving Pictures* (1999) examines the career of the

actress and film producer Nell Shipman and uses the memory play mode to focus on three stages of her career, from ingénue in a stock company, to rising star, to has-been. It charts the determination of the actress to become an independent writer and producer and not be reduced to a studio pawn. *End Dream* (2000) investigates the murder of Scottish domestic Janet Smith, who was killed in Vancouver in mysterious circumstances in 1924. The story examines the complicated relationship between the young woman, her employers, and their Chinese houseboy who was charged in her death but acquitted. *Angel's Trumpet* (2001) is about the relationship between F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda. It is set in a psychiatrist's office and depicts an extended mediation organized by Fitzgerald to enlist the psychiatrist's help in order to prevent Zelda from interfering with his career aspirations. Pollock's most recent work continues to explore feminist issues in relation to historical topics, focusing particularly on women's experience and role socialization. She engages with the complex terrain of contemporary feminism, paying close attention to both individual psychology and social conditioning in order to reveal the conflicts and contradictions entailed in negotiating those two forces.

It is important to note that the early "feminist" plays of all four playwrights discussed here were powerful precisely because of their engagement with feminist issues of their time. These plays explored feminism from multiple perspectives and with an attention to the idea of gender performance in a way that anticipated feminism's move beyond identity politics and into contemporary critiques of gender construction. Their work is thus feminist in a contemporary sense because it probed how women negotiate complex roles and relationships with respect to their careers and families and illustrated the indeterminacy of their identity. The struggle for women's self-determination apparent in these early plays is present in the authors' later work, but in that work it is addressed with less urgency and, for

the most part, in the context of a significantly changed, yet still problematic, social environment. Most of the women in the later plays benefit from the social changes instituted by the second-wave feminist movement, including advances in women's access to higher education and their representation in the professional workforce. Female characters are shown to be far more empowered in terms of their choices in later works, even while some of their choices remain quite traditional.

The plays under discussion here reflect a shift in Canadian drama, to the extent that they made a critical examination of women's experience the subject of mainstream interest and they deepened and intensified the portrayal of women's experience beyond the stereotypical. Women in these plays are multifaceted and complex, sometimes even reprehensible. The delineation of women's lives at this extraordinary time in Canadian history is significant. These depictions remain some of the most powerful portrayals of women and their struggles with subjectivity that exist in the field of Canadian drama.

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