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Source: *Theatre Journal*, Mar., 1989, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Mar., 1989), pp. 45-55

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

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Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890–1920

Judith L. Stephens

In her essay, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," Michele Barrett suggests new methods for studying relations between literature, gender ideology, and social change. Defining ideology as "the process of producing meaning," Barrett isolates several processes by which literary texts reproduce gender ideology within a given social formation.[1] Two of these processes, "compensation" and "recuperation," seem particularly useful in providing the basis for a materialist feminist analysis of Progressive era plays. Since compensation refers to the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the "moral value" of femininity and recuperation refers to the process of negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods, Progressive era dramas, which characteristically adhered to the conventional belief in the moral superiority of females while simultaneously addressing issues arising from women's changing position in society, can be newly appreciated as a site of struggle over the meaning of gender.[2]

Certain dramas of the Progressive era (1890–1920) are particularly suited to a feminist analysis because they addressed issues that grew out of contemporary social movements dedicated to changing women's position in society. However, this essay will attempt to demonstrate how presenting such issues within the confines of certain dramatic conventions served the processes of compensation and recuperation and thereby reproduced dominant gender ideology. Recognizing the presence of compensation and recuperation in Progressive era plays can provide an understanding of how drama, as cultural practice, can both challenge and reinforce dominant gender ideology in periods of social change.

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[1]Michele Barrett, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in Literature and Culture,* ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen), 65–85.

[2]Ibid., 83.

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Earlier studies by theatre scholars have established different feminist approaches to reading nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dramatic texts. Kathleen McLennan has examined Steele MacKaye's *Marriage* (1872) as a challenge to the nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity.[3] Rosemarie Bank has demonstrated how female characters often play an active and crucial role in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century melodramas, challenging the popular stereotype of the passive, helpless, melodramatic heroine.[4] Lois Gottlieb examined how the term "feminist" applies to the plays of Rachel Crothers.[5] The intent of this essay is not to refute these earlier valuable studies but to offer an additional feminist approach for studying dramatic texts from this period.

Social Reform and Gender Ideology

The feminist tradition inherited by leaders of the Progressive era was a tradition marked by ties to religion, family, and a sense of moral duty. According to Ellen Dubois, the earlier reform societies of the 1830s and 1840s had claimed the moral reform of society as a "self-consciously female endeavor," and Alice Rossi found that "in both social origins and the deepest premises of their thinking, most early native born American feminists were profoundly conservative and moralistic."[6] Given this set of circumstances, it is not surprising to learn the female reformers of the Progressive era openly embraced the moral hegemony nineteenth-century ideology bestowed upon middle-class women.

Nineteenth-century middle-class ideology constructed an image of Woman as a morally superior being especially suited for protecting her (female) domestic sphere from the corruption of society or the (male) work place.[7] Accepting this conventional belief which, on the one hand, relegated women and men to separate spheres but, on the other, gave females special sanctifying powers, women reformers of the Progressive era successfully argued for a logical extension of those powers from the private sphere of the home into the wider public sphere of society. Known to historians as moral reformers and generally acknowledged as representing a strain of nineteenth-century feminism, women such as Carrie Chapman Catt, Anna Howard Shaw, Florence Kelly, and Lillian Wald argued that women could weed out corruption and ultimately reform society if given the chance to extend their housecleaning and sanctifying talents into the public arena. Many contemporary female reformers

[3]Kathleen McLennan, "Marriage in America's Gilded Age," *Theatre Journal* 37 (1985): 345–56.

[4]Rosemarie K. Bank, "The Second Face of the Idol: Women in Melodrama," in *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Kirch Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Crown Press, 1981), 238–43.

[5]Lois Gottlieb, "Looking to Women: Rachel Crothers and the Feminist Heroine," in Chinoy and Jenkins, *Women in American Theatre*, 137–45.

[6]Ellen Dubois, "Women's Rights and Abolition: The Nature of the Connection," in *Anti Slavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on The Abolitionists*, ed. Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 245 and Alice Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 248.

[7]Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981) and Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

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adopted the same premise and language. Jane Addams encouraged women to become involved with municipal government by comparing it to "housekeeping on a large scale"; Charlotte Perkins Gilman asked women not to limit their nurturing ability to a nuclear family but to assume their full duty as "mothers of the world"; socialist editor Josephine Conger-Kaneko suggested women's sphere was not confined to the thing misnamed "home" but extended to the larger sphere of world services; and proponents of higher education for women, such as Alice Freeman Palmer and M. Carey Thomas, argued for its acceptance on the grounds that it would serve "the best interests of the family."[8] Temperance leader Frances Willard won wide support for her cause by adopting such mottos as "Home Protection," and she proclaimed that, "woman will bless and brighten every place she enters and will enter every place."[9] Using such traditional language and imagery, the female reformers of the Progressive era worked to expand woman's sphere of action and influence. Ironically, dominant gender ideology was appropriated by a movement dedicated to changing middle-class women's position in society.

Whether the Progressive era included significant progress for women is still debated today, with some feminists defending the female reformers for asserting women's right to a public voice and others viewing their achievements as "hollow victories."[10] Perhaps the reason for the lingering debate stems from the contradictory position female reformers assumed by basing their argument to change their position in society on a conventional belief which had served to limit their opportunities and power.

Dramatic Conventions and Gender Ideology

Just as female reformers assumed a contradictory stance in their struggle for change, dramas of the Progressive era that addressed women's position in society often appeared to champion the cause of women's rights but, by adhering to standard dramatic conventions, they inherently contained an imperceptible counterargument which served to reinforce the status quo.

The morally superior female is a dominant, even characteristic, figure in nineteenth-century drama. During the Progressive era, theatre audiences accepted the growing tendency of playwrights to deal with current social issues, but these issues were presented through the conventions of traditional dramatic form. According to Garth Wilson, "liberation from old tastes and habits was slow and most playwrights were

[8]Jane Addams, "Utilization of Women in City Government," in Alice S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 605; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Women and Economics" in Rossi, 588; Josephine Conger-Kaneko, "Women and Socialism," *Progressive Woman* 5 (1911): 8; Alice Freeman Palmer and M. Carey Thomas quoted in Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 107, 108.

[9]Frances Willard, quoted in Rothman, *Women's Proper Place,* 67 and in Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1959), 183.

[10]See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985) and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 45. For an assessment of the connection between moral reformers and socialism see Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

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still devoted to the devices and methods of melodrama which had influenced dramatists for a hundred years."[11] The idea that drama should present a moral view of life remained a basic tenet. Even the more progressive critics of the period, such as Brander Matthews and Clayton Hamilton, who championed the new Ibsen-like realism over the strict Victorian standards of William Winter, supported the traditional view of drama as a story incorporating conflict, crisis, and resolution involving characters faced with moral decisions.[12] While the conventions of the drama focused attention on characters faced with moral decisions, prevailing ideology dictated the most moral or "right" decision must be made by the female. Rosemarie Bank found even the most "liberal minded" critics of the period subscribed to a belief in the morally superior female.[13] In a review of *Margaret Fleming*, B. O. Flower wrote in *Arena*, "it is an incontestable fact that woman is ethically, infinitely superior to man; her moral perceptions are firmer and stronger, her unselfishness is far greater, her spiritual nature deeper and richer than that of her brothers."[14] The dominant theory of the drama joined with the prevailing belief in women's moral superiority to exert a strong influence in determining the bounds within which the meaning of gender was constructed and negotiated in Progressive era dramas.

The moralistic nature and conventional structure of melodrama were conducive to presenting the morally superior female and thereby reproduced dominant gender ideology of the period. The following discussion will demonstrate how these dramatic conventions served the processes of compensation and recuperation in plays that addressed women's changing position in society. The plays chosen for discussion were selected from a growing list of Progressive era plays singled out by critics as significantly involving issues affecting women. That list appears at the end of this essay. The five plays chosen for discussion have been acknowledged for their feminist tendencies and are familiar to theatre scholars. I have chosen to discuss James Herne's *Margaret Fleming* (1890) and Rachel Crothers's *A Man's World* (1909) because they are recognized for their challenge to the sexual double standard. Herne's *Sag Harbor* (1899) and Crothers's *He and She* (1911) were chosen because both deal with combining the responsibilities of motherhood with female independence. Finally, I have chosen to include Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) because it addresses the consequences of assigning separate spheres to men and women and demonstrates how an avowedly feminist play, written for a noncommercial theatre, still served to reinforce dominant gender ideology.

The Double Standard

During the Progressive era, the position of the moral reformers on the double standard was not that women should have the same sexual freedom as men but that

[11]Garth Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Hair* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973), 243.

[12]See Brander Matthews, *A Study of the Drama*, 1910, *The Development of the Drama*, 1903 and *Principles of Playmaking*, 1919; Clayton Hamilton, *The Theory of the Theatre and Other Principles of Dramatic Criticism*, 1939, *Studies in Stagecraft*, 1914, and *Problems of the Playwright*, 1917.

[13]Rosemarie K. Bank, "The Image of Women in Plays of the Progressive Era," paper presented at the annual convention of the American Theatre Association, Toronto, 1985.

[14]B.O. Flower, "The Era of Women," *Arena* 4 (1891), 382.

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men and women should be judged by a single standard, the "most moral" standard (strict fidelity to one's spouse), which was then only applied to women. *Margaret Fleming* and *A Man's World* both espouse this view and include final scenes in which each heroine delivers a monologue denouncing the double standard.[15] While both Herne and Crothers were credited with presenting a feminist view that challenged the status quo, the fact that dramatic convention forced the issue to be placed within the context of a female facing a moral decision served the processes of compensation and recuperation and thereby reinforced dominant gender ideology.

Margaret Fleming's major decision in the play is to take back Philip, her repentant husband, and to raise his illegitimate son, along with their daughter, as their own. Within the context of the play, Margaret's decision is not portrayed as a submissive or self-sacrificing gesture but is carefully constructed to demonstrate her courage and strength, as well as her moral leadership. It is clear from her dialogue in the final scene that her decision does not include forgiveness for Philip but simply reflects what she feels is "best" for them to do. Philip concedes to Margaret's moral leadership and gives her the power to determine their future when he asks, "What do you want me to do? Shall I go away? . . . I want to do whatever you think is best." Margaret replies, "it is best for both of us to remain here and take up the old life together" (543).

Although in the original version Margaret had refused to be reunited with Philip, Mrs. Katherine Herne, who acted the part of Margaret, and who, according to A. H. Quinn, had taken an active role in the original creation of the play, approved of the new version and felt that "given the character of Margaret and the personality of Philip, they would be reunited."[16] With either ending, Margaret is shown to provide the moral leadership and make the "right" or most moral decision within the context of the play. Such presentation of ideas and images that emphasized the moral worth of femininity served the process of compensation by convincing females they actually possessed an important source of power. In her essay, Barrett cites examples from "the plethora of practices which, in the context of systematic denial of opportunities for women, attempt to 'compensate' for this by a corresponding ideology of moral worth."[17] She specifically notes "the ideology of domesticity," with its intense moral and sentimental elevation of the family home, was developed in the stultifying ethos of Victorian restrictions on female activity.

In addition to compensation, *Margaret Fleming* serves the process of recuperation because it appears to challenge the status quo while, on a more subtle level, it works to defuse that challenge. The play appears to challenge the status quo by portraying a strong female character who seems to determine the events of the play while presenting "the female view" on a contemporary controversial issue. But the conventions of the drama undermine the challenge by presenting the issue in a framework

[15]James Herne, *Margaret Fleming*, in *Representative American Plays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953) and Rachel Crothers, *A Man's World* in *Plays by American Women: 1900–1930*, ed. Judith Barlow (New York: Applause, 1985). Citations from these sources are documented within the text.

[16]Quinn, *Representative American Plays*, 516.

[17]Barrett, "Ideology and Cultural Production of Gender," 81.

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constructed to focus ultimately on an individual moral decision with the female character positioned to provide the moral leadership. Margaret appeared to be a new type of heroine because her character seemed to determine the events of the play instead of being manipulated by the plot, but by confining her power to moral influence, the drama reinforces dominant gender ideology and takes away with one hand what it gives with the other.[18] In the final act of the play, Dr. Larkin, who seems to be a spokesman for the author, tells Margaret: "this world needs just such women as you." Dr. Larkin is saying that the world needs the influence of Margaret's moral leadership, but this view, which is the same one presented by the female moral reformers, contains an inherent concession to dominant gender ideology and thus inadvertently reinforces the status quo.

In contrast to Margaret, Frank Ware in a *A Man's World,* by Rachel Crothers, is a heroine whose major decision is to reject her long-time companion when she learns he has fathered an illegitimate child. For this reason the play was acclaimed for taking an ever stronger feminist stance than *Margaret Fleming*. Frank's decision to reject Malcolm Gaskell was seen as a daring reversal of the usual pattern in which "erring men easily won forgiveness from their mates."[19] The play aroused enough controversy to prompt a response by contemporary playwright Agustus Thomas, who wrote *As A Man Thinks* in defense of the double standard.

The process of compensation is at work here because Frank, like Margaret Fleming, is presented as moral leader. Her decision to reject Gaskell is presented as the most moral, noble, or the "right" decision within the context of the play. Unlike Philip Fleming, Gaskell is unrepentant; he refuses to acknowledge any wrong doing and feels he has simply "led a man's life" (68). When Frank asks him to consider the irresponsibility of his actions, Gaskell replies: "No! Don't try to hold me to account by a standard that doesn't exist. Don't measure me by your theories. If you love me, you'll stand on that and forget everything else" (69). Frank's rejection of Gaskell is accepted by the audience as the moral or "right" decision because of his unrepenting attitude. Philip accepted Margaret's moral leadership, realized the "iniquity" of his behavior, and was "saved" while Gaskell refused to grant Frank Ware such power and is justifiably rejected.

The process of recuperation is served in that Frank Ware is portrayed as an intelligent, independent, modern woman striking a blow against the double standard but her power is ultimately couched in terms of moral leadership. Progressive era dramas such as *It's A Man's World* and *Margaret Fleming* easily incorporated contemporary feminist arguments against the double standard, but such challenges to the status quo were obliquely diffused by conventions that upheld middle-class society's definition of and insistence on women's moral superiority.

[18]Margaret Fleming is traditionally recognized as a progressive heroine in the portrayal of women in American drama. Laurilyn Harris, "Atypical Ingenues and Other Iconoclastic Females in 19th Century American Drama," paper presented at the National Educational Theatre Conference, New York, 1986.

[19]Judith Barlow, "Introduction," *Plays by American Women*, xviii.

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Motherhood

Both *Sag Harbor* and *He and She* demonstrate the family's dependency on the mother's moral leadership.[20] Although Martha in *Sag Harbor* is a full-time wife and mother and Ann Herford in *He and She* is juggling the demands of wife, mother, and successful professional artist, both women fulfill the function of moral leader within their own homes.

In the final act of *Sag Harbor*, Martha decides she is not dependent on her husband but, if necessary, is fully capable of raising their son on her own. She is portrayed as the strongest character because she is the only one capable of rising above the petty love triangle created through the devotion shown to her by both her husband, Ben, and his younger brother, Frank. Jealousy, bitterness, and suspicion between the two brothers results in Ben threatening to leave Sag Harbor so that Martha and Frank can be left alone together. Martha resolves the conflict by accepting her husband's decision to leave and vows to send Frank away too. When asked who will carry on the family business, she answers: "I will—best I can . . . I'm not going to sit down here and eat my heart out because my husband doesn't choose to live with me. I've got a child to bring up and educate and I'm going to do it . . ." (234). Herne's stage directions read that Ben and Frank both "stare at Martha, amazed at the fearless spirit she is showing for the first time in her life." This climactic scene, which demonstrates previously hidden independence and assertiveness, appears to grant her a new dimension of power. The scene also is consistent with the contemporary suffragist/feminist argument that declared motherhood required strength and independence from women, not dependency.[21] But recuperation is subtly at work here because Martha's new-found courage and independence are championed within the safe confines of a mother's devotion to her child. On the one hand, the play espouses the "modern woman's" argument that said motherhood fostered independence and assertiveness in women instead of a need for protection, but on the other hand, it reestablishes the conventional boundaries within which these qualities can be displayed. Martha's startling scene of independence permanently ends the rivalry between the two brothers, and it becomes unnecessary for her to carry out her threat.

Compensation occurs because Martha retains her role as a moral leader for the family. She remains an elevated figure who knows what is "best" for everyone concerned.

In contrast to Martha, Ann Herford in *He and She* is a wife and mother with a professional career but, like Martha, she also provides the moral leadership within her home. Ann's decision, in the final moments of the play, is to give up the prestigious commission she has won in order to devote her full attention to her troubled teenage daughter. When her husband, who had also entered the artistic competition,

[20]James Herne, *Sag Harbor*, in *Shore Acres and Other Plays* (New York: Samuel French, 1928) and Crothers, *He and She*, in Quinn, *Representative American Plays*. Citations from these sources are documented in the text.

[21]Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Motherhood," in Rossi, *The Feminist Papers*, 396–401 and Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York, Columbia, 1965), 114–15.

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reminds her she will always regret giving up the commission, Ann answers: "It's my job. She is what I've given to life. If I fail her now my whole life is a failure. There isn't any choice, she's part of my body, part of my soul" (928).

A common argument against middle-class women working outside the home was that if mothers were to devote their energies to maintaining a professional career, the home and family life would necessarily be neglected. It is easy to understand how Ann Herford is a refutation of that argument, and in this sense she is a "feminist heroine" in the Progressive era. But when Ann is compared to Martha of *Sag Harbor,* it appears the power granted to both females is negotiated under very similar conditions. Martha's climactic scene was constructed to show she possessed an underlying spark of independence and an ability to work in the public sphere. This liberating scene is *acceptable,* and her character remains admirable in the eyes of the public because her motherly devotion and moral leadership were previously established throughout the play. Ann's climactic scene of moral decision was constructed to convince the audience she possessed true motherly devotion. This scene of recuperation is *necessary* because her independence and ability to compete in the male domain has automatically brought her motherly devotion and moral leadership into doubt. Compensation occurs because Ann retains her moral leadership, but the price she is forced to pay (giving up the commission) is the work of recuperation which, again, takes away with one hand what it has given with the other. Through the character of Ann Herford, Rachel Crothers championed the feminist cause by presenting a woman who was able to compete successfully in a male-dominated profession, but this portrayal of female victory apparently demanded a simultaneous reassurance that the "new woman" would not sacrifice her traditional responsibility of providing moral leadership in the home. If a choice *had* to be made between successful artist and ideal mother, the new woman must prove she is a true woman and choose the latter. Such oscillation between a desire to champion feminist arguments and loyalty to dominant gender ideology established the boundaries within which dramas could challenge conventional views of motherhood.

Separate Spheres

Trifles, by Susan Glaspell, focuses on the decision of two farm women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, to conceal evidence that would implicate another farm wife in the investigation of her husband's murder.[22] As with the previous plays, their decision is presented as the moral or "right" decision, even though it is understood to go clearly against conventional law.

While the Sheriff and County Attorney search through the farmhouse looking for evidence of a break-in or struggle, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters notice many clues of disruption in the wife's canning, housekeeping, and needlework. Through the accumulation of these details the women begin to solve the murder mystery on their own. By slowly making the audience aware of the wife's frustration, isolation, and difficult life with her husband, Glaspell creates understanding for the women's de-

[22]Susan Glaspell, *Trifles,* in Barlow, *Plays by American Women,* 70–86.

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cision to conceal the evidence. As they debate with their own consciences, Mrs. Peters points out, "The law has got to punish crime," but Mrs. Hale reminds her of the wife's predicament and total isolation, saying, "That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (84).

Further support for the women's decision is created through the portrayal of the condescending attitude of the two men. As the Sheriff and County Attorney scoff at the women's preoccupation with the "trifles" of housekeeping, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters proceed to solve the mystery and conceal their evidence. In portraying this situation, Glaspell is saying that women have a certain knowledge or wisdom that men do not want or value. By their decision, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters disrupt or subvert conventional law, but they maintain the image of moral leaders by adhering to an alternate or "higher" moral code.

Karen K. Stein has suggested that *Trifles* is a feminist document because it sympathetically explores the lives of women who would normally be minor figures in a play.[23] Other feminist critics have praised it because it presents and shows the value of a specifically female point of view.[24] I am suggesting that, in addition to these views, the play also colludes with dominant gender ideology, and, in this respect, refutes its own argument. Compensation is at work here because the women's moral superiority enables them to go against or to subvert conventional law and still be "right." However, recuperation is served in that "women's law" is pitted against "men's law," and thus the play perpetuates the idea of separate spheres. By finding and concealing the incriminating evidence, the women win their own individual victory, but the system continues intact. It is as if Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are playing out the standard "What Every Woman Knows" role, encouraging a smug complacency in their moral superiority, knowing they secretly have the "real power" while "permitting" the men to remain and function in socially acknowledged positions of power. The play perpetuates the romantic notion that each woman can secretly and individually subvert the larger system, if she so desires. Like the other plays discussed in this essay, *Trifles* both challenged and reinforced the dominant gender ideology of the period.

Conclusion

The five texts discussed in this essay demonstrate that the structure of melodrama with its emphasis on moral choice was especially adapted to reinforcing the prevailing belief in women's moral leadership. Because of this unique set of circumstances, progressive dramas of the period commonly expressed the same arguments the moral reformers were presenting to society. However, while appearing to challenge the

[23]Karen F. Stein, "The Women's World of Glaspell's *Trifles*," in Chinoy and Jenkins, *Women in American Theatre*, 251.

[24]Rachel France, "Apropos of Women and The Folk Play," in Chinoy and Jenkins, *Women in American Theatre*, 151; Linda Walsh Jenkins, "Locating the Language of Gender Experience," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 2 (1984): 12; Karen Malpede, "Susan Glaspell," in *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1983), 146; and Barlow, xxii.

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status quo, both the dramas and female reformers were operating on a basic assumption that served to uphold dominant gender ideology.

Although the females in these plays are very different from one another and at times make opposite choices, they share a common power to determine what will be seen as "right" or "wrong" within the context of the play. Whether the female is a wife and mother with a professional career, such as Ann in *He and She,* or a full-time homemaker, such as Martha in *Sag Harbor,* whether she is a woman who takes back the so-called "errant male," such as Margaret Fleming, or rejects him, such as Frank in *A Man's World,* she retains the role of moral leader. She persists in this role even when she defies conventional law, like the farm wives in *Trifles*. Such elevation of the moral worth of femininity serves the process of compensation by suggesting females possess an important power. The representation of the morally superior female projected a powerful figure in Progressive era dramas, but this same representation served to reinforce dominant gender ideology.

The process of recuperation is also at work because while each play appears to champion "the female cause," it is also reinforcing dominant gender ideology. Specifically, each play espouses the views put forth by the female reformers on contemporary issues concerning women: there should be a single standard of sexual morality applied to both men and women, motherhood demands self-reliance instead of dependency, mothers who are also professional career women will not neglect their responsibility within the home, and men who trivialize what they see as "women's sphere" are denying themselves an important source of knowledge and insight. However, like the female reformers, Progressive era plays presented their argument for changing women's position in society through a framework that functioned to control the limits of change. Like ideology, the functioning of dramatic convention is often hidden, and what appears to the reader/spectator as an engaging story which challenges social convention may also contain a more subtle counterargument which serves to recoup any ground lost in the direction of significant change. Elin Diamond has noted an important intersection of gender, ideology, and the theatre experience:

> Gender refers to the words, gestures, appearances, ideas and behavior that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity. When spectators 'see' gender they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture. Gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work since 'feminine' or 'masculine' behavior usually appears to be a natural—and thus fixed and unalterable—extension of biological sex.[25]

When Progressive era audiences saw the representation of the morally superior female on stage, they accepted her as a natural fact—as an index of feminine identity. This essay has demonstrated how Progressive era plays reinforced such gender ideology by their moralistic nature and conventional structure even as they incorporated ideas intended to effect "progress for women." The plays were celebrated for presenting ideas that called for social change while the working of the apparatus,

[25]Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *The Drama Review* 32 (1988): 84.

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within which such ideas were constructed and negotiated, was ignored. In Jill Dolan's view, the materialist feminist project is to reveal the complicity of the representational apparatus in maintaining sexual difference.[26] As the five plays discussed in this essay demonstrate, the insight resulting from such revelation permits a new appreciation of drama as a site of struggle over the meaning of gender during periods of social change.

Progressive Era Plays Concerning Issues Affecting Women

1890	James A. Herne	*Margaret Flemming*
1895	Sydney Grundy	*The New Woman*
1896	Martha Morton	*A Bachelor's Romance*
1897	Charles Hoyt	*A Contented Woman*
1899	James A. Herne	*Sag Harbor*
1906	William Vaughn Moody	*The Great Divide*
1906	Langdon Mitchell	*The New York Idea*
1906	Rachel Crothers	*The Three of Us*
1906	Clyde Fitch	*The Woman in the Case*
1908	Eugene Walter	*The Easiest Way*
1909	Clyde Fitch	*The City*
1909	Rachel Crothers	*A Man's World*
1910	William Vaughn Moody	*The Faith Healer*
1910	Elizabeth Robins	*Votes for Women*
1911	Agustus Thomas	*As A Man Thinks*
1911	Rachel Crothers	*He and She*
1913	Alice Brown	*Children of the Earth*
1913	William Hurlbut	*The Strange Woman*
1913	Bayard Veiller	*The Fight*
1913	Anne Crawford Flexner	*The Marriage Game*
1916	Susan Glaspell	*Trifles*
1916	Clare Kummer	*Good Gracious Annabelle*
1917	Jesse Lynch Williams	*Why Marry?*
1918	Susan Glaspell	*Woman's Honor*
1918	Charolotte E. Wells and Dorothy Donnelly	*The Riddle: Woman*
1918	Arlene Van Ness Hines	*Her Honor the Mayor*
1919	Zoe Atkins	*Declasse*
1919	Rachel Barton Butler	*Mama's Affair*

[26]Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988), 101.

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