
Plays
" by
and about
Women

An Anthology

EDITED BY Victoria Sullivan AND James Hatch



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Introduction

Here is an anthology devoted to twentieth-century plays by women. They are primarily about women and their problems: their struggles to attract prestigious men, their seeking of a coherent identity, and most recently, their anger at the bondage of outgrown stereotypes. All of the plays selected read well and play well. Several are experimental in form, while others are traditional, well-made plays. In the past, female playwrights have been largely ignored in standard drama anthologies, and therefore this group of eight plays should provide some new insights into how women view themselves in dramatic terms.

Drama directors, teachers and actresses will welcome these plays for very practical reasons: they provide roles for women. Since in the Western world action has generally been a male prerogative, most of the roles in play casts have been male, a phenomenon to which any aspiring actress can testify. The plays in this volume offer a total of eighty-five female parts, roles which run a dramatic range of age, class, type and genre from the working girls in *Rites* to the society matrons in *The Women* to the schoolteachers and pupils in *The Children's Hour* to the amorphously changing roles in *Calm Down Mother*.

As Kate Millett has pointed out in *Sexual Politics*, economics have played a role in keeping women "in their place." In the theatre, financial backers have been loath to risk the large amount of money necessary to mount a play by a woman in a society where patriarchal attitudes have reigned in relative security until recently. Occasional playwrights like Lillian Hellman and Clare Boothe have overcome this masculine hesitation, but they are the exceptions. Virginia Woolf claimed that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common," and women's creative problem has always been

“that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure.”

Although the plays here are *about* women, the anthology is not strictly feminist in viewpoint, for the selections are plays first, not polemics. In fact, they are not even all positive in their assessment of women. Clare Boothe's *The Women* presents a picture of woman as a trivial social beast. Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* treats lesbianism as a legitimately scandalous accusation. But each of the eight plays deals in some fashion, either positively or negatively, with the nature of women in Western society from a female point of view.

Art is a kind of mirror, with all its grotesqueries and distortions, and so these plays provide some real data on the characteristics of the uniquely female vision. Half of the selections date from before 1965 to provide historical perspective. Female consciousness, like black consciousness, while always present, is shaped by its time. Freud defined women in 1933 as basically passive, masochistic and narcissistic, a formula that had the effect of strongly prohibiting female creativity in any sphere other than childbearing, and Erikson's doctrine of “inner space” reinforced this attitude. Kate Millet labels the period 1930 to 1960 “the Counterrevolution,” the period when earlier feminist gains were negated under the pressure of psychoanalytic theory and political reality, and when the twentieth-century version of the “feminine mystique” was born. The modern woman playwright, then, has had to fight against strong cultural taboos, refusing to acquiesce to the “anatomy is destiny” argument. She has had to be a very strong person indeed to invade the traditionally male world of the theatre.

The distance that women have traveled in their awareness of themselves can be measured by starting with *Overtures*, a one-act play written in 1913 in which two women are presented solely in their relationships to a man. The dramatist,

Alice Gerstenberg, reveals her characters through an expressionistic device; she gives each an inner and an outer persona, played by two different actresses. The audience hears not only what the characters say, but what they think and feel. To glimpse the social implications of the triangle in this play, consider the situation in reverse: two men competing to be the love-mate of a famous woman painter.

By contrast, *The Children's Hour*, first produced in 1934, considers two women in a noncompetitive relationship. Lillian Hellman, only twenty-six when she wrote it, already knew how to construct a taut, carefully crafted play.

The Children's Hour is dominated by women; in a cast of sixteen, only two are males. The story centers around Martha and Karen, who run a girls' boarding school. One of their pupils accuses them of lesbianism, an untrue charge that destroys them. “This is really not a play about lesbianism,” Ms. Hellman said in an interview during the 1952 revival of the play, “but about a lie.” It is a lie the school, the town and finally the women themselves come to believe. Women in positions of authority have always been particularly vulnerable to slander (the Gabrielle Russier case in France comes to mind); they are expected to be exemplary at the same time that they are suspected of hiding sinister perversions. If they were “normal,” the reasoning goes, why would they desire careers?

In the play's denouement Martha says to Karen, “I've loved you like a friend, the way thousands of women feel about other women.” Perhaps Lillian Hellman is suggesting that if a woman can learn to love herself, she will not be afraid to love another. Clare Boothe in *The Women* (1936) examines the problem specifically. Why is it that women do not love themselves?

Brooks Atkinson, then drama critic for the *New York Times*, wrote in his review that she “succeeded by spraying vitriol over the members of her sex” and declared that “Miss Boothe's writing was too poisonous for my taste.” Not everyone agreed: *The Women* ran for 657 performances. Yet the

myth persisted that *The Women* was a vitriolic attack upon the female sex. It is and is not.

The plot is slight: Mary loses her husband to a vamp, obtains a divorce, regrets it. The last scene shows her behaving "like a woman," clawing to get her man back. The overt evidence condemning women comes from the mouth of every character in the play:

There's only one tragedy for a woman—losing her man. . . . This is a man's world. The sooner our girls are taught to accept the fact graciously. . . . But Mother dear, I don't want to be a little girl. I hate girls. They're so silly. . . . Women are natural enemies. . . . Pride, that's a luxury a woman in love can't afford.

Women speaking against women.

Clare Boothe herself said that "*The Women* is a satirical play about a numerically small group of ladies native to the Park Avenues of America." This is true in the sense that the women in the play have wealth and leisure, but the condition that encourages them to waste their lives and to destroy one another is general to women at all levels of the society.

No man is presented onstage in *The Women*, yet the characters are concerned with nothing else. The "girls" have no careers, no ambitions of their own. Says one professional woman:

I wish I could get a man to foot my bills. I'm sick and tired, cooking my own breakfast, sloshing through the rain at 8 A.M., working like a dog. For what? Independence? A lot of independence you have on a woman's wages. I'd chuck it like that for a decent, or an indecent home.

The working "girls" speak:

FIRST FITTER Look at that body. She's got him now.
 SECOND SALESGIRL You can't trust any man. That's all they want.
 CORSET MODEL (*plaintively, her hands on her lovely hips*) What else have we got to give?

Indeed, what else? This is the question Ms. Boothe asks women over and over throughout the play—a play whose scenes are set in the living room, at the hairdresser's, in the kitchen, the bathroom, the powder room, the fitting room, the world of segregated females who, if they are allowed into men's world, are so poorly paid and badly treated that they long to return to even the most unsatisfactory home.

An indictment of narcissism and frivolity, *The Women* thrusts an unflattering mirror at the female image. Still, to show women the worst of their sex is to challenge them to reveal the best—that struggle toward human definition and freedom which fascinates Doris Lessing in *Play with a Tiger*.

Play with a Tiger was first produced at the Comedy Theatre, London, on March 22, 1962. Ms. Lessing is probably best known as a novelist, and one of her major fictional concerns is a particular type of modern woman: the intellectual who refuses to make ideological and personal compromises in a world that demands them. The heroine of this play is a writer in her mid-thirties, Anna, who lives alone in a London flat. In the eyes of the world she is self-sufficient, charming, enterprising; but she knows that mere survival in a fragmenting world is an effort.

She wants a man, she is attractive to men, but she finds it impossible to break through the battle of the sexes and have a man on her own terms. So, although she has a number of friends and lovers, she is basically lonely. The action of the play is confined to one evening in her life, but the audience must assume that the action is repetitive, that although a crisis point is reached and passed (if not resolved) with one man, she will have to relive this crisis with other men.

Structurally, by abandoning the totally realistic set, Ms. Lessing broadens the psychological dimensions in the play. At certain points the walls of the apartment vanish, and the protagonists find themselves in an undefined atmosphere where they can re-create past selves, past experiences, past disguises. In the course of acting out this conscious regression, they reveal the early pressures that produced their adult personae.

Megan Terry's *Calm Down Mother*, first performed by the Open Theatre in March 1965 at the Sheridan Square Playhouse in New York City, is even more experimental in form. Subtitled "A Transformation for Three Women," it is played on an open stage with four chairs. In the transformation play, which has developed out of Open Theatre workshops, the actors—or, in this case, actresses—keep switching into new roles and situations without the aid of props, simply by means of acting technique. In this play the three women go through a series of short sketches focusing on female identity, or lack of identity, playing various archetypal female roles. The underlying theme linking these sketches is that anatomy may be destiny, that women's bodies define their roles, that "bellies" and "eggies" are the essential female elements. By giving this idea vivid life on the stage, Ms. Terry reveals its fearful limitations.

Natalia Ginzburg presents an equally frightening portrait of female limitation in *The Advertisement*, a play originally written in Italian, but given its world premiere in English translation by the National Theatre at the Theatre Royal, Brighton, England, on September 16, 1968.

The play revolves around Teresa, a woman who puts an advertisement in a newspaper in order to rent out a room in her large flat to a young female student. Once the student arrives, a slow unraveling of Teresa's passionate, absurd, unfortunate affair and marriage begins. Teresa, like Anna in *Play with a Tiger*, is lonely. She is also a compulsive talker. Her marriage lasted five years, and in the course of describing it to her young listener, she reveals herself as the self-indulgent victim of her own desperately chaotic personality. Her long-winded, egocentric monologues say something about the female state. Having been brought up with no particular goal except to catch a man, she cannot support herself economically or emotionally. Yet because of her demanding dependence and compulsive need to talk, no man can stand to live with her.

When the play was first performed, Irving Wardle, drama

critic for the *Times* of London, attacked it for being "the equivalent of a cheap woman's magazine story." He assumes that a complaining female protagonist is automatically less noble than Stanley Kowalski or Willy Loman. The implicit standard of judgment behind Wardle's criticism is: men suffer greatly and are tragic; women suffer mawkishly and are bathetic.

There is little action in the play. In fact it has been successfully performed as a radio play by the BBC. Teresa is a woman who has been reduced to talk as her only form of action; her speeches are long and self-pitying; they ignore the response of the listener because they are old dreams and obsessions relived and so contain no freshness, no possibility of new growth.

Another National Theatre production, *Rites* by Maureen Duffy, first performed in its experimental theatre program on February 8, 1969, with a twelve-character all-female cast, is the perfect late-sixties foil to *The Women*. Fashionable New York matrons are replaced by London working-class women, and instead of the elegant-thirties powder room, the setting is a ladies' "loo" (public washroom).

Hostility toward men is expressed which is quite different from the veiled self-loathing of *The Women*. These lower-class women are neither educated nor consciously liberated, yet they possess a gut-level recognition of the inequities of the system. Ada, the head matron, is very much aware of her body as a commodity in the sexual market:

It's not much and you've got to tart it up a bit to sell it high. After all the goods are all the same when they get the wrapping off. You've got to make them pay for the wrapping off. It's the first law of finance.

Men are always "they" and "them" in this environment; they are not actually described as the enemy, but they are quite obviously felt to be such. There is a cynicism bred deep into all of these women which allows them to joke among themselves about the cultural myths of our times:

THIRD OFFICE GIRL Dear Auntie Mabel, my friend is always begging me to do wrong. He says if I loved him I would be kind to him. What shall I do? I am frightened of losing him if I do not give in.

FIRST OFFICE GIRL Dear worried Blue Eyes, on no account let him force you to anticipate the delights of the honeymoon. Two people should save themselves for each other. If this is all this boy wants from you he does not really love you and once he has had it he will quickly tire.

NORMA Eddy always falls dead asleep after.

MEG Men are made different.

FIRST OFFICE GIRL That's for sure.

(They scream with laughter)

Although a man might have written such dialogue, it does not seem likely; it is, in some strange way, too unsentimental for a man.

Consider two other pieces of dialogue:

FIRST OFFICE GIRL Ent you goin in then Norma?

NORMA I'm sick of old Villars and his, "Type this Miss Smith, file that Miss Smith, take it down Miss Smith, lick it, stamp on it, post it. In tray, out tray."

Or:

ADA I'll tell you about your kind of love: a few moments of pleasure and then a lifetime kidding yourselves. Caught, bound, even if you don't know it. Or a lifetime looking, like Meg, and wailing what you've missed. Years of ministering to a stranger . . .

Such frustration finally unites all the women in the room for an act of ritualized violence against the enemy, the "rites" of the title. The act is horrifying but not surprising to an audience that has caught the cadence of anger boiling underground throughout the early portions of the play.

Such anger is doubly present in black women writers. From the production of Angelina Grimke's *Rachel* in 1916 to *Wine in the Wilderness* in 1969, over one hundred and twenty-five plays were written by black women in America.

The first to be performed professionally off-Broadway was *Gold Through the Trees* by Alice Childress in 1952. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry became the first black woman to have a play staged on Broadway when *A Raisin in the Sun* opened. In 1964 Adrienne Kennedy won the "Obie," the off-Broadway award for the best play of the year, for *The Funnyhouse of a Negro*. In 1972 Micki Grant won two "Obie" awards for her musical, *Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope*.

Alice Childress' *Wine in the Wilderness* was first produced in a television series "On Being Black" in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 4, 1969. Abbey Lincoln played the role of Tommy; Israel Hicks played Bill, and it is these two who carry the conflict of the play.

Bill is an artist, he has an education and money; he is a man burdened with a pseudo-romantic vision of the mythical "black woman." Tommy has neither money nor recognition, but she has a vitality and a knowledge of what human beings are and should be. She is a grass-roots woman who has survived the rats, the roaches, the riots, and the landlords of Harlem. With Tommy, Ms. Childress has created a strong new black woman character to contrast with the traditional strong "Mammy" type. Bill's self-serving notion that he is "better" than Tommy not only is defeated but he comes to recognize that her ability to survive is the wine in the wilderness that has enabled the whole black race to survive in America.

To be a woman in the twentieth century is to be a creature caught in a time of change. And change is an opportunity for women to define themselves. Revolutions in consciousness produce art, not only art nurtured in anger and expressed in polemic, but art with passion, sensitivity and heightened awareness. The artist is a shaper, a person who gives form to chaos, one whose pain slowly emerges as perception. The theatre has been and will continue to be the stage upon which women create new women.

The Advertisement

BY NATALIA GINZBURG

Translated by Henry Reed

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CHARACTERS

TERESA

ELENA

LORENZO

GIOVANNA

[BOY*]

*TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This text of *The Advertisement*, though substantially the same as the one used by the BBC and the National Theatre, has been revised in the light of the printed Italian text published by Einaudi. It therefore includes a few changes made by Signora Ginzburg herself. The largest of these is a brief scene near the end of the first act, between Teresa and a grocer's boy. Since Signora Ginzburg regards this scene as optional, and leaves it to the producer to decide whether to include or to omit it, I have put it in parentheses. (The "boy" may, I suppose, be of any age up to about eighteen.) I have taken the opportunity to correct a number of my own original errors, to rephrase certain remarks, and to restore three sentences I had carelessly omitted.—H.R.

Act One

SCENE: A doorbell rings. TERESA opens the door. Enter ELENA.

TERESA Good afternoon.

ELENA Good afternoon. I telephoned this morning. I've come about the advertisement in the paper. My name's Elena Tesei.

TERESA Which advertisement was it? I put in three advertisements.

ELENA The one for the room.

TERESA Ah, yes, the room. You're looking for a room? Well, I'll show you the room. It faces west. It gets the sun the whole of the afternoon. There's a view of Saint Peter's. Do sit down a moment. Can I get you a cup of coffee?

ELENA No, thank you.

TERESA There are five rooms in the flat, so it's really too big for me; but I don't want to leave it: I can't bear moving . . . It's always so sad, I think. So I want to let one room to a university girl in exchange for a little light housework and so on. I loathe housework. Don't you?

ELENA No, some housework I quite enjoy. And I can't afford to pay for a room. That was why I answered your advertisement.

TERESA As I said, I put in three advertisements. One was for the sideboard. You don't know anyone who wants to buy a genuine nineteenth-century inlaid rosewood sideboard, I suppose? That's it, over there. I don't keep dishes in it; it's full of old magazines at the moment. In fact, I really haven't any use for a sideboard. I have all my meals in the kitchen. The third advertisement I put in was for my house in the country at Rocca di Papa. I want to sell it. It has ten rooms and an English garden. Well, I say garden: it's more of a park actually. I never go there. The few times

all. It's in my handbag. One day I shall shoot myself. Then you won't need the annulment. I'll make him a widower.

ELENA Give me that pistol.

TERESA Don't be silly.

ELENA Give me your bag.

TERESA Don't be silly.

ELENA Throw the pistol away! Please, Teresa, I do beg of you, throw it away!

TERESA All right. I'll throw it away.

ELENA I must dress. It's getting late. I must lock my bag. He'll be down below very soon, waiting for me. You won't be alone, Teresa! I'll always be coming to see you; he'll always be coming too! We shall always be fond of you, both of us! (*Embraces her*)

TERESA Yes.

ELENA I must go and dress. (*Exit*)

(*TERESA goes into her own room. Then into ELENA'S room. The stage remains empty. Then a pistol shot is heard. TERESA runs to the telephone and dials a number*)

TERESA Hullo, Lorenzo! Lorenzo! Come round, for God's sake, come round, I've killed her! I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to, but I've killed her! She's dead, she died at once. For God's sake, Lorenzo, do come, do come! (*She collapses into sobs*)

(*The doorbell rings. TERESA wipes her eyes on her hands. She opens the door. Enter GIOVANNA*)

GIOVANNA Good morning. I telephoned a short while ago. I've come about the advertisement in the paper. My name's Giovanna Ricciardi.

TERESA Which advertisement was it? I put in three advertisements.

GIOVANNA The one for the room.

CURTAIN

Rites

BY MAUREEN DUFFY

a war correspondent for her husband's publications. From 1943 to 1947 she was a member of Congress. President Eisenhower appointed her ambassador to Italy in 1953, where she served until 1956. In 1970 she wrote a one-act play on women's liberation, *A Doll's House 1970*, whose title was subsequently changed to *Slam the Door Softly*.

DORIS LESSING was born in 1919 in Persia. When she was five, her family moved to Southern Rhodesia, where she lived until 1949 when she settled in England. A year later she published her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*. She is best known for *The Golden Notebook*, which has been recognized by many women as an important book about self-realization. She has written two plays: *Each His Own Wilderness* (1958), which was performed at London's Royal Court Theatre, and *Play with a Tiger* (1962), which was produced at the Comedy Theatre, London.

NATALIA GINZBURG was born in 1916 in Palermo, Italy. The daughter of a famed biologist, she spent her childhood in Turin. She has been married twice and has three children. She has written three plays: *I Married You for Fun* (1965); *The Secretary* (1968); and *The Advertisement*, which was given its world premiere by the National Theatre in Brighton, England, in 1968. Almost simultaneously the play was produced on BBC radio. Both productions starred Joan Plowright. She has written six novels, five of which have been translated into English. She admits to being influenced by Harold Pinter. "What interests me most," she has said, "is the absurdity of real people."

MEGAN TERRY was born in 1932 in Seattle, Washington. She studied theatre in the West and Canada before coming east to be a member of the Open Theatre and director of its playwrights' workshops, which placed a heavy emphasis upon the improvisation of actors as a device to help the playwright form his piece. Some of Megan Terry's plays are *Eat at Joe's*; *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*; *Magic Realists*; *Ex-copper Queen on a Set of Pills*; and *Viet Rock*. In February 1972 she joined with five other female playwrights to form the Women's Theatre Council, a group founded to direct, produce and encourage the plays of women. As she said then: "Jane Austen wrote under her embroidery. My grandmother wrote, and no one knew it until she died. The fact that we exist will give other women a chance to come out."

MAUREEN DUFFY was born in 1933. She attended the University of London, and has written five novels and a collection of poetry, as well as several plays. *Rites* was produced in London in the spring of 1969.

ALICE CHILDRESS, born in Charleston, South Carolina, grew up in Harlem and became interested in the theatre while she was in grade school. For twelve years she was a member of The American Negro Theatre, which produced such successes as *Striver's Row* and *Anna Lucasta*. Her own career as a writer began in 1949 with a one-act play, *Florence*, for which she received twenty dollars. In 1952 *Gold Through the Trees* became the first play written by a black woman to be performed professionally on the American stage; *Trouble in Mind* won an "Obie" in 1955 for the best off-Broadway play. Her other plays include *Wedding Band*; *Mojo*; *Martin Luther King at Montgomery, Alabama*; and *Just a Little Simple*, an adaptation of Langston Hughes's *Simple Speaks His Mind*. In 1971 she edited *Black Scenes*, the first collection of scenes chosen for the training of black actors. At present she lives and writes in Harlem.