

*WOMAN ON TRIAL. GENDER AND THE
ACCUSED WOMAN IN PLAYS FROM ANCIENT
GREECE TO THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE.*

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At a time when news tells us of multiple cases of gender violence and of fewer known cases of women who retaliate against this violence – of which French Jacqueline Sauvage’s killing of her husband in 2012 after 47 years of abuse stands as a *cause célèbre* – this volume reminds readers of gendered notions of justice and law and the ideal vehicle that the theatre has always been to embody such significant themes. Amelia Howe Kritzer, who sadly and unexpectedly passed away recently, had always been aware of the powerful tool the theatre was for feminist purposes. She had edited the groundbreaking collection *Plays by Early American Women, 1775-1850* (1995), and authored *The Plays of Caryl Churchill* (1991) and *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain* (2008). Surely enough, Kritzer shared with her co-editor, Miriam López-Rodríguez, the same enthusiasm for a feminist political use of the theatre. López-Rodríguez’s co-edition of *Staging a Cultural Paradigm: The Political and the Personal in American Drama* (2003), *Women’s Contribution to Nineteenth Century American Drama* (2004), or *Broadway’s Bravest Woman: Selected Writings of Sophie Treadwell* (2006) speak for themselves. *Woman on Trial. Gender and the Accused Woman in Plays from Ancient Greece to the Contemporary Stage* is, as its title announces, a wide-ranging collection both in chronological and geographical terms; along the essays 22 plays, spanning roughly 24 centuries, are discussed. The 15 chapters and the introduction that make up the collection offer a variety of texts (from classical ones to more recent works), perspectives and styles that reconsider woman as a class in the staging of her trial. Though one misses the

traditional biographical notes on authors that give readers an idea of what to expect from their writings, it is also true that the clear differences as to where they come from and how they approach the texts is evident through the reading of the essays. On the whole, they provide a multiplicity of voices that at the same time unite to shout against the same social evil: the unjust treatment of women during trials across time and space. As Kritzer affirms in her introduction, “the woman on trial constitutes a metaphor of female subjectivity in patriarchal cultures” (13), and thus the theatricalization of woman on trial turns the theatre into an alternative courtroom where spectators become members of the jury.

After a pertinent introduction that presents the scope of the volume and the thematic connections that will appear in the selected plays, and which Kritzer also employs to excuse the absence of plays readers might miss, most notably Susan Glaspell’s popular one-act play *Trifles*, the volume is divided into five sections that follow the chronological order of the composition of the plays under discussion. The first section is devoted to “Ancient and Medieval Drama” and includes Chiara Meccarello’s discussion of Hecuba’s speech with Polymestor in the *agon* in Euripides’ play. Meccarello’s analysis is shaped by the juridical format and successfully shows the evolution of Hecuba from victim to victimizer. After this essay, Marta Steiner discusses *Snow in Midsummer*, the most popular *xiqu*, or music play, by 13th century Chinese playwright Guan Hanqing. Through her analysis of Dou E, the female Confucian heroine who dies rather than giving in to forced seduction, Steiner aptly argues that Dou E stands for all Han-Chinese people oppressed under the Yuan regime. Most notably in theatrical terms, Steiner suggests that Dou E’s revenge as a ghost, and not as a real woman, was the only possible means through which Chinese spectators could truly be moved. Had Dou E taken revenge as a woman, the audience would not have felt the necessary empathy to identify with her.

The second section covers “Renaissance Drama.” Two essays give readers a glimpse of women’s usual commodification in real life and in art during such a period, in works uncovered by Kim Solga’s comprehensive *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance* (2009). Lilly J. Goren’s “Woman’s Value on Trial in *Troilus and Cressida*” highlights rape as a patriarchal weapon. And the dramatic version of rape, as Davida Bloom has noted, “provides an opportunity to both observe and question a multitude of societal forces that shape our attitudes, beliefs and identities” (6). Moreover, Goren very

wittily compares how Ulysses judges Cressida in Shakespeare's play, drawing his conclusion that she is a whore because of her appearance, to many modern defenses of those accused of rape or sexual assault. With her essay "Raping Justice in John Webster's *The White Devil*," Karol Cooper revisits the trial of Vittoria Corombona to argue that her death is not only representative of political punishment for women's refusal to embody either the whore or the virgin pattern, but also "a masculine protest against the lack of more holistic modes of representing gendered subjects" (107), a claim so original that it leaves readers longing for further elaboration.

The third section offers three essays which provide cross-period comparisons, a necessary section that allows for the volume's "trans-historical examination of gender" (1) that Kritzer announces in the introduction. In "Transgressive Women from Shakespeare to Shaw and Bryan," Dana Di Pardo Léon-Henri focuses on the trial as a device used to reveal the real identity of the female protagonists – Shakespeare's Hermione, George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan, and Alma Pakenham Rattenbury in Joan Bryan's *By Some Divine Mistake* – and to underline that when women are judged, no matter when, no matter where, they are not only judged by the law, but also by society in general. Unlike previous revisions of the figure of Mary Queen of Scots, with *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, Verna A. Foster argues in the next essay that Liz Lochhead originally writes from a Scottish and feminist perspective to evaluate this historical figure in a unique way. To prove this, Foster puts the play in contrast with versions by Schiller, Anderson and Bolt. In an excellent theatrical analysis, not undertaken to the same extent by any other essay in the collection so far, Foster proves that Lochhead uncovers the intertwining of the religious, the sexual, the gendered, and the national in what happens to Mary, in the clash between Mary and Elizabeth I, and, more importantly, in the present-day consequences of this fusion. The last essay in the section, authored by Kritzer herself, compares the use of witchcraft trials, perceived by the audience as examples of prejudice and scapegoating, in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*. Focusing on gender politics, Kritzer argues that because *The Crucible* is modelled after Aristotelian tragedy, women – good or bad – are always trouble. Meanwhile, in *Vinegar Tom*, and especially due to the use of Brechtian songs, Churchill "highlights the social attitudes about

gender that create double-binds for women in the past and today” (170).

The fourth section, devoted to “Modern Drama,” provides a dramatic counterpart to Lucy Bland’s *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (2013), and it opens with López-Rodríguez’s “The Flapper on Trial in *Machinal*.” The most significant contribution of this essay, given the play’s scholarly popularity, lies in its discussion of Treadwell’s appropriation of the real Snyder-Gray case. As López-Rodríguez argues, Treadwell presents the expressionistic protagonist, Young Woman, as a victim of circumstances, thus enlisting the sympathy of the audience toward her, and by the same token allowing the playwright to exorcise her own biographical demons (her love affair with Maynard Dixon and her difficult relationship with her mother.) The next essay also discusses a play based on a real event: the accusation of lesbianism endured by two schoolmistresses in Edinburgh in 1810, and which Lillian Hellman translocated to New England in the 1930s in *The Children’s Hour*. As Araceli González Crespán argues, the play forces the audience to become the jury who sees both school and law as Althusserian ideological apparatuses and legal language as the controlling device that reveals and punishes non-normative sexual behaviors.

The last section moves on to “Contemporary Drama” and addresses an interesting range of plays from Western stages. In a very engaging approach to debbie tucker green’s *Stoning Mary* and Shelagh Stephenson’s *Five Kind of Silence*, Valentina Mikluc makes use of Carol Gilligan’s concept of ethics of care to argue that the female protagonists in both plays do not kill their male victims in self-defense, but as acts of responsibility toward their communities, something that the male ethics of justice obviously condemns and punishes. With “Aileen Wuornos or, the Heroine of Last Resort,” Jules Odendahl-James tackles the difficult task of proving that with *Self-Defense*, the play based on Wuornos’ polemical case, Carson Kreitzer offers the audience a way to identify with the offender without excusing or admiring her violence. To do so, Odendahl-James combines personal anecdotes about her own witnessing and research on Wuornos, and her brilliant analysis of Kreitzer’s use of Brechtian techniques, namely the Chorus and the multiple casting, supported by excellent accounts of the play in production. Another real case is at the basis of the play discussed by Lisa Hagen in the next essay. Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard’s incarceration in the

late 19th century inspired Emily Mann's *Mrs. Packard*. In her discussion, Hagen proves that besides dramatizing and denouncing the perception of madness as a female illness, Mann is also giving Packard the chance of a new trial by the audience. As Hagen argues, Mann succeeds in her goals through the use of documentary theatre and the division of the stage into two levels, which enables the simultaneous acting of the trial and asylum scenes, and thus empowers the audience as jurors who have all the necessary information to reach a verdict.

Brechtian techniques like this are also highlighted and explored in Rovie Herrera Medalle's analysis of Naomi Wallace's *And I and Silence*, with devices such as the *Gestus*, historicization, or songs. Furthermore, Herrera also reads the play under the optics of Foucault's panopticon to conclude that the protagonists have always been in prison, either literal or metaphorical, and that it is indeed surveillance and oppression in a racist world, both when imprisoned and released, that lead to the tragic end of the biracial protagonist couple. Finally, in the essay that closes the collection, Amanda Lockitch compares two versions of the real case of Ashley Smith, the 19-year old Canadian girl who killed herself while her guards filmed it: Leah Jane Esau's *The Death of Ashley Smith* and Judith Thompson's *Watching Glory Die*, a work-in-progress when this volume came out and which was published last March. Lockitch's essay is a wonderful closure to the collection, as her emphasis on the performative elements of the plays, from the forced viewing of Smith's real death in Esau's piece to the sound effects on which both plays rely – a ligature ripping between scenes in Thompson's play and the carnival musical and the slowing heartbeat in Esau's work – remind us of the urgent need to find ways to make the audience not only feel pity for the protagonist, but also to listen and react to her Brechtian call for action. As Lockitch says, “[o]nly through our awareness can we make a difference” (312).

To conclude, though uneven in their dramatic/theatrical approach and in the depth of their argumentation, all the essays included in this volume contribute to make *Woman on Trial* a must for drama students and those interested in Gender Studies. Its interdisciplinary and international character, framed by feminist scholarship, reveals not only gender oppression, but also gender policing, the potential power of women to subvert such policing, and, what is more, the role of the audience in making a difference across time and space.

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