British Theatre and Feminism from Clemence Dane to Gordon Daviot, 1921–1935

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on largely forgotten plays by British women authors—Clemence Dane, Fryn Tennyson Jesse, Marie Stopes, G. B. Stern, Aimée Stuart, and Gordon Daviot—who wrote for London's West End theatres between 1921 and 1935. It analyses and contextualises their plays to investigate how middle-class women's struggles in the domestic sphere and feminist concerns prevalent during the interwar period were represented on stage. I argue that those playwrights, sometimes dismissed as conventional and apolitical, embody in their works a subtle yet significant form of feminism. I focus on plays featuring women who bravely challenge social conventions but partially or entirely fail to break free and, in doing so, I trace how these plays question the limits of the 'so-called' emancipation that women enjoyed following the First World War and the suffrage movement and illustrates a tentative form of feminism that appreciates the value of small acts of resistance while acknowledging their shortcomings. The middlebrow canon under discussion employs the drawing-room play's conventions, which heavily rely on intricate marriage plots. In Chapter One, I examine *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921) by Clemence Dane and *The Pelican* (1924) by Fryn Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood and tackle their depiction of divorce and its implications for women's liberation. Chapter Two analyses *Our Ostriches* (1923) and *Vectia* (1926) by Marie Stopes and explores their portrayals of sex education and birth control. Chapter Three focuses on *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931) by G. B. Stern and *Nine Till Six* (1930) by Aimée and Philip Stuart and their representation of marriage and career as polarised choices for women. Finally, Chapter Four considers *The Laughing Woman* (1934) by Gordon Daviot and *Wild Decembers* (1933) by Dane, which feature creative women in history and the barriers to their artistic expression.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore how a group of middlebrow British women playwrights from the interwar period (1921–1935) responded to the emergence of the suffrage movement in Britain and the transformative social and political changes ushered in by the First World War. These playwrights are Clemence Dane, Fryn Tennyson Jesse, Marie Stopes, G. B. Stern, Aimée Stuart, and Gordon Daviot. They primarily wrote for London's commercial West End theatres. I mainly focus on eight plays: Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921) and *Wild Decembers* (1933), Tennyson Jesse and H.M. Harwood's *The Pelican* (1924), Stopes' *Our Ostriches* (1923) and *Vectia* (1926), Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931), Aimée and Philip Stuart's *Nine Till Six* (1930), and Daviot's *The Laughing Woman* (1934). My first objective is to demonstrate how the women protagonists in these plays represent middle-class British women during the interwar period. My second objective is to explore how these six playwrights engage with significant social issues for many British middle-class women who lived in 1920s and 1930s Britain, and reflect an emerging but subversive feminism at a time of deep change. The issues that I discuss in my four successive chapters include marriage and divorce, sex education and birth control awareness, workplace tensions, and women's creative freedom.

I focus predominantly on the years 1921 to 1935 for several reasons. While I do take on board changes in the labour market and social changes in the aftermath of the First World War, this is not a study of the whole interwar period and I do not focus on the long legacies of the First World War in detail. What I pay attention to is the great sense of uncertainty that defines this period, marked by widespread dread that another war could be imminent.[1] Legal and social milestones shaped my parameters: 1918 marked a historic turning point for women and the suffrage campaign.[2] This is because the Representation of the People Act finally passed which gave women over the age of 30 the right to vote for the first time.[3] The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 opened certain professions to women, and the Matrimonial Causes Act was amended in 1923 and 1937 which finally allowed wives to file for divorce on grounds of adultery, like men, and introduced additional reasons for divorce.[4] Yet, many British women continued to face entrenched barriers in the years after the war due to economic difficulties.[5] The return of soldiers from military service

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[1] Richard Overy, *The Inter-war Crisis, 1919–1939* (Harlow: Pearson, 2010), 5-6; David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), xvii; Jan Ifversen, "The Crisis of European Civilization After 1918," in *Ideas of Europe since 1914: The Legacy of the First World War*, ed. Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 14–31.

[2] Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: Virago, 1978), 366. See also Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914–1959* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992); Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[3] Strachey, *The Cause,* 366.

[4] Henry Kha, *A History of Divorce Law: Reform in England from the Victorian to Interwar Years* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2, 80. Before the 1923 bill, a woman petitioning for divorce on the grounds of adultery also had to prove an "aggravated enormity" (incest, rape, sodomy, bestiality, cruelty, or desertion).

[5] See Deidre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914–1959* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992); Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora Press, 1987); Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870–1950: Sexual Division and Social Change* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987).

aggravated this issue, as it led to the dismissal of thousands of women war workers from their jobs.[6] The main barrier that British women faced in the period between the wars was the deeply held notion that their place was exclusively in the home, which is a running theme throughout the thesis.[7] The founding of the first birth control clinic in London in 1921 marked a turning point for reproductive rights.[8] The plays I study closely aligns with these debates. The earliest play, *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921), responds to post-war issues of marriage, separation and mental health, which echo the legal reforms to divorce laws. The latest is *The laughing Woman* (1934), which was produced just before the political and cultural climate began to shift by the approach of the Second World War. Taken together, the period 1921-1935 offers a historically charged framework that allows me to explore how these plays closely resonated with these legal and political changes.

My research questions primarily focus on two main areas. First: are the women protagonists in these plays, who represent British women between the wars, able to become truly emancipated, and, most importantly, do they want to be liberated? And second: what do these plays reveal about their authors' views on the state of feminism and women's rights at that time? Of course, the women protagonists in these plays do not represent all women. The texts centre around white, middle-class women in affluent drawing rooms. Working-class women and women of colour are not the subjects of these plays. The authors — Dane, Daviot, Stern, Stopes, Stuart, and Tennyson Jesse — shared the same class profile: they were white, middle-class, politically conservative writers who were mainly concerned with the interests of their class. What I mean by the term 'conservative' becomes clearer over the course of my chapters: the playwrights that I discuss were politically engaged and called for social reforms, but did not advocate radical changes to the structure of society. Moreover, they overlooked the struggles of less-privileged women, which is important given that they wrote for a popular theatre that reached a large working-class audience.

I must point out early on that there is little scholarship on West End interwar audiences in particular, as most of these sources are dated or focus on nineteenth-century and Edwardian audiences.[9] However, contemporary sources from the early twentieth century suggest that West End audiences were mixed in class. For example, in 1903, Italian critic Mario Borsa described London's theatre crowds as "a mixed crowd [including] shopmen, clerks, and spinsters in pince-nez; but more numerous still are the shopgirls, milliners, dressmakers, typists, stenographers, cashiers of large and small houses of business, telegraph and telephonegirls, and the thousands of other girls whose place in the social scale is hard to guess or to define."[10] As for the upper class, Borsa observed that they dressed to be seen: "They thread their way — delicate visions of white, pale blue, or pink, in hoods or wraps of Japanese silk, embroidered slippers and fleecy boas […] with a fantastic shimmer of pearls and diamonds, with a soft rustle of silks, satins, and tulle."[11] In her 1902 historical account of London, author Emily Constance Baird Cook observed that

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[6] Strachey, *The Cause,* 370.
[7] Deidre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), 3.
[8] Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes: Sexual Revolution and The Birth Control Movement* (Manchester: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xiv.
[9] See Michael R. Booth, "East End and West End: Class and Audience in Victorian London," *Theatre Research International* 2, no. 2 (1977): 98–103; Rohan McWilliam, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001).
[10] Mario Borsa, *The English Stage of To-Day* (London: John Lane, 1903), 4–5.
[11] Ibid., 3.

premieres of West End plays attracted a diverse audience, including the lower-middle class, "smart society," royalty, and "influential magnates, editors, aristocratic 'patrons of the drama,' and a certain proportion of fashionable Londoners, those known for making it a point to attend every 'first night' of any distinction."[12] McWilliam, in his recent study of West End pleasure culture between 1800 and 1914, notes that although West End theatres mainly targeted middle-class audiences, people from all classes found something to enjoy in the theatre.[13] He refers, for instance, to the long lines of people standing in the rain and poor weather to buy affordable tickets for the pit and gallery.[14] The nature of the audience is not something I can delve deeply into, due to the paucity of documentation around these plays. This lack of sources also makes a more performance-based approach unfeasible. My aim is to shed some light on how those economically-privileged dramatists transcended class boundaries by tackling universal social problems that resonated with theatregoers from all classes in a manner that was meant to entertain.

The prolific dramatic output of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Daviot, and Stuart indicates that the male-dominated London theatres during the period under examination were accessible and provided some support and outlet to women with creative aspirations. Nevertheless, the sample of plays I examine in this thesis suggests that this support was limited. It confined women playwrights to a specific type of theatre in which their role was to entertain and construct narratives that were often considered light-hearted and plot-driven. Through these carefully crafted storylines, which take place in drawing rooms and depict elaborate marriage scenarios , these playwrights subtly critique political and social structures and comment on the realities facing women in Britain during the period between the wars. In this thesis, I argue that the plays of Dane, Daviot, Stern, Stopes, Stuart and Tennyson Jesse, which have been dismissed as lacking in feminism and political awareness in other contexts, embody a subtle yet powerful feminism. Their plays represent women restricted by gender, class, social norms and conventional ideas about their place in the home, even after significant advances in women's rights had been achieved. Through contrived plots that attempt to appear realistic but sometimes end up being overly ornate, they depict women choosing marriage over a career (e.g., Wanda in Tennyson Jesse and Harwood's *The Pelican* and Daryll in Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper*), remarrying after divorce instead of pursuing a different life path (e.g., Margaret in Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*), or abandoning their aspirations to support a man's ambition (e.g., Frik in Daviot's *The Laughing Woman*). However, I contend that these plays also show how giving up on one's independence is a nuanced choice involving many social and economic factors. The female protagonists across my corpus are shown to take tentative steps towards freedom because radical change is not necessarily an available option. Many of them even partially or completely fail and find it easier to conform to social expectations. The plays (and perhaps the playwrights themselves) might be suggesting that this was not the time for rebelling or acting in a radical way, and that smaller steps might be more effective because they might lead to larger changes in women's rights. On the other hand, Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Daviot, and Stuart might be questioning whether women were ready for significant changes. The decisions their protagonists make are not only narrative choices, but have real social dimensions. As I demonstrate throughout, plot becomes a tool for

[12] Mrs. E. T. Cook, *Highways and Byways in London* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 280.
[13] Rohan McWilliam, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 190.
[14] Ibid., 189.

exposing the limitations of this so-called freedom and questioning whether achievements such as voting rights, access to divorce, birth control, sex education, expanded job opportunities, and the right to express their creativity were enough to grant women true freedom.

Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart and Daviot were selected as the primary subjects of my thesis because, while they were widely popular in their time, they have since been largely underrepresented in the anthologies of British theatre that have appeared over the past 70 years and in theatre scholarship. There is scattered information about them in histories of British drama published during their lifetimes but what is available is inconsistent. For instance, in his 1935 critical assessment of British interwar theatre, the theatre historian Camillo Pellizzi recognised Dane's attempts to advocate for reform in divorce laws in her hit play *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921) but described her efforts as being part of a limited process of gradual social change: "It is clear that Miss Dane is still a middle-class Protestant who wants to break away from the traditional compromises, and thrust her moral and social principles to their ultimate logical consequences."[15] He concluded that there is a "a hint of changed times, but we are really still in the sphere in which Shaw moved."[16] Writing in 1946, Lynton Hudson, another theatre historian, acknowledged the role women dramatists played in popularising "a new type of comedy [that is] predominantly female," which he claimed helped to alleviate "the shadow of depression and the looming threat of war," particularly during the 1930s.[17] Nevertheless, Hudson ironically estimated that in the future, this "gently humorous comedy" may gain recognition in the next century: "It is the vindication of the woman playwright, for it is usually written by a woman. It is the delight of mainly feminine audiences. It is with us still in 1945. Perhaps in a hundred years from now it will be given a place in dramatic literature similar to that which Miss [Nancy] Mitford occupies in fiction."[18] Pellizzi and Hudson's scepticism is echoed by theatre critic J. C. Trewin, who in 1953 praised Dane's and Dodie Smith's range and prolific outputs but dismissed their contributions: "In Clemence Dane and Dodie Smith we have the tempest and the teacup-storm. Each, in its way, has been felt in the theatre. Yet I think Aphra Behn, turning the playbills of nearly three hundred years, would have to shake her head. Women's Hour upon the stage is sparsely filled indeed."[19] Trewin's reference to Aphra Behn, the pioneering seventeenth-century playwright, indicates his conviction that, despite three centuries of progress, Dane and Smith's efforts did not appreciably improve the status of women playwrights in the theatre.

This brief overview indicates that how theatre critics of the first half of the twentieth century could present British women who authored middlebrow theatre during the 1920s and 1930s as writers on the margin, and how such work could be dismissed as mediocre and not boundary-pushing. Paradoxically, Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stern, Daviot and Stuart were forgotten until the 1990s, despite feminism becoming increasingly embedded into the mainstream. Stopes, however, remained known, though primarily as a controversial figure due to her problematic eugenicist views and association with birth control. In other areas, such as the novel, middlebrow British women novelists have garnered increasing academic

[15] Camillo Pellizzi, *English Drama: The Last Great Phase* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 152.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Lynton Hudson, *The Twentieth-Century Drama* (London: George G. Harrap, 1946), 59.
[18] Ibid.
[19] J. C. Trewin, *Dramatists of Today* (London: Staples, 1953), 132.

interest.[20] It was in 1996 that these playwrights were finally considered from a scholarly perspective with Maggie B. Gale's *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918–1962*. Gale's work initiated the process of recovering a long-forgotten corpus of drama by early twentieth-century British women and other contributions to the London stage, and hers has remained a foundational work since then. Gale provides insight into the intricate workings of London's theatre establishments and offers a comprehensive examination of the ideological, cultural and socioeconomic changes that influenced women's dramatic writing.[21] She focuses her analysis on a selection of British women playwrights who were popular during the 1920s and 1930s, including Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stern, Daviot and Stuart as well as Joan Temple, Gertrude Jennings, Dodie Smith, Esther McCracken, Bridget Boland, Margaret Kennedy and others, whom she refers to as "the lost generation of playwrights."[22] Gale's work sparked further interest in this neglected corpus and additional academic research started to emerge, notably by Rebecca Cameron and Louise McDonald, who wrote PhD theses and monographs on neglected women dramatists from the period.[23] In her recent study, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Interwar Period* (2021), McDonald takes a theoretical and culture-based approach in situating Dane within a women-authored middlebrow discourse during the 1920s and 1930s.[24] McDonald's detailed research of Dane's life and work complements Gale's historical and textual-based approach with analyses of Dane's novels, short stories and journalism, in addition to her plays.[25] Her book demonstrates how Dane's feminism evolved over time, and how her later works became more explicitly feminist.[26]

Despite the efforts of Gale, McDonald, and Cameron, there remains a critical need for additional research and scholarship into British women dramatists of the 1920s and 1930s, a field that is still marginalised in scholarship on modern British theatre. For example, Dane, who was extremely popular and made significant contributions to interwar British drama, does not feature in major histories of twentieth-century theatre such as Christopher Innes's *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (2002).[27] Another example is Simon Shepherd's *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre* (2009) which splits "feminist theatre" into two phases: Edwardian suffrage theatre and a "longer-lasting"

[20] See Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914–1939* (London: Virago, 1983); Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2006).

[21] Maggie B. Gale, *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918–1962* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[22] Maggie B. Gale, "Women Playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 23, 26.

[23] See Rebecca Cameron, "British Women Dramatists and the Feminist Movement, 1914–1939" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1998); Louise McDonald, "'Shout It So the Women's Side Can Hear': Clemence Dane's Interwar Fiction and Feminist Consciousness" (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2013).

[24] Louise McDonald, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-war Years* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3–4.

[25] Ibid., 5.

[26] Ibid., 3–4.

[27] Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

theatre that emerged at the end of the 1960s, completely leaving out the interwar period.[28] The critical neglect of these playwrights in major histories of British theatre is reflective of the broader tendency to marginalize the contributions of women in the dramatic canon.

My contribution to interwar theatre studies is primarily empirical, as a key aspect of my contribution lies in the recovery and the cross-referencing of a wealth of knowledge and facts related to those playwrights that have been lost or forgotten. What drives this thesis is an attempt to rescue forgotten texts from historical oblivion. In the process of analysing and contextualizing these plays, I have uncovered a copious amount of neglected primary and biographical material. My research draws upon under-explored interwar newspapers, magazines, semi-autobiographical writings, feminist manifestos and diaries, in addition to rigorous textual analysis and critical evaluation of the plays. This diverse body of evidence allows me to highlight the significance of women's drama in Britain between the wars and to reinforce its place within the broader canon of British theatre. Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart and Daviot and their works are important and deserve scholarly attention. While Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart and Daviot are rarely discussed, Dane and Stopes have garnered some critical attention in recent years, albeit in a limited capacity. For example, in most of her studies on interwar women's theatre, Gale focuses extensively on Dane and her works.[29] Similarly, McDonald's book centres primarily on Dane, although she situates Dane within the context of her contemporaries.[30] As for Stopes, several articles and chapters discuss aspects of her plays, including Esther Beth Sullivan's "Vectia, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," Christina Hauck's "Through a Glass Darkly: *A Game of Chess* and Two Plays by Marie Stopes," and Helen Freshwater's *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression*.[31] In contrast, the dramatic works of Tennyson Jesse, Stern, Daviot and Aimée Stuart have remained largely undiscussed.[32] Furthermore, biographical information regarding Dane, Tennyson Jess, Stern, Stuart and Daviot is scattered and was never kept during their lifetime, with the exception of Stopes, who has had numerous biographies written about her. I must point out early on that while I touch upon certain aspects of my authors' lives and sexuality which offer promising grounds for queer studies, this is not my theoretical frame. My methodology involves historicizing and contextualizing the plays in relation to feminist journalism and essaysim from the period. To document this feminism, I engage with a set of debates that were unfolding in the shadow of the suffrage movement. In addition to Dane, Stopes, and Stern, key figures in these

[28] Simon Shepherd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 193.

[29] See Maggie B. Gale, *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918–1962* (London: Routledge, 1996); Maggie B. Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Maggie B. Gale, "From Fame to Obscurity: In Search of Clemence Dane," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[30] See Louise McDonald, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-war Years* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[31] See Esther Beth Sullivan, "Vectia, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," *Theatre Survey* 46, no. 1 (2005); Christina Hauck, "Through a Glass Darkly: 'A Game of Chess' and Two Plays by Marie Stopes," *Journal of Modern Literature* 21, no. 1 (1997); Helen Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[32] While these playwrights have been largely undiscussed, some brief considerations of their work can be found in Maggie B. Gale, *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918–1962* (London: Routledge, 1996); Louise McDonald, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-war Years* (New York: Routledge, 2021); and Rebecca D'Monte, *British Theatre and Performance 1900–1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

debates include Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain, Elizabeth Robins, Stella Browne, Cicely Hamilton, and Dora Russell. I examine their essays, books, and manifestos to map the coordinates of this distinct form of British feminism.

Due to external circumstances, my research process was shaped by certain practical constrains. I began my PhD in October 2021, when Covid-19 restrictions were still in place. During that time period, the Victoria and Albert Museum's Theatre and Performance archives (which held important material on Clemence Dane) remained closed to researchers. This limited my access to these collections. Similarly, I was unable to visit the Wellcome Trust Archives in London to consult materials related to Marie Stopes because I was the sole caretaker of my young daughter while living in the UK. Childcare responsibilities prevented me from conducting any extended travel to archives outside my immediate location. These limitations meant I had to find alternative ways of gathering material. I relied a lot on digitised archives, online newspaper databases, university library e-sources, and published collections.[33] I also made use of regional archives, second-hand book dealers, and smaller online repositories that could provide scans or transcripts of material I could not access in person.[34] Although these constraints shaped the scope of my research, they also prompted me to develop a more flexible approach.

My methodological process combines archival recovery with contextual and textual analysis. As I mentioned earlier, I had to rely on digitised archives, newspaper databases, and regional collections. I used keyword searches, browsed through women online magazine's pages, and cross-checked reviews, adverts, and biographies to piece together information about the forgotten plays.[35] When I could not find more information about some of the more obscure plays (like *Nine Till Six* and *The Pelican*), I turned to paratexts, such as reviews, newspaper articles and announcements, censorship, and memoirs. I treated them as evidence of reception and cultural significance. My textual analysis is grounded in close reading of the plays. I look for thematic resonances, recurring motifs, language and dialogue, patterns of characterisation, and the use of structure. In addition, I read the plays comparatively by setting them alongside contemporary feminist essays, biographies, and manifestoes to trace how they engaged with debates about marriage laws, eugenics and professional identity. My approach is not driven by abstract feminist theory but by the historical debates themselves. This enabled me to map the intersection between theatre and interwar feminism. Recovery itself is a key part of my approach. My attempt to piece together fragmented records and overlooked texts is both a scholarly intervention as well as a feminist practice that aims to restore visibility to those women playwrights.

In this regard, my approach to drama bears some similarities to scholarly approaches to theatre history and historiography. Therefore, I must engage with key texts in theatre historiography to situate my study in relation to the main concerns presented in these texts.

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[33] Some of the digital and online newspaper archives I consulted include the Internet Archive, the British Newspaper Archive, Daily Mirror Historical Archives, Women's Magazine Archive, and The London School of Economics (LSE) Digital Archives.

[34] I visited the British Library at Boston Spa a few times and was able to access digitised material such as Marie Stopes' newspaper *Birth Control News*. I also found several volumes of *Good Housekeeping* magazine there. Through the Victoria and Albert Museum's website, I was able to view rare material, including photographs of Clemence Dane and some of her sculptures, as well as drawings by Henri Gaudier.

[35] Some of the women's online magazines' pages and archives I checked include Women's Magazine Archive, which includes historical editions of *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. I also checked *the Time and Tide* website, which includes a few rare editions, as well as the Time and Tide archive in the British Newspaper Archive.

Davis and Marx, in their discussion of the challenges of a historiographic approach to theatre and performance, argue that theatre or performance historiography should be studied through the lens of Critical Media History.[36] This perspective, they explain, is shaped by the intertwined histories of Theatre Studies, Performance Studies, and cultural history at the start of the 2020s.[37] Davis and Marx show that Critical Media History examines how performance and media are shaped, formatted, and re-formatted not only by semiotic, aesthetic, and hermeneutic factors but also by legal, social, political, military, economic, and other "constitutive conditions."[38] In their view, theatre and performance cannot be fixed with strict definitions but must be understood through the complex interrelations and interdependencies that shape them.[39] Odai Johnson points out that the main challenge of performance historiography is that much of its history is missing, undocumented, or erased, and what survives is only fragment.[40] He emphasizes that the aim is not to reconstruct or restore what is lost, but to acknowledge absence itself and give the missing a presence with historiographic work.[41] In Johnson's view, history depends on evidence, but this focus also directs attention to what survives while overlooking what has been left out, even though what is missing can sometimes be the most revealing part of the record.[42]

Canning and Postlewait argue that the main challenge of historiography is how the past is represented, and this question is important in the study of performance.[43] In their view, historians depend on both evidence and interpretation, and that their work is guided by certain core ideas.[44] They identify five key concepts—archive, time, space, identify, and narrative—that shape how historical research is done and how history is written.[45] Their aim is not simply to retell events but to examine the conditions that make historical understanding possible.[46] According to Canning and Postlewait, paying attention to these five concepts allows performance historiography to better explain how histories of theatre, dance, and performance are created and understood.[47] Cochrane and Robinson, in their discussion of theatre history and ethics, stress the fact that historians are shaped by the cultural values of their own time and cannot escape them.[48] The representation of the past is always limited, Cochrane and Robinson maintain, since historians can speak for the dead but not to them, and their accounts are inevitably constructed rather than direct reproduction of historical reality.[49] Both emphasize that a key task of historiography is to

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[36] Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx, "Introduction: On Critical Media History," in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 3.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Odai Johnson, "The Size of All That's Missing," in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 44.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 45.
[43] Thomas Postlewait and Charlotte M. Canning, "Representing the Past: An Introduction on Five Themes," in *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, ed. Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 1.
[44] Ibid., 1–2.
[45] Ibid., 2.
[46] Ibid., 1.
[47] Ibid., 2–3.
[48] Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson, "Introduction," in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, ed. Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.
[49] Ibid., 2.

examine how the ethical values of the past continue to shape the present and attempt to use critical thinking to represent, recover, or reinterpret past practices, while remaining aware that these values influence both historians and their work.[50] According to Cochrane and Robinson, the historian's main ethical duty is to seek truth, no matter how difficult, and that the integrity of the evidence supporting any historical claim is equally important.[51] Facts are not fixed and they cannot be separated from the ways they are explained, Cochrane and Robinson argue, and what historians believe about the past differs from what people who lived through it understood.[52] Our knowledge of where performances took place, how they were staged, and the material conditions that shaped them is always changing, either through new discoveries or the reappraisal of existing facts.[53] Cochrane and Robinson conclude by stating that even the definition of theatre itself has also been repeatedly questioned by performance studies and applied theatre, and acknowledging this uncertainty is an ethical act in itself.[54]

My study shares many of the concerns raised in these works on theatre historiography. Like Davis and Marx, I approach theatre as something shaped by legal, social, political, and cultural contexts rather than a as a fixed or isolated form. My research also responds to the challenges described by Odai Johnson, since much of the history of interwar women's drama is missing or forgotten. In this sense, my work does not try to reconstruct what is lost but to give visibility to what has been overlooked. I also relate to Canning and Postlewait's idea that historical research depends on both evidence and interpretation. My work is not only built on archival and textual evidence. It is also shaped by my interpretation of how these plays reflect the cultural and feminist debates of their time. My study also resonates with Cochrane and Robinson's idea that theatre history is always influenced by the values of the historian's own time. I recognize that my understanding of these plays is informed by my position as a contemporary researcher and that representing the past always involves choices. My aim is to engage critically and ethically with the material and, at the same time, acknowledge both its gaps and possibilities. This is also why I treat recovery as a feminist act. Through piecing together fragments, I try to restore attention to women whose contributions to theatre have been forgotten, and show how their plays always speak to questions on gender and social change today.

A question arises here regarding the value of studying the lives and works of these largely forgotten women. First, my thesis demonstrates that studying this neglected corpus is crucial in understanding the role women played in the development of the commercial London theatres in the 1920s and 1930s. The plays of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart and Daviot hold significant value and deserve to be studied as an important part of British interwar theatre because they are rich historical and social documents. They tell us a lot about the state of things in the West End theatres.[55] For example, my exploration of the

[50] Ibid., 4.
[51] Ibid., 5.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] See Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale, eds., *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Rebecca D'Monte, *British Theatre and Performance 1900–1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Maggie B. Gale, *A Social History of British Performance Cultures 1900–1939: Citizenship, Surveillance and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2020); Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Michelle Jones, *London Couture and the Making of a Fashion Centre* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022); Raymond Mander and Joe

theatrical activities of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart, and Daviot (along with other women dramatists I do not discuss here) underscore the historical reality that West End theatres in London during the 1920s and 1930s largely produced work by women from a white, middle-class background. I could not find any women of colour among the scores of women who contributed to the London commercial theatres, although some working-class women made a name for themselves in London's theatre world, such is Elizabeth Baker (1876-1962), a suffragette born into a lower-middle-class family and a prolific playwright who was also active during the 1920s and 1930s.[56]

Second, studying the plays of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stuart, Stern and Daviot, which have women at the centre of their narratives, is important in understanding British feminism between the wars and its influence on women's writing for the stage in the 1920s and 1930s. Interwar feminism, born after the momentous and militant suffrage movement, was overlooked until the 1980s.[57] Since then, many scholars have done pioneering work to rediscover that field, especially Dale Spender in her 1983 book *There's Always Been a Women's Movement this Century*. Spender expresses how astonished she is that "we of the post-sixties women's movement" did not know about the achievements and struggles of earlier feminists like Rebecca West, Dora Russell and Mary Stott.[58] Barbara Caine, in her study of English feminism from 1790 to 1980, observes that the suffragettes "emblazoned themselves on the popular historical imagination" leaving the "quieter work of non-militant women" after the war in the shadows.[59] According to Caine, the efforts of British feminists during the 1920s and 1930s were not as visible as those of mid-Victorian feminists (who debated controversial issues like prostitution), not least because their focus, particularly in the 1930s, included welfare issues like motherhood.[60] Welfare feminists, such as Mary Stocks and Eva Hubback, known as the "New Feminists," sought to "develop a new, more domestically oriented feminist ideology."[61] A prominent New Feminist was Eleanor Rathbone, an MP and leader of the National Union for Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC).[62] In her 1925 article "The Old and the New Feminism," Rathbone explained how the New Feminists were more concerned with the welfare of women rather than total equality with men: "We can demand what we want for women, not because it is what men have got, but it is what women need to fulfil the potentialities of their own natures and to adjust themselves to the circumstances of their own lives."[63] This perspective created

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Mitchenson, *The Theatres of London* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963); Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, eds., *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Rohan McWilliam, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[56] Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 100–107.

[57] See Dale Spender, *There's Always Been a Women's Movement this Century* (London: Pandora Press, 1983).

[58] Dale Spender, *There's Always Been a Women's Movement this Century* (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 6.

[59] Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 173.

[60] Ibid., 173–174.

[61] Maria DiCenzo and Alexis Motuz, "Politicizing the Home: Welfare Feminism and the Feminist Press in Interwar Britain," *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (May 2017): 389; E. M. Hubback, "Retrospect, 1926," *The Woman's Leader*, December 31, 1926, 413, LSE Digital Library; Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, The Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 4.

[62] Pamela Horn, *Women in the 1920s* (Alan Sutton: Phoenix Mill, 1995), 59.

[63] Eleanor Rathbone, "The Old and the New Feminism," in *Feminist Writings from Ancient Times to the Modern World: A Global Sourcebook and History*, ed. Tiffany K. Wayne (California: Greenwood Press, 2011), 485. I am mindful that I am citing this from a secondary source, as the original essays by Rathbone and Holtby are untraceable.

tension with equal-rights feminists, many of whom were members of the Six Point Group which emerged from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a pre-war suffragette organisation.[64] Among them were Winifred Holtby and Lady Rhondda; the latter established the feminist magazine *Time and Tide*.[65] Holtby, in her 1926 article for *Time and Tide* "Feminism Divided," disapproved of how "the New Feminism emphasises the importance of the women's point of view,'" as opposed to how "the Old Feminism believes in the primary importance of the human being."[66] Old Feminists felt that Rathbone and her followers' attitude marked a "historical betrayal" towards the suffragettes of the previous century who had fought so hard to achieve equality with men on all levels.[67] Nevertheless, contemporary scholars have applauded the New Feminists' efforts to improve the domestic life of women. In a recent reappraisal of the period, DiCenzo and Motuz praise welfare feminists such as Rathbone for making significant contributions to enhancing the domestic and maternal conditions of women to provide them with more economic and reproductive freedom.[68]

As this is mainly a literary study, I will not explore the intricacies of New or Old Feminism. My purpose is to show how welfare feminism became prominent during the 1920s and 1930s in Britain and how the plays discussed in this thesis strongly resonate with its interest in women's domestic life. My chosen texts depict everyday issues such as marriage and divorce, mother-daughter relationships, pregnancy and birth control, motherhood, and generational conflict. One might argue that these issues are mundane and are overshadowed by larger political and social issues like the suffrage, access to education or equal pay. Yet, the plays that I discuss occasionally touch upon important political concerns: Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* discusses the right to divorce and Stopes' *Our Ostriches* discusses reproductive rights. My thesis demonstrates that these plays deserve to be included in feminist studies of modern British theatre. My contribution lies in my demonstration that the kind of feminism in these plays is covert, illusive, deceptively non-feminist, yet profoundly feminist in subtle ways. These plays depict small acts of resistance that paved the way for larger changes. For example, Vectia, in Stopes' *Vectia*, rebels by educating herself about sex and liberating herself from her impotent marriage. Evadne, in Stopes' *Our Ostriches,* rebels on her upper-class background by campaigning for contraceptive rights for poor women. Margaret, in Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*, overcomes her hesitation to claim her right to divorce and liberates herself from her previous marriage. Daryll, in Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper,* subverts traditional gender expectations by becoming the 'man of the house' and supporting both her male and female family members. Frik, in Daviot's *The Laughing Woman*, defies social norms by living with a man outside the boundaries of marriage. My study shows how the plays (and by extension, the playwright themselves) question the freedom and the rights women had gained. In subtle ways, the plays of Dane, Daviot, Stern, Stopes, Stuart and Tennyson Jesse reflect this sense of tentativeness (perhaps even ambivalence) toward the achievements of the feminist movement thus far. Studying this form of feminism helps better understand women's

[64] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 27–28.
[65] Ibid., 27–28.
[66] Winifred Holtby, "Feminism Divided," *Time and Tide*, August 6, 1926, 8. This article is included in a souvenir edition published in association with the AHRC-funded "TIME AND TIDE: Connections and Legacies" project (timeandtidemagazine.org).
[67] Tiffany K. Wayne, *Feminist Writings from Ancient Times to the Modern World: A Global Sourcebook and History* (California: Greenwood Press, 2011), 486.
[68] DiCenzo and Motuz, "Politicizing the Home," 378.

theatre after the Second World War and the explicitly feminist plays that emerged after the 1960s.

My research contributes to other important areas as well. Foremost is the growing interest in middlebrow literature. Middlebrow literature, or what Nicola Humble terms the "feminine middlebrow," applies to the popular fiction produced between the 1920s and the 1950s.[69] It was primarily produced and read by women.[70] Popular women middlebrow novelists from the period included Rose Macaulay, Dodie Smith, Nancy Mitford and Stella Gibbons; their works were frequently included in lists such as Book-of-the-Month in popular newspapers and sold tens of thousands of copies.[71] These books typically address themes of gender, family, class and home in connection to the everyday lives and fortunes of the middle class.[72] These novels are described by Nicola Beauman as "the drama of the undramatic."[73] Unfortunately, the majority of academic research on middlebrow literature (which I discuss in the literary review section in detail) so far focuses on fiction rather than theatre. This imbalance makes the efforts of scholars like Gale, Cameron and McDonald even more important.

My thesis contributes to the scholarship on middlebrow literature in general and middlebrow theatre in particular by showing how the plays of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart, and Daviot reflect themes, interests, character types, settings, and feminist concerns associated with the middlebrow genre (I will further explore these proximities later in the thesis). I must point out that Dane, Stern, Stopes, Daviot and Tennyson Jesse were also novelists who penned novels that share an interest in middle-class life and the domestic sphere. However, novels are not the focus of this thesis; drama is. At the heart of the plays discussed here are women and their relationship to the home as a space for both comfort and tension. The element of popularity and entertainment, which is a defining feature of middlebrow literature, also governs these plays. The commercial plays I discuss in this thesis share with the middlebrow genre a style that is accessible; it adheres to literary standards but avoids the experimental techniques of highbrow literature like fragmented narratives or free indirect discourse. This is because the plays' primary purpose was to entertain the average West End theatre goer and generate profit, just like the novels penned by authors like Stella Gibbons and E. M. Delafield, which were meant to be read by the average middle-class reader and become bestsellers.[74] The value of my research lies in exploring how the themes and characteristics of the domestic novel are translated into an entirely different medium: the theatre. The theatre is a world apart from the novel. It is live and direct. Dramatists do not have the luxury of descriptive passages like novelists. Consequently, they must express this content using other means, such as setting, stage props, stage directions, and dialogue. This aspect has not been studied in depth. As a result, my research contributes profoundly to the field of middlebrow studies by expanding the field to include drama. In what follows, I will provide some context on how women dramatists navigated the theatrical world of the West End during the 1920s and 1930s, drawing on the sources discussing this question.

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[69] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–3.
[70] Ibid., 2.
[71] Ibid., 2–3.
[72] Ibid., 3.
[73] Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1984), 5.
[74] Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel,* 1–13.

It is a matter of speculation whether or not the playwrights I investigate knew each other. Some of them (e.g., Dane and Stern) were good friends.[75] Tennyson Jesse appears to have known Dane and Stern too. In one of her letters, she mentioned having dinner with Dane and the famous actress Diana Wynyard.[76] She also said that her secretary of eighteen years had gone to work for Stern.[77] I have found that most of my selected playwrights were connected through the playwright and actor Noël Coward. Dane was part of Coward's group of homosexual-identified actors and playwrights, which also included Ivor Novello.[78] She was reportedly his "lesbian muse" for the character of the medium Madame Arcati in his play *Blithe Spirit* (1941).[79] In her semi-autobiographical book *London Has a Garden* (1964), Dane, who reminisced about her theatre days in the 1920s and 1930s, attested to the closeness of their friendship.[80] She mentioned the frequent phone calls between her and Coward and related a particular instance in which Coward urged her to come to the rehearsal of his play *Present Laughter* (1939).[81] Coward was also close to Stern and reportedly penned letters full of praise to her following the release of her debut novel.[82] Stern even dedicated her 1930 novel *Mosaic* to Coward with "as much respect and affection."[83] Additionally, Stern helped Coward brainstorm ideas for his 1931 hit play *Cavalcade*.[84] Coward was also acquainted with Tennyson Jesse, having written a letter of praise to her and her husband Harwood after attending their play *The Pelican* (1924), which apparently moved him deeply.[85] The most intriguing friendship was certainly that between Coward and Stopes. She was primarily a scientist and activist and only ventured into playwriting to promote her eugenic views and disseminate information about birth control. Stopes and Coward maintained a professional relationship, with Stopes asking him to review some of her plays and even offering her own suggestions for some of his.[86] Coward even composed a satirical poem about Stopes which starts with the lines: "If through a mist of awful fears/ Your mind in anguish gropes/ Dry up your panic stricken tears/ And fly to Marie Stopes."[87] I could not find direct evidence that Coward knew either Aimée Stuart or Daviot, although they all moved in the same circles and knew the same individuals. For example, the stage actor Sir John Gielgud was a close friend of both Coward and Daviot.[88] Overall, Coward's connections with and support for women playwrights of his generation suggest he was a true enabler of their talent and contributions

[75] G. B. Stern, *Monogram* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 266.
[76] Joanna Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn: A Biography of F. Tennyson Jesse* (London: Anrde Deutsch, 1984), 175.
[77] Ibid., 13, 185.
[78] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 9.
[79] Gay Wachman, *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 194.
[80] Clemence Dane, *London Has a Garden*, (New York: Norton, 1965), 121.
[81] Ibid., 121.
[82] Sheridan Morley, *A Talent to Amuse: a Biography of Noël Coward* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 44.
[83] Qtd. in Morley, *A Talent to Amuse*,49.
[84] Barry Day, ed., *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen Drama, 2007), 215–216.
[85] Qtd. in Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn,* 139.
[86] Ruth Hall, ed., *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 205.
[87] Noël Coward, "If Through a Mist," *The Complete Verse of Noël Coward*, ed. Barry Day (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 242.
[88] Richard Mangan, ed., *Sir John Gielgud: A Life in Letters* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004), 18.

to the theatre. The connection these playwrights had with Coward also indicates the existence of collaborations and mentorships between men and women playwrights in the London theatre scene during the 1920s and 1930s.

Journalism was another shared professional pursuit that contributed to the artistic development of the playwrights examined in this thesis, and I will briefly explore their engagement with it. For example, Dane wrote for well-known political feminist magazines including *Time and Tide* and *Women's Leader*, while Stern was more wide-ranging and published in newspapers including *The Sketch* and *The Liverpool Daily Press*.[89] Moreover, both collaborated on articles for *Good Housekeeping* and they even published in the same issue on occasion.[90] Unlike Stern and Dane, Daviot was uninterested in political or feminist writing but she occasionally published several of her pieces in prominent newspapers such as *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*.[91] Little is known about Stuart's journalistic career but she had formerly worked for the London *Daily Mail* when she met her first husband.[92] Like Daviot, Tennyson Jesse published stories and reviews in magazines, including New York's *Metropolitan Magazine*.[93] Tennyson Jesse also served as a crime editor for periodicals including the *Daily Mail* and as a war reporter during the First World War.[94] Stopes stands apart from the other playwrights discussed in this thesis in that her publications were either scientific papers for academic journals or for her own newspaper, *Birth Control News*.[95] The fact that several of these playwrights had their plays regularly aired on radio during the 1930s and broadcast as late as the 1960s by radio stations including the BBC National Programme Daventry and the BBC Light Programme is another factor that expanded their public reach.[96]

It is worthy of note that many women dramatists who produced plays for London West End theatres at that time, including Dane, Stern, Gertrude Jennings and Cicely Hamilton, had prior theatre experience because many of them had been actresses before switching to writing.[97] Jennings and Hamilton in particular were affiliated with the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) which operated from 1908 to 1913.[98] The AFL was managed by women, produced plays to support women's enfranchisement, and played an important role in training numerous actresses in a professional setting before the First World War.[99] Another factor that further supported women's involvement in the theatre was the changing and increasingly feminine audience in London theatres. Many critics of the period complained about the 'flapper' audiences; these were described in 1933 by the critic and

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[89] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 26–27. G. B. Stern, "The Worst Moment of My Life," *The Sketch*, January 31, 1934, 188. British Newspaper Archive. G. B. Stern, "The Story Women Like Best: Cupid's Cut and Come Again," *Liverpool Daily Post*, December 2, 1920, 8. British Newspaper Archive.

[90] Clemence Dane, "First Flights," *Good Housekeeping*, October 1, 1926, 69, 175, 176; G. B. Stern, "The Eternal Philanderer," *Good Housekeeping*, October 1, 1926, 69, 189, 190. Women's Magazine Archive.

[91] Jennifer Morgan Henderson, *Josephine Tey: A Life* (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2015), 100, 224.

[92] Ian Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs: The Short and Heroic Lives of the Young Aviators who Fought and Died in the First World War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012), 156.

[93] Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn*, 73.

[94] Ibid., 204; Cathy Hartley, *A Historical Dictionary of British Women* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 499.

[95] Debenham, *Marie Stopes: Sexual Revolution,*43, 76.

[96] BBC Genome Programme Index, BBC, https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/search/0/20?q=clemence+dane#top (accessed February 18, 2024).

[97] David Waldron Smithers, *'Therefore Imagine…': The Works of Clemence Dane* (Kent: Dragonfly Press, 1988), 11; Gale, "Women Playwrights," 24, 27.

[98] Ibid., 24.

[99] Ibid.

dramatist St. John Ervine as "wild-eyed young women, hysterically greeting favourites on the stage or in the auditorium, appeared likely to make every first night in London a riot."[100] Borsa described the "thousands" of young girls who frequented West End theatres with a tone similar in sarcasm to Ervine's: "The passion displayed by girls for the theatre, with its inevitable accompaniment of secret infatuations for actors, of languors and excitements, has developed of late years into a real hysterical malady, studied by physicians, psychologists, and sociologists, with great diversity of diagnosis and from different points of view."[101] The figure of the flapper has a long shadow and various iterations of it can be seen in the plays discussed in the current thesis. The flappers were primarily young, single and financially independent and their prominent presence in the audience and reactions to a performances undoubtedly influenced a play's reception on its first night, as well as the reviewers and critics.[102] Reflecting back, the theatre historian and critic Ernest Short affirmed in 1951 that women dominated audiences in the period between the wars and that two-thirds of London theatre audiences during the 1920s and 1930s were young women.[103] These women, it seemed, clearly preferred neither farces nor tragedies. In fact, the playwright Arthur Wing Pinero had to give up writing farces in favour of serious drama with themes that would appeal to young women.[104] Similarly, George Bernard Shaw remarked in 1925 that the flourishing of comedy was largely due to the impact of women in the audience: "I think the influence of women has helped to banish tragedy of that kind from the literary stage—and a good job too!"[105]

The plays of Dane, Daviot and their contemporaries, as Gale explains, were produced in the commercial mainstream by privately-owned theatres controlled by a "small cartel of profit-oriented managers" as government backing for theatres did not come about until the 1940s.[106] Many women involved in the theatre benefited from private sponsorship. For example, theatre producer Lena Ashwell secured funding from an unnamed American millionairess, which enabled her to secure a ninety-nine-year lease on the Kingsway Theatre.[107] Although the majority of managers and producers were men, many women managed to make a name for themselves, like the actress and producer Auriol Lee.[108] Lee's experience on stage enabled her to successfully develop her own approach to theatre production.[109] She is notable for her acclaimed productions of Gertrude Jennings' *Family Affairs* (1934) and John Van Druten's *London Wall* (1931).[110] Dane was particularly indebted to the influential producer and director Basil Dean, who produced two of her plays in 1921 at the St. Martin's Theatre: *A Bill of Divorcement* and *Will Shakespeare*.[111] According to reports in the *Westminster Gazette* and the *London Daily News*, Dean was credited with

[100] St. John Ervine, *The Theatre In My Time* (London: Rich & Cowan Ltd, 1933), 140.
[101] Borsa, *The English Stage of To-Day*, 5.
[102] Gale, *West End Women*, 13–14.
[103] Ernest Short, *Sixty Years of Theatre* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1951), 325.
[104] Short, *Sixty Years of Theatre*, 325.
[105] George Bernard Shaw, *Table-talk of G. B. S.: Conversations on Things in General*, ed. Archibald Henderson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1925), 37.
[106] Gale, "Women Playwrights," 25.
[107] Short, *Sixty Years of Theatre*, 326.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Janice Oliver, "Clemence Dane (Winifred Ashton) (1887–1965)," in *British Playwrights, 1880–1956: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, ed. William W. Demastes and Katherine E. Kelly (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 98–99.

saving *Will Shakespeare*: Dean and Dane initially decided to cancel the play following poor box office returns in the first two weeks, but as the audience continued to turn out, he chose to keep it running.[112] He also produced Dane's *The Way Things Happen* (1924) at the Ambassadors Theatre.[113] Dean was also supportive of other women playwrights. In 1934, he produced a film adaptation of Dodie Smith's play *Autumn Crocus* (1931), which starred Ivor Novello, with the rights to the film earning Smith £1,500.[114] He collaborated with Margaret Kennedy to adapt her hit novel *The Constant Nymph* (1924) into a play in 1926 at the New Theatre, with Coward in the lead role.[115] This brief overview conveys how many women dramatists in the West End theatre business during the 1920s and 1930s understood the importance of forming alliances and partnerships with influential male figures in the industry to boost their careers.

Furthermore, with the support of the theatre business and powerful figures including Dean and Coward, women playwrights were given the opportunity to pave the way for opportunities for women actresses by creating plays with strong women protagonists. For example, Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* provided the young actress Maggie Albanesi a spectacular rise to popularity (which was tragically cut short when she took her own life at the age of twenty-four).[116] The play's Broadway production in the same year launched the career of the American actress Katharine Cornell and its 1932 Hollywood film production gave Katharine Hepburn her big break in the role of Sydney, the daughter, opposite John Barrymore in the role of her father.[117] Diana Wynyard saw her career cemented by Dane's *Wild Decembers* (1933).[118] She urged Dane to negotiate with her agent to grant her the role of Charlotte Brontë, which Dane readily did.[119] A notable role that Wynyard also played was that of Daryll in Stern's *The Man who Pays the Piper* (1931).[120] Sybil Thorndike was another celebrated actress who starred in both major and minor roles in several of Dane's plays including *Granite* (1926), *Mariners* (1929) and *Eighty in the Shade* (1959), the latter of which was written specifically for Thorndike.[121] Occasionally, women playwrights launched the careers of male actors. A notable example was Daviot's casting of the actor Sir John Gielgud in the title role of her hugely successful historical drama *Richard of Bordeaux* (1932), a role which Gielgud declared made his career: "It was to the brilliant inspiration and sympathy of Gordon Daviot that I owed the biggest personal success of my career."[122]

Plays by women authors in the 1920s and 1930s were performed all over the West End commercial theatres, which shows how popular and profitable they were. The St. Martin's Theatre was home to Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921) (with a remarkable 402

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[112] "'Will Shakespeare': Miss Clemence Dane's Play to Continue," *Westminster Gazette*, December 9, 1921, 7; "'Will Shakespeare Saved: Clemence Dane's Play Gets Fresh Lease of Life," *London Daily News*, December 9, 1921, 5. British Newspaper Archive.

[113] "New Plays by Women," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, February 8, 1924, 5. British Newspaper Archive.

[114] Henderson, *Josephine Tey: A Life*, 149, 181,

[115] Morley, *A Talent to Amuse*, 107.

[116] Short, *Sixty Years of Theatre*, 327, 328.

[117] D. K. Cameron, "Maggie Albanesi's Short, Brilliant Career," *The Stage*, February 15, 1979, 23. British Newspaper Archive.

[118] Weedon, Alexis. "Women, Suffrage, and Clemence Dane: A Game of Speculation." In *Fiction and 'The Woman Question' From 1850–1930*, edited by Nicola Darwood, W. R. Owens, and Alexis Weedon, 137. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

[119] Ibid.

[120] "A Short Run," *Reynold's Illustrated News*, February 15, 1931, 16. British Newspaper Archive.

[121] Smithers, "'*Therefore Imagine*," 34, 37, 38, 49.

[122] John Gielgud, *Early Stages* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 243.

performances), *Will Shakespeare* (1921) and Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931), whilst the Ambassadors Theatre staged many successful plays, including Dane's *The Way Things Happen* (1924) and *Granite* (1926), Tennyson Jesse and Harwood's *The Pelican* (1924), and Jennings' most popular comedy, *Family Affairs* (1934).[123] A wealth of plays written by women were produced at other popular West End theatres including the Court, the Regent, the Apollo, the Criterion, the Kingsway, the Aldwych, the Shaftsbury, the Queen's and Everyman.[124] Popular plays frequently had repeat performances over the years. For example, *A Bill of Divorcement* returned to St. Martin's for seventy performances in 1929, followed by seven performances at the Regent in 1930.[125] Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* was a highly successful production. It debuted in 1926 at the New Theatre (later renamed the Noël Coward Theatre) and ran for 387 performances.[126] In 1928, it ran for 58 performances at the Garrick with Dean and in 1930 it ran for twelve performances at the Regent.[127] Women nonetheless remained a minority with limited influence. According to statistics compiled by Gale, plays written by women alone or in partnership with men (such as the Stuarts and Tennyson Jesse and her husband) accounted for just twelve percent of all of the plays produced in the West End, and peaked at twenty percent in certain years such as 1927 and 1936.[128]

The London theatre scene has been home to a great variety of dramatic endeavours, all of which are well documented. Much evidence shows that commercial theatre across the West End was so popular that it left little space for more 'highbrow' or experimental theatre in the city. Writing in 1947, theatre producer Norman Marshall complained about the dominance of commercial theatre during the 1920s. He examined the production of Restoration and Elizabethan classics, Shakespearean plays, works by Ibsen, Molière, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoievsky, Benavente and more contemporary British and foreign productions by Granville Barker, Flecker, Pirandello, O'Neill, James Joyce, O'Casey, Jean-Jacques Bernard, and Shaw.[129] He described how these plays were produced in what he terms "other theatre" which "struggled for existence in strange, out-of-the-way locations such as a drill hall in Hampstead rechristened The Everyman Theatre, […] and a back street attic in Covent Garden in which the Gate Theatre had just been started."[130] Marshall acknowledged the important role of private societies in producing Sunday performances of several "distinguished" imported plays from Europe and America, particularly those which the Lord Chamberlain considered to be unsuitable.[131] Prominent among these were the Three Hundred Club, the Phoenix, and the Stage Society.[132] Marshall also brought up the existence of amateur and minor theatres such as the Playhouse in Oxford and the Cambridge Theatre Festival in which audiences were primarily undergraduate students.[133] Despite his complaints about the

[123] Gale, *West End Women*, 200–213.
[124] Ibid., 198–237. Gale presents a comprehensive index of all plays performed between 1917 and 1959, including the playwrights, the venue, the date and the number of performances.
[125] Gale, *West End Women*, 212–213.
[126] Henderson, *Josephine Tey: A Life*, 149; Gale, *West End Women*, 207.
[127] Gale, *West End Women*, 210, 212.
[128] Maggie B. Gale, "The London Stage, 1918-1945," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Since 1895*, ed. Baz Kershaw, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152.
[129] Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London: John Lehmann, 1947), 11.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid., 12.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid., 20.

dominance of commercial theatre, Marshall's testimony implies that there was a tradition in London theatres of giving prominence to different strands of playwrighting at the same time.

These anecdotes also suggest that women were accepted as dramatists provided that they created lucrative productions. Much suggests that they could not risk too much experimentation and refrained from including radical or contentious issues to avoid censorship or controversy (with the exception of Stopes, who had few plays banned due to her obsession with depicting male impotence). Adhering to middlebrow conventions was both safer and more profitable. There were some attempts to experiment but these were not overly radical. For example, Dane's historical play *Will Shakespeare* experimented with blank verse. Meanwhile, Aimée and Philip Stuart experimented with settings by moving from the drawing room to more professional environments like the dressmaker's shop in *Nine Till Six* (1930). Janice Oliver, in her assessment of Dane's career, lauds her for experimenting with genre and form and for producing "more intellectual, experimentally daring work" than many of her male and female contemporaries.[134] Indeed, Dane dabbled with different genres; aside from domestic dramas and historical plays, she produced *Granite*, a melodrama, and *Adam's Apple* (1928), a musical.[135] Oliver maintains, however, that the world in which playwrights like Dane and Daviot emerged and worked was still relatively new and uncharted, and she admires their determination:

> Dane was a female theatre practitioner working in so thoroughly entrenched a man's world that she, along with other women playwrights like "Gordon Daviot" (Elizabeth Mackintosh), adopted a male pseudonym, one can assume because of a male author's easier access to public acceptance. In an era when the tyrannical reign of the male actor-manager had just waned, and when actresses like Ellen Terry had just come into their own power, female playwrights had as yet no footing; consequently, Dane could look to no one as a gauge for success or influence.[136]

According to Oliver, the literary environment in which Dane and Daviot produced plays was one in which critics with "virulent male bias" (including St. John Ervine) thrived.[137] Oliver praises Dane's perseverance in this male-dominated world: "[B]ecause of voices like these that subjugated women, the complex of strong-willed egos in the theatre, and interior constraints that cultivated only nurturing roles, it is incredible that Dane gained as much critical and commercial success as she did."[138] Oliver's statement helps to clarify why some women playwrights preferred to collaborate with men to ensure better access to the theatre. For example, Tennyson Jesse produced six plays with her husband Harwood and Aimée Stuart and her husband Philip worked together on several plays including *Nine Till Six* (1930) and *Sixteen* (1934). Bethany Wood explains that some women writers (including those who were already well known) found it more beneficial to collaborate with male

[134] Oliver, "Clemence Dane," 101.
[135] Ibid., 99–100.
[136] Ibid., 101–102.
[137] Ibid., 102.
[138] Ibid.

dramatists who had connections.[139] Tennyson Jesse was one of them; she was already a famous author when she collaborated with Harwood, a successful theatre manager.[140]

Critical Perspectives on Interwar Feminist Theatre

The extent to which the playwrights discussed here sit comfortably with the history of British feminism is a difficult question. According to Gale, one of the primary reasons that the works of women playwrights between the wars were dismissed by theatre historians and feminist critics, aside from their association with commercial theatre, is that they predominantly focused on what was considered the "trivial" domestic lives of women in their households.[141] Consequently, their work was widely perceived as "lacking a feminist perspective or innovative strategy."[142] This notion, first introduced by early-twentieth century critics, was later seconded by several theatre critics including the feminist theatre critic Michelene Wandor. Wandor attributed the reduced visibility of interwar feminist theatre to the First World War and the declining militancy of the suffrage campaign.[143] In Wandor's view, women playwrights started to reflect on feminist concerns more directly after the Second World War, as a result of having been exposed to significantly more radical pressures.[144] Fidelis Morgan, also notable for her unfavourable stance towards interwar women's drama, assembled a compilation of plays produced by British women dramatists from 1900 to 1950. This anthology features works by Kennedy, Hamilton, Dane, Hermione Gingold and Diana Morgan, among others. In her introduction to the anthology, Morgan expresses disappointment at her inability to find any "lost masterpiece" among those plays.[145] She states that she dismissed most of the plays while compiling her anthology because she found them amateurish, with "a message but little dramatic import."[146]

In *West End Women*, Gale counterbalances Morgan's and Wandor's statements by demonstrating through her analysis of a large number of these plays, how these plays engaged with contemporary debates about gender roles.[147] In Gale's view, the conflicting problems and pressures that women faced peaked between the wars.[148] Although the plays were not united by a common political cause such as suffrage, Gale elaborates, they all addressed issues which affect women and were actively discussed in popular magazines and newspapers, as well as among feminists, including the limited choices women had between a career or marriage.[149] In her preface to Morgan's anthology, Susannah York, a British actor, presents a fair assessment of the bourgeois nature of these interwar plays and acknowledges their burgeoning feminism:

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[139] Bethany Wood, *Women Adapting: Bringing Three Serials of the Roaring Twenties to Stage and Screen* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 28–29.
[140] Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn,* 114–118, 290.
[141] Gale, *West End Women*, 1.
[142] Ibid., 2.
[143] Michelene Wandor, *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2005), 2.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Fidelis Morgan, *Introduction to The Years Between: Plays by Women on the London Stage 1900–1950* (London: Virago Press, 1994), xv.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Gale, *West End Women*, 3.
[148] Ibid., 6.
[149] Ibid., 3.

> No common theme strings these plays easily upon a single thread, so disparate are they in character. All of them, however, are written by women during the first half of this century and all explore the changing role of women finding their feet in an emerging suffragette and post-suffragette milieu (in the case of *William Shakespeare* [a 1921 play by Clemence Dane] through metaphor). Leading characters are middle-class, and the plays reflect the limitations and tensions beneath the surface of their domestic lives. Theatre-going was then […] primarily a bourgeois entertainment and these dramas throw up a circumscribed but illuminating mirror image of their audiences' world.[150]

York's remarks, which align closely with my perspective in this thesis, are important because they reinforce how these plays, which cannot be tied to one fixed feminist agenda, share a concern with how women were redefining themselves in a post-suffrage society. She points out that their middle-class domestic settings offer a close reflection of the everyday pressures and choices that shaped women's lives at the time.

While York's comments emphasize the reflective and socially grounded nature of these plays, Wandor and Morgan interpret this same focus quite differently. Their remarks on British interwar theatre suggest that the plays written by women for London's West End theatres are not worth analysing because they are perceived as less intellectually or artistically stimulating than highbrow or avant-garde theatre. This thesis takes the opposite view and seeks to recognise the depth of the contribution of women dramatists to the London stage during the 1920s and 1930s, through the works of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart and Daviot but without claiming that these plays have the same literary merits as highbrow theatre. My study explores the diversity and richness of the themes and characters in women's middlebrow drama. It appreciates how these plays foreground the emotional and practical demands of women's domestic roles and deeply capture their everyday anxieties, fears, needs, and struggles. I also show that the plays of Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart and Daviot are valuable mirrors of how middle-class women lived at that time. They have their flaws, but nonetheless offer a social critique that is serious and poignant, yet light-hearted and entertaining – of a kind that many theatre-goers would have easily appreciated and identified with.

More recently, scholars including Gale, McDonald and Cameron have diligently researched the works of women playwrights from the 1920s and 1930s.[151] They show that women's interwar theatre was not 'trivial' and that those playwrights produced work that is deeply rooted in the social and political realities that women experienced. Notably, in a discussion of Dane's life and work, Gale shows how *A Bill of Divorcement* reflects many social

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[150] Susannah York, *Preface to The Years Between: Plays by Women on the London Stage 1900–1950* (London: Virago Press, 1994), IV.

[151] Among the most prominent scholarship that provides a re-evaluation of interwar British women's drama is Maggie B. Gale, *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918–1962* (London: Routledge, 1996); Maggie B. Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Maggie B. Gale, "From Fame to Obscurity: In Search of Clemence Dane," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Louise McDonald, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-war Years* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Rebecca Cameron, "Irreconcilable Differences: Divorce and Women's Drama before 1945," *Modern Drama* 44, no. 4 (2001); and Rebecca Cameron, "The Limits of Emancipation: Changing Approaches to Feminism in Early-Twentieth-Century British Women's Drama," *Women's Studies* 37, no. 2 (March 2008): 111.

anxieties regarding divorce and its moral ramifications.[152] Gale expands on other themes in Dane's plays as well, such as women and power and the nature of celebrity to provide a better understanding of Dane's contribution to British theatre and cinema.[153] Elsewhere, Cameron traces feminist responses to British divorce laws by considering Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* and Elizabeth Baker's *Penelope Forgives* (1930).[154] Intense discussions surrounded divorce in London's social circles, Cameron shows, but divorce was rarely depicted on stage: the women protagonists in most plays were given few options to escape from unhappy marriages.[155] As she points out, the heroines of Dane's and Baker's plays have the ability to break away from their marriages, which frames divorce as a serious option.[156] In her recent reappraisal of Dane's work, McDonald demonstrates that Dane's plays reflect a modern and "fully-formed" feminist position, owing to their strong women characters (who are also feminist heroines), their social awareness and their numerous progressive feminist messages, which are cued to wider changes in women's roles during the period.[157] *A Bill of Divorcement* takes central place in her study: the play's resolution, she asserts, indicates a feminist renegotiation of gender roles: at the same time, Dane's other heroines embody Victorian ideals prevalent in the past and the modern sensibilities of future heroines who appeared on television and in films after the Second World War.[158]

To highlight my contribution more clearly to the field, I need to outline the limitations of the studies of Gale, Cameron and McDonald to show how my thesis develops beyond and departs from their contributions. In *West End Women*, Gale provides a broad study rather than a critical analysis of individual plays.[159] Her aim is to recover and include as many works by women as possible. This indicates that her study prioritizes breadth over depth. She arranges her book thematically into sections: women in society, working women, motherhood and the family, dramatizing history, and spinsters and widows.[160] Each chapter introduces the social issue at stake and moves through a wide range of plays, including a short summary with a brief commentary. The strength of Gale's approach is in the sheer range of obscure dramatists she brings to light. However, the drawback is that the plays are not examined in literary or formal detail. In her articles, Gale narrows her focus almost exclusively to Dane.[161] She situates Dane through biographical detail, her theatre activity, and her career as a novelist and short story writer. The production and critical reception of *A Bill of Divorcement* take centre stage in her study. A brief discussion of some of Dane's other plays is included in her study but with less detailed attention, such as *Will Shakespeare* (1921) and *Eighty in the Shade* (1959). My study builds on Gale's foundation by offering a more sustained close reading of characterization, themes, dialogue, stage directions, and

[152] Maggie B. Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 48–49.
[153] Ibid., 51–54.
[154] Rebecca Cameron, "Irreconcilable Differences: Divorce and Women's Drama before 1945," *Modern Drama* 44, no. 4 (2001).
[155] Ibid., 478.
[156] Ibid., 476.
[157] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 23, 46.
[158] Ibid., 15.
[159] See Gale, *West End Women.*
[160] Ibid.
[161] See Maggie B. Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Maggie B. Gale, "From Fame to Obscurity: In Search of Clemence Dane," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

structure. Moreover, I do my own research into neglected primary sources from the interwar period. This allows me to set the plays within a richer historical and cultural context than Gale provides. At the same time, I move beyond her focus on Dane by providing an in-depth analysis of the works of Tennyson Jesse, Stern, Stopes, Aimee Stuart, and Daviot, whose works Gale does not explore in detail.

In Cameron's study of divorce and women's drama before 1945, she provides statistics on divorce and some textual analysis of *A Bill of Divorcement* and Elizabeth Baker's *Penelope Forgives* (1930).[162] Cameron focuses on how Dane shows the harshness of divorce laws and opposition to them in the play. I go further by digging into the parliamentary debates on divorce laws to place the play in its legal and cultural context. I also raise new issues such as domesticity, the home, and the play's form as a drawing-room play. In addition, I examine *The Pelican*, a play about divorce that Cameron overlooks, to show how both plays deal with divorce in different ways. My discussion of class, inheritance, the financial cost of divorce, and the Russell case on which *The Pelican* is based on adds a new dimension on how women's interwar drama reflected such a contentious issue. In her PhD thesis, Cameron also looks at the theme of creativity in Dane's *Will Shakespeare* and Daviot's *The Laughing Woman* and attempts to place it within contemporary debates.[163] But her readings of the plays are more descriptive than critical. I build on Cameron's work by looking more deeply into debates about women and genius among Dane and Daviot's contemporaries, which led me to uncover new primary material. Cameron draws on two 1930s biographies that Daviot used for *The Laughing Woman*, but I revisit those biographies myself, rather than rely on Cameron's reading of them, to reach new insights into how Daviot interpreted her characters in the play. Moreover, while Cameron focuses on genius in Dane's *Will Shakespeare*, I examine genius in Dane's *Wild Decembers* (1933), a play which was tackled in detail only by Louise McDonald in her book on Dane.[164]

In her analysis of *Wild Decembers*, McDonald focuses exclusively on the character of Charlotte Brontë as a feminist heroine. I explore fresh issues around women and creativity that neither Cameron nor McDonald discuses, particularly the Brontës' use of pseudonyms and how this issue continued into the 1920s and 1930s, the interwar period's reception of the Brontës' works, and the long history of the rumor that Branwell Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights*. McDonald's study, like Gale's, is very much Dane-centered. She examines plays like Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, but only in comparison to Dane's work. My analysis of Stern's play goes further by offering deeper textual analysis and placing it in the political and economic context of women's lives after the First World War. I look at issues such as job opportunities, marriage bars, parliamentary acts on women and work, and the cultural images of the suffragette, the flapper, and the spinster, to show how these were reflected in the play. I also examine the Stuart's *Nine Till Six*, a completely neglected play that neither Gale, McDonald, nor Cameron discusses. Studying this play enables me to raise new issues such as the figure of the shop girl in early twentieth-century department stores and the challenges she faced in balancing marriage and career, which I show are strongly represented in the play. McDonald's focus on Dane's work is wider in the sense that she

[162] See Rebecca Cameron, "Irreconcilable Differences: Divorce and Women's Drama before 1945," *Modern Drama* 44, no. 4 (2001).
[163] See Rebecca Cameron, "British Women Dramatists and the Feminist Movement, 1914–1939" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1998).
[164] See Louise McDonald, *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-war Years* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

covers all genres: she devotes one chapter to Dane's plays and dedicates the rest to her novels, short stores, and journalism. My study, which focuses exclusively on Dane and her contemporaries' dramatic works, makes it possible to establish their contribution to interwar British theatre more clearly. In addition, neither Gale, McDonald, nor Cameron examines Stopes' plays or the way they represent pressing issues in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s such as censorship, reproduction, eugenics, and class. My analysis of Stopes' plays draws extensively on her available biographies, which I use to trace links between her drama and broader debates about the eugenic movement, birth control campaigns, British feminism, and Stopes' elitist views on women and class.

Many women dramatists involved in London theatres between the wars were preoccupied by the disruption caused by the First World War and its effect on the fabric of British society, as well as the problems and pressures women faced as regards marriage and their careers. Some key scholarship provides insight into these questions. For example, in *British Theatre and Performance 1900–1950*, D'Monté explains how playwrights including Dane, Kennedy, Stern and Smith focused their work on the paradoxical correlation between the liberation of women and the damage caused by the war, which prompted them to create conflicts in their plays around sexuality, family and the workplace.[165] McDonald, for her part, also discusses the women protagonists of Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, whom she sees as reflective of a wider trend: these heroines, who are aware of how the war changed them forever, become dissatisfied with the available options which provided women with the possibility of redefining gender roles during the interwar period, but their unhappiness paradoxically leads them to yearn for a more conventional life.[166] McDonald contends that Dane's plays, in comparison, are more "feminist-invested" in the sense that they lack concern about affording women greater authority.[167]

As previously acknowledged, the plays examined here fall within the middlebrow genre. The term 'middlebrow' itself was not held in high regard during that time. In 1925, the satirical British magazine *Punch* coined the term for the first time.[168] Brown and Grover propose that the term "middlebrow" originated from profound apprehensions regarding cultural authority and the ways culture is passed down.[169] It became a focal point for biases against the lower middle classes, femininity, domesticity, and narrative forms seen as old-fashioned.[170] Holmes explains that the term "middlebrow" was initially coined as a "sneer," as middlebrow culture was seen as possessing "neither the dignity of the high nor the colourful vulgar energy of the low. It suggests a failed aspiration to artistic value—a form of art that is second-rate, mediocre, middle-of-the-road, a literature […] that reaffirms commonsensical truths, that conforms and reassures rather than contesting or opening new horizons."[171] Holmes explains how these works often reflect the lives of the English middle class in a realist fashion, describing them as the "backbone of inter-war publishing."[172] Woolf

[165] Rebecca D'Monté, *British Theatre and Performance 1900–1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 131.
[166] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 78–79.
[167] Ibid., 96.
[168] Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917–1955* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4–5.
[169] Erica Brown and Mary Grover, "Introduction: Middlebrow Matters," in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920–1960*, ed. Erica Brown and Mary Grover (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.
[170] Brown and Grover, "Introduction: Middlebrow Matters," 1.
[171] Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France Since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 11–12.
[172] Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, 12.

was very outspoken in her dislike of middlebrow writers, whom she described as "the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige."[173] The work they produce, she argued, is neither good nor bad, just in between: "It is not well written; nor is it badly written. It is not proper, nor is it improper—in short, it is betwixt."[174] In Woolf's view, the middlebrow is tainted by commercial drive and seeks to appeal to the largest possible readership.[175] It will never achieve the depth and innovation of the highbrow or the raw authenticity of the lowbrow, she concludes.[176] This unflattering view of the middlebrow could explain the decline in interest for Dane's plays and those of her contemporaries after their deaths and the fact that scholarship on their works has remained confined to a small field in theatre studies.

Similarly, novels considered middlebrow by women authors in the 1920s and 1930s were widely overlooked until the 1980s when Beauman published her pioneering work *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914–39*. This monograph is one of the first attempts to explore this previously neglected area in modern literary studies. Beauman brings attention to the "vanished" everyday Englishwoman during the interwar years in Britain, a figure often overlooked by historians and scholars but depicted very well in the fiction of middle-class women novelists.[177] Beauman's work not only recovers a wealth of previously unknown novels by women but provided thematic analyses of domesticity, love, relationships, sex, psychoanalysis and war.[178] These analyses paint a comprehensive picture of the leisured English middle-class woman's life and aspirations.[179] Among the novelists she tackles are Stern, Kennedy, Tennyson Jesse, Dorothy Canfield, Elizabeth Cambridge, Enid Bagnold, Elizabeth Bowen, F. M. Mayor, Kate O'Brien and many other previously neglected writers.[180] Another of Beauman's significant contributions is Persephone Books, which specializes in publishing out-of-print, forgotten works by women authors, which made them accessible to the public for the first time.[181]

Pioneering work has been done by Alison Light in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. Light focuses on four writers who were active during the interwar period – Ivy Compton-Burnett, Agatha Christie, Jan Struther, and Daphne du Maurier – and examines how a new type of modernism emerges in their novels in light of the dislocation caused by the First World War.[182] Light argues that examining the writings of middle-class women "at home" in the aftermath of the First World War reveals what she terms a "conservative modernism," a cultural mode that could "look backward and

[173] Virginia Woolf, "To the Editor of the *New Statesman*," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 180.
[174] Ibid., 181.
[175] Ibid., 175–186.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*, 2–3.
[178] Ibid., 1–13.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid., 253–262.
[181] Anna Kiernan, "Independent Publishing in a Post-digital World: Creative Campaigns and Promotional Opportunities," in *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, ed. Astrid Ensslin, Bronwen Thomas, and Julia Round (New York: Routledge, 2023), 299.
[182] Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (New York, Routledge, 1991), 11.

forward" and represent Englishness "in both its most modern and reactionary forms."[183] Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* is another significant study. It covers sixty novels by thirty well-known and forgotten middlebrow women novelists, including Margery Allingham, Elizabeth Bowen, Stella Gibbons, Rachel Ferguson, E. M. Delafield, Angela Thirkell, and Elizabeth Taylor, among others. Humble argues that middlebrow fiction was instrumental in the development of a "new class and gender identities" during the 1920s and 1950s.[184] She claims that this is demonstrated by the way that this genre of writing developed into a forum in which competing groups within the burgeoning middle class engaged in fierce battles for social supremacy.[185] Middlebrow fiction, Humble adds, "redefined domesticity as stylish" by focussing on the home and addressing middle-class women's insecurities about their new domestic duties.[186] In addition, Humble refers to how the genre's "feyness and frivolity and its flexible generic boundaries" allowed it to avoid being classified as dangerously subversive of social values.[187] For Humble, middlebrow fiction exposed the underlying dissatisfaction of interwar women by depicting the family unit as "eccentric" and an "anti-social organisation."[188] Despite the fact that the middle-class women protagonists in these middlebrow novels enjoyed more social, physical and educational liberties, they were portrayed as facing restricted job prospects.[189]

Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei's *Domestic Modernism, The Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* is another significant work in the emerging field of middlebrow studies. This book attempts to reclaim the neglected novels of the interwar British novelist E. H. Young. The authors' aim is to enrich the discourse on home culture and highlight the contributions of writers like Young, who were marginalised by the view that only "experimental modernist techniques" represent modern expression.[190] According to Briganti and Mezei, studying the domestic modernism of the novels of Young and her contemporaries like Lettice Cooper, E. M. Delafield, and Rose Macaulay, reveals an "unrelenting, if covert, search for and creation of the self and a subtle pursuit of the art of living."[191] Ehland and Wächter, in their study of gender and middlebrow fiction, contend that although middlebrow fiction had to conform to the conventions of the genre and the demands of publishers, these works deserve to be studied because they ask serious questions about "the crumbling Empire, collapsing class structures and the deterioration of the Victorian family ideal and contribute largely to the deconstruction and redefinition of gender roles and ideals."[192]

This review of important scholarship on women's theatre in 1920s and 1930s Britain indicates that the field is expanding. Nonetheless, this growth is limited to either a narrow focus on the novel (as is the case with middlebrow studies) or centres predominantly on Dane. My thesis, which includes more detailed analysis of forgotten plays and their authors'

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[183] Light, *Forever England*, 10–11.
[184] Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 5.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, The Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1.
[191] Ibid., 1, 6.
[192] Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter, "Introduction: 'All Granite, Fog and Female Fiction,'" in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890–1945*, ed. Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 2–3.

lives, hopes to provide a more inclusive approach. Moreover, my thesis offers a fresh perspective on the emerging feminism of middlebrow plays performed in West End theatres between the wars. I explore the poignant stories these plays tell about the quiet, everyday battles average middle-class women fought and how subtly they challenged patriarchal norms in their homes. These small and mundane stories must be acknowledged and appreciated for what they are. Although the stories they tell are neither inclusive in terms of class and race nor radical in terms of their feminism, these plays nonetheless show courage and strength and reflect the long wait and struggle for the freedom women enjoy today.

Chapter 1 examines the representation of divorce in Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* and Tennyson Jesse and Harwood's *The Pelican* (1924). The plot of *A Bill of Divorcement* centres on Margaret, an affluent middle-class woman who divorced her mentally ill husband on the grounds of insanity and is now happily engaged to another man. Her life is upended when her ex-husband unexpectedly returns. He has suddenly recovered and wants their marriage to continue. Margaret faces immense pressure from the family rector and her relatives to reconcile with him. The play's ending sees Margaret finally breaking free of these constraints to marry her fiancé. Tennyson Jesse and Harwood's *The Pelican* draws inspiration from the infamous Russell divorce case of 1921. The play focuses on an upper-middle-class family and on the successful divorce of the main protagonist, Wanda, on grounds of adultery; the divorce, however, renders her child illegitimate. The divorce offers her the freedom to become a successful businesswoman, but the play insinuates that this is also a tragedy in its own way. Wanda eventually succumbs to social pressures and remarries her former spouse to legitimize her son, who wants to join the British army. The divorce law reforms during the 1920s and 1930s, as both plays demonstrate, offered British women greater opportunities, but that did not mean that women were liberated from social and psychological pressures. *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* do not push the boundaries much, as they portray divorced women choosing remarriage over more liberating alternatives.

Chapter Two explores Marie Stopes' *Our Ostriches* (1923) and *Vectia* (1926)—two plays that reflect her disturbing eugenic ideologies about birth control and sex education. *Vectia* centres on a young upper-middle-class wife who learns that her marriage is unconsummated because of her husband's 'impotence.' The play concludes with Vectia leaving with her husband's best friend, a man who can help her have the child she desires. *Vectia,* which promotes procreation as a woman's primary role, was banned due to its controversial content. Stopes replaced it with *Our Ostriches*, a didactic play about birth control. In it, Evadne, an upper-class woman, meets Mrs. Flinker, a poor woman from the slums who went through multiple pregnancies and stillbirths as a result of her ignorance of birth control. When the Birth-Rate Commission refuses to help, Evadne takes it upon herself to help poor women. The play, which reflects Stopes' real-life efforts to promote contraception in slum areas, also exposes the classist nature of her ideology. Although she sought to improve working-class women's lives, she advocated for their sterilisation and framed it as a humanitarian act. Through a close reading of these plays, I argue that Stopes' feminism was shaped by class and eugenic thinking.

In Chapter Three, I address the hardships women faced in balancing marriage and career through Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931) and Aimée and Philip Stuart's *Nine Till Six* (1930). In *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, Daryll, a thirty-year-old, middle-class unmarried woman becomes the breadwinner in her family after losing her father and older brother in the First World War. The play shows how Daryll begins to doubt her independence as she realizes that being the 'man of the house' is unbearably difficult. Daryll eventually

resigns from her position and assumes the role of a traditional housewife. The play suggests that perhaps women were beginning to question whether the freedom to work and be financially self-sufficient actually brought them fulfilment. *Nine Till Six* revolves around a group of shop girls working in a dressmaking shop and reveals the tragic hardships faced by the shop girls and their employer. Despite having the right to work and earn a living, the working-class shop girls are unable to cross class barriers. This is evident in how Gracie, a working-class girl, fails to get promoted, while the job she wants goes to an aristocratic girl named Bridgit. Like *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, *Nine Till Six* depicts work and financial independence as unfulfilling.

In Chapter Four, I examine two plays that depict historical creative women: Daviot's *The Laughing Woman* (1934) and Dane's *Wild Decembers* (1933), which draw on the lives of the writers Sophie Brzeska and the Brontë sisters respectively. These plays illustrate how gifted women throughout history have faced obstacles that stunted their creativity, and suggest that these pressures have continued in the present. Central to both plays is the social expectation to prioritize domestic duties over artistic talent, as well as gender biases that disadvantaged women. *The Laughing Woman* portrays the regression of a woman called Frik from a budding artist with a gift for writing to someone who gives up on her dreams to support the career of René, a much younger male artist. Her journey, I contend, serves as a metaphor for the social expectations British women writers faced in the 1920s and 1930s, which led some of them to abandon their artistic or creative aspirations. *Wild Decembers* employs a more historically-based method in its dramatization of the Brontë sisters' life and literary legacy. The play examines gendered assumptions and practices in the publishing industry by highlighting the Brontë sisters' use of male pen names in particular and strongly suggest that creative women during 1920s and 1930s were still facing prejudices in the publishing world related to their gender.

These chapters together show how women dramatists of the interwar years used the commercial stage to raise questions about women's freedom while still writing within the expectations of popular theatre. They produced neat plots about marriage, family, and work. They also discussed difficult questions about divorce, contraception, women's work, and creativity. The women at the centre of these plays often compromise or fall short of independence, yet they push back in quieter ways that reflect the tough choices British women faced in the 1920s and 1930s. I argue that this quiet, understated feminism has not been fully recognized. My contribution is to recover these neglected authors and place them back in the history of British theatre by using forgotten plays, scattered life records, newspapers, and feminist writings from the time. I also show how their work connects to the wider world of middlebrow culture, which is usually discussed in relation to novels rather than plays. These plays matter because they give us a record of how women tried to navigate the constrains of freedom in the turbulent years between the war.

Chapter One
Divorce and the Law: Clemence Dane, Fryn Tennyson Jesse, and H. M. Harwood

In this chapter, I examine two plays whose plots are based on specific debates about divorce—a controversial issue that attracted public attention in Britain between the wars. These plays are *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921) by Clemence Dane and *The Pelican* (1924) by Fryn Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood. I demonstrate that both plays respond to significant reforms in British divorce laws in the 1920s and 1930s. I argue that, although *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* show that the right to divorce has given the women protagonists in the plays freedom beyond remaining in unhappy marriages, they also maintain that this newfound freedom proved too complex to enjoy fully. *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican,* I contend, illustrate this by showing how many social factors were involved: divorced women continued to face stigmas around their divorced status or social pressures to reconcile. Second, through showing how both plays share similar endings, in which the divorced women protagonists decide to remarry as a resolution to their situations, I argue that these plays do not offer a radical solution to the problem of divorce, since they do not take a strong political stance against the institution of marriage. Instead, they foreground the struggles of women within the existing legal and social frameworks. Therefore, it is safe to say that *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* display limited imagination in their representations of women's freedom beyond marriage: divorce is considered but only as a step towards remarriage. On the other hand, both plays show a certain lucidity in recognising that, for women, divorce was the problem, whereas marriage remained the convention.

The title of *A Bill of Divorcement* is derived from a phrase in the King James Bible.[1] The play mainly advocates for the amendment of divorce laws, focusing particularly on expanding the grounds for divorce to include insanity, which was not available at the time the play was written.[2] I explore how *A Bill of Divorcement* is a representative of the drawing-room play in its emphasis on the domestic sphere. Margaret views her ex-husband's home as a safe haven. But, in reality, she is confined in it by the social expectations embodied by her aunt by marriage, Hester, and the rector, who attempt to prevent her from exercising her right to divorce and leave. Although her ex-husband, Hilary, is portrayed as 'recovered,' he suffers from bouts of rage that make him highly unstable. Through these tensions, I contend, the play highlights the necessity of granting women legal rights like divorce to liberate them from the confines of the home and their traditional roles as homemakers. For Dane, divorce is a human right, and granting women these rights is essential for achieving equality and recognizing them as full citizens.[3] However, the play's conclusion complicates this perspective. It shows how Margaret's liberation is made possible by her daughter's sacrificing her freedom to care for her father in Margaret's place. Such an ending conveys

[1] The phrase **"**A Bill of Divorcement**"** comes from Deuteronomy 24:1: "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house" (King James Version).

[2] Nicole Flynn, "'My Wife's Not My Wife, She's My Daughter': Relocating *A Bill of Divorcement* from Stage to Screen," *The Space Between* 16 (2020): 3.

[3] Clemence Dane, *The Women's Side* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 120–143.

how women's emancipation during the interwar period in Britain remained a complex and nuanced matter, often coming at a high personal cost.

While the characters in *A Bill of Divorcement* are fictional, *The Pelican* draws inspiration from the Russell court trials, in which the son and heir of Lord Ampthill petitioned to divorce his wife Christabel on the grounds of adultery and claimed that their son was not his.[4] Unlike *A Bill of Divorcement*, which does not depict how Margaret obtains her divorce, *The Pelican* highlight the emotional and financial strain of the trial on Wanda, both during and after the divorce. The play introduces a significant twist by falsely declaring the child illegitimate, while in reality, the Russell infant was proven legitimate.[5] Through this narrative choice, the play highlights the collateral damage divorce inflicts on children from broken marriages. In this particular case which involves class and inheritance (since the child would have been the successor to a title), the play emphasizes how an innocent child suffers as a result of adult conflicts and loses privileges that are his by right. *The Pelican* portrays Wanda's post-divorce circumstances as fortunate but also highlights the precarious nature of divorce for women. Divorce can either devastate women's lives or provide them an opportunity for a better future. However, the play ultimately concludes with a loss of freedom for Wanda.

Viewed alongside each other, Dane's play seems intended to be more politically vocal than *The Pelican*. As I demonstrate in this chapter, Dane was an active proponent of making divorce accessible to women.[6] She wrote articles on the subject and clearly intended for her debut play to embody the changes she wished to see in British divorce laws at the time.[7] Even the title of the play suggests how deliberate her approach was. Choosing theatre as a platform for this message indicates that she must have believed this medium, which is live and direct, had a broader reach than, for example, publishing a novel about divorce, although she was also a talented novelist. *The Pelican*, in contrast, was not intended to be political in the same way. I have not come across any indication that Tennyson Jesse and her husband were particularly invested in divorce as a political cause. The play appears to have been written simply to capitalize on a scandalous topic. As experienced West End playwrights, both likely recognized that dramatizing the notorious divorce trial would attract a broad audience, as many among the public likely followed its every detail in the newspapers. It is true that *The Pelican* does not convey as explicit a message about divorce as Dane's play, but it delivers a poignant commentary on how women like Wanda and Christabel Russell (on whom Wanda's character is based) were treated in high-profile divorce cases.

In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of the debate surrounding the changing divorce laws of the 1920s and 1930s. These evolving laws were a major concern for men and women writers in London's intellectual circles, but Dane was particularly noted for her advocacy of divorce. Her 1927 feminist manifesto *The Women's Side* referred to a 1923 draft bill aimed at amending the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which sought to allow both husbands and wives to divorce on the same grounds of adultery.[8] For Dane, the Matrimonial Causes Bill of 1923 was a cause for celebration. It was part of the series of debates that provided great inspiration to her as a playwright. In *The Women's Side*, Dane

[4] Bevis Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby: The Battle of the Ampthill Succession* (London: Hopcyn Press, 2013), xvii.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 120–143.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 395–396.

noted that the legislation marked a significant accomplishment for women because it "defined […] the status of women: it concedes for the first time her absolute right as a human being to the same law and the same justice that man enjoys."[9] The original 1857 act Dane refers to was groundbreaking in itself at that time. It moved divorce from the ecclesiastical courts to the civil courts, officially legalising divorce for the first time in British history.[10] Previously, divorce was a complicated and long procedure which involved three steps: obtaining an ecclesiastical decree, obtaining a civil court order for "damages against the adulterous partner," and finally dissolving the marriage through a private Act of Parliament.[11]

Dane's interest in divorce laws was part of a larger movement at the turn of the twentieth century towards reforming divorce legislation. The Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes was established in 1909 as a result of widespread discontent with the current divorce laws.[12] The Commission met until 1912 and included the equalisation of divorce laws as one of its main demands, something that suffragettes were also concerned with.[13] Writers like George Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett, and Arthur Conan Doyle, the latter of whom was President of the Divorce Law Reform Union, were all part of the movement.[14] Shaw was outspoken in his demand for reform and greater pragmatism in divorce proceedings. In the preface to his play *Getting Married* (1914), Shaw, who was pro-divorce, criticised the current divorce laws which included adultery as the primary grounds for divorce, ignoring other serious issues such as ill-temper, drunkenness, lunacy, criminal behaviour or religious incompatibility.[15] Making divorce "as easy, as cheap and as private as marriage" was a priority for Shaw.[16] He recommended that all common legal grounds for seeking divorce must be abolished: "Grant divorce at the request of either party, whether the other consents or not; and admit no other ground than the request, which should be made without stating any reasons."[17]

To appreciate how the problem of divorce affected London-dominated feminist circles, I will present a brief overview of the opinions of several British interwar feminists who, like Dane, were vocal in their advocacy for changes to the divorce process as part of the battle to eliminate legal discrimination. For example, the socialist feminist Vera Brittain discussed the legal advancement that married British women had achieved since 1833 in her 1934 essay *The Married Woman in the Modern World*.[18] Brittain explained how custody laws (such as the Custody of Infant's Act of 1839) provided women equal guardianship over their children, whilst the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 granted women the

[9] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 130–131.
[10] Penelope Russell, "Matrimonial Causes Act 1857," in *Women's Legal Landmarks: Celebrating the History of Women and Law in the UK and Ireland*, ed. Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 63.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Anne Humphreys, "The Three of Them: The Scene of Divorce in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction," in *After Intimacy: The Culture of Divorce in the West Since 1789*, ed. Karl Leydecker and Nicholas White (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 133.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] George Bernard Shaw, "Preface," in *Getting Married and The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1914), 73.
[16] Shaw, "Preface," 99.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Vera Brittain, *The Married Woman in the Modern World* (London: The Suffragette Fellowship, 1934), 6.

right to their wages and property ownership.[19] In the matter of divorce, she asserted that the laws had come a long way since the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 when divorce could only be obtained through a private Act of Parliament.[20] Like Dane, Brittain strongly supported the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923, which allowed husband and wife to seek divorce on the equal grounds of adultery and claimed that this Act marked a significant step forward for women because it guaranteed "the sexes were given equal rights in regard to divorce."[21] Nevertheless, in Brittain's view, more reforms were needed when it comes to the grounds of divorce, maintaining that they should be "very widely extended."[22] Winifred Holtby, a close friend of Brittain and fellow feminist, argued that reforming divorce laws should follow the "same principal of equality between the sexes," meaning that both sexes should have the same rights and obligations under the laws, without any bias or discrimination.[23] Holtby argued that genuine morality can only be achieved by treating women "as equal and adult human being" rather than by coercive or oppressive measures.[24]

Some prominent voices among women writers during the 1920s and 1930s did not support making divorce accessible in the same way feminists such as Dane, Brittain and Holtby did. For example, Dane's essay "Some Questions on Divorce," which appeared in the first British edition of *Good Housekeeping* in March 1922, provoked the English novelist Marie Belloc Lowndes. In this essay (which was later included in *The Women's Side*) Dane argued that divorce should be granted "by mutual consent" rather than "pretended adultery," a practice which was common at that time.[25] The essay concludes with the claim that religion should not interfere with divorce because marriage is a "civil contract." [26] In response to Dane, Lowndes wrote an essay entitled "The Effects of Easy Divorce" for the following issue of *Good Housekeeping*. She disagreed with Dane's claim that religious prejudice is the only valid obstacle to simplifying divorce.[27] Lowndes, who was a professed Catholic, called for divorce to be made more difficult and cited France as an example of a country that had made divorce easy for childless couples, which had resulted, in her view, in an "extraordinary prevalence of divorce."[28] She claimed that easy divorce had wrecked many happy homes in France: "Every Frenchman and Frenchwoman can tell you of examples of middle-aged wives given up, driven from their homes by younger women."[29] Lowndes ends her essay with a strong plea to make divorce difficult in England: "Easy divorce will work even greater havoc in this country than it does in France. Make marriage more difficult, rather than divorce easier, should be, to my mind, the watchword of the reformer."[30] While Dane viewed divorce as a human right, Lowndes's rhetoric was heavy with religious and moral overtones. These two different opinions show how opposing viewpoints coexisted within the literary scene, and that divorce was a topic actively debated among British women writers during that time.

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[19] Brittain, *The Married Woman in the Modern World*, 7
[20] Ibid., 8.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Winnifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (New York: Longmans, 1935), 67.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Clemence Dane, "Some Questions on Divorce," *Good Housekeeping* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 1922): 90.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, "The Effects of Easy Divorce," *Good Housekeeping* 1 (April 1922): 27.
[28] Ibid., 94.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

Concern for the legislation around divorce was not limited to journalists and writers; it made its way onto the London stage as well. Two well-known plays featuring divorced couples are Shaw's *Getting Married* (1908) and Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1933). In both plays, divorce is treated comically, and the plays end with the reconciliation of the couples.[31] It is remarkable that lesser-known writers like Dane and Tennyson Jesse (in collaboration with her husband, Harwood) were able to offer a more serious treatment of divorce than Shaw and Coward. *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* skilfully adapted dry legal facts about divorce into drawing-room plays that were commercially successful. Plays like *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* are neither wholly trivial nor lacking in depth. They include moments of light-heartedness but are difficult to categorize as pure comedies. At the same time, they lack tragic endings and cathartic elements. This gives them a unique hybrid form that attest to the adventurous nature of interwar commercial theatre in London. These commercial and light-hearted plays have some narrative flaws and plot holes. For example, in *A Bill of Divorcement*, the mentally ill ex-husband suddenly recovers from his madness after fifteen years without explanation. The play also overlooks the financial difficulties divorced women faced at the time. As for *The Pelican,* it opens in a confusing manner: the characters discuss the divorce case without giving us any details or naming the parties involved. This makes the play unintelligible without previous knowledge of the real court case. Another notable plot hole appears around Wanda, who became a businesswoman after her divorce. *The Pelican* includes scenes in which she discusses statistics with her boss, but it never clarifies the nature of her business. In what follows, I briefly explore Dane's life and work, showing how thoroughly engaged she was in the literary and publishing cultures of her time, as well as the London political and social scenes.

Clemence Dane: A Biographical Overview

Clemence Dane (1888–1965) was actually the pen name of Winifred Ashton.[32] Under another name, Diana Cortis, Dane began her career as an actress before becoming a famous novelist, dramatist, actress, critic, biographer, screenwriter, journalist, a radio personality and sculptor.[33] Her writing career started with the publication of her sensational lesbian-themed novel, *Regiment of Women* (1917), and she followed it with twenty bestselling novels and short stories.[34] Dane's novels, including *Regiment of Women*, *First the Blade* (1918), and *Legend* (1919), were successful and well received by critics.[35] Playwriting was a great passion for Dane, and she wrote thirty plays for theatre, radio, and television throughout her career.[36] Crime fiction was another area Dane was interested in as well. She collaborated with Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers to publish several crime-story collections.[37] Dane's influence also reached Hollywood: one of her crime novels, which she co-authored with Helen Simpson, was adapted by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1930 film *Murder!*[38] Moreover, she received an Oscar for the screenplay she wrote for Alexander

[31] Cameron, "Irreconcilable Differences," 479.
[32] Smithers, *'Therefore Imagine,'* 11.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 11, 17.
[35] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 103.
[36] Smithers, *'Therefore Imagine,'* 11, 57, 58.
[37] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 1.
[38] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 1.

Korda's film *Perfect Strangers* in 1946.[39] A professed feminist, Dane wrote for popular feminist newspapers and magazines, including *The Women's Leader* and *Time and Tide*, and served as a committee member of the feminist organization the Six Point Group.[40] Between 1922 and 1933, Dane wrote for *Good Housekeeping*, eventually becoming the magazine's editor in chief from 1923 to 1933.[41] In 1939, Dane was appointed President of the Society of Women Journalists and held this position until 1959.[42] In 1953, Dane was awarded the prestigious CBE award for her great achievements in theatre, literature and film.[43] It is clear that all of these activities are connected by her interest in women's rights. Many of Dane's ideas about women's social roles are expressed in her collection of essays, *The Women's Side* (1927), in which she also shares her views on the education system, religion, the death penalty, divorce, enfranchisement, women in business, female creativity, and personal liberty.[44]

Dane was truly valued by her contemporaries and earned the admiration of some famous literary figures. For example, after the premiere of her 1921 play *Will Shakespeare*, which portrayed Shakespeare in an irreverent light, the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre committee held an urgent meeting to protest against it.[45] This protest piqued Shaw's curiosity, compelling him to attend the play and later write a letter to Dane in which he expressed how much he had enjoyed it.[46] As for her personal life, Dane never married, and many scholars speculate that she may have been a lesbian. Her first partner, with whom she shared a home, was Elsie Arnold, to whom she dedicated *Regiment of Women*.[47] Her second partner was Olwen Bowen-Davis, to whom Dane bequeathed everything after her death.[48] Perhaps due to her closeted lesbianism, Dane was very secretive and kept her personal life private. According to Bowen-Davis, Dane refused to have her biography written.[49] She also instructed her literary executors to get rid of her letters and anything related to her personal life after her death.[50] Therefore, knowledge about Dane's life is limited but some anecdotes can be found in other sources, including the biographies of her closest friends Noël Coward and the actress Sybil Thorndike.[51] Gale discusses in detail the paradoxes surrounding Dane's status in the canon and finds it unfortunate that despite Dane's celebrity status during her day, she rarely appears in recent histories of British theatre.[52] She is a good example of how women's works can disappear into oblivion even when they are highly successful.

A Bill of Divorcement (1921): Divorce and the Home

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 27–28.
[41] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 1.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Fay Hammill, Esme Miskimmin, and Ashlie Sponenberg, eds., *Encyclopaedia of British Women's Writings, 1900–1950* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 64.
[44] Dane, *The Women's Side*.
[45] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 88–89.
[46] Ibid., 89.
[47] Ibid., 106.
[48] Ibid., 108.
[49] Smithers, '*Therefore Imagine*,' 20.
[50] Emily Hamer, *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth Century Lesbians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 87–88.
[51] Smithers, '*Therefore Imagine*,' 12; Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," 48.
[52] Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," 48.

From my perspective, Dane is one of the key figures of the period and was amongst the most lucid on the issue of divorce and its vital importance with regards to women's rights. She was no revolutionary, however. Rather, she was a reformer who wanted to see new laws passed and minor reforms made. *A Bill of Divorcement* demonstrates her dedication to sit through numerous legal debates and documents in order to craft an informed plot. The play was a hit at the box office.[53] Its success reflects an appetite among audiences at that time to see subjects highly debated in the public realm represented and discussed in the theatre. Produced at the St Martin's Theatre in 1921, it went on to be performed 400 times and was made into a popular Hollywood film in 1932.[54] The play was well received by theatre critics such as Tarn who, in an issue of *The Spectator* in 1921, admired the play and declared that its energy surpassed any play he had ever seen by any contemporary playwright except Shaw.[55] *The Graphic* hailed the play as "the best play on the London stage at the moment" and lauded Dane as a rising talent.[56] Dane appears to have had a particularly productive year in 1921 because she also wrote and staged her historical play *Will Shakespeare* that year.

A Bill of Divorcement was clearly inspired by contemporary debates surrounding the new amendments to divorce laws, which were the subject of discussion in Parliament. For example, Lord Birkenhead stated in a parliamentary debate in June 1923 that the Matrimonial Causes Acts of 1857 and 1884 were unfair to women.[57] The laws were indeed biased against women: a husband could divorce his wife for adultery, while a wife had to prove adultery aggravated by incest, rape, sodomy, bestiality, cruelty, or desertion.[58] After much debate, Members of Parliament unanimously voted "entirely to a dissolution of marriage on the one specific ground of adultery, and nothing else" for both husband and wife.[59] Subsequently, more provisions were added and divorce on the grounds of incurable insanity was recognised as a legitimate ground for divorce in the Matrimonial Causes Bill of 1937, which stated that "the cases for which divorce may be granted by this Bill are either gross cruelty, desertion or insanity in addition to adultery."[60] Although both reforms were introduced after *A Bill of Divorcement* was performed, Dane clearly anticipated this change. She situated her play in the future in 1933 and invited the audience to imagine that divorce on the grounds of insanity had been made a legitimate cause for divorce. The printed version of the play states: "The audience is asked to imagine that the recommendations of the Majority Report of the Royal Commission on Divorce v. Matrimonial Causes have become the law of the land."[61] The same possibility is explored in *The Women's Side* in which she expressed her hope that "reformers […] will continue to work for the relief of those tied to lunatics, hopeless drunkards and life convicts."[62]

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[53] Maggie B. Gale, "From Fame to Obscurity: In Search of Clemence Dane," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 121.
[54] Gale, "The Many Masks of Clemence Dane," 48.
[55] Tarn, "'A Bill of Divorcement,' by Clemence Dane, at The St. Martin's Theatre," *The Spectator*, April 9, 1921, 460. British Newspaper Archive.
[56] "'Clemence Dane' as a Dramatist," *The Graphic*, March 19, 1921, 350. British Newspaper Archive.
[57] HL Deb. (5th ser.) (26 June 1923) (54) col. 588.
[58] Kha, *A History of Divorce Law*, 2.
[59] HL Deb. (5th ser.) (26 June 1923) (54) col. 588.
[60] HL Deb. (5th ser.) (15 July 1937) (106) col. 501.
[61] Clemence Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, in *The Collected Plays of Clemence Dane*, ed. Clemence Dane (London: William Heinemann, 1961), 133.
[62] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 134.

The play's success drew attention to the issue of insanity as grounds for divorce, and several newspapers began to discuss this topic. For example, *The Sphere* published an article in 1921 titled "A Literary Letter: Madness as Grounds for Divorce." The author argued that he did not consider *A Bill of Divorcement* to be as contentious as it was made out to be, noting that seventy years earlier, another women novelist "took the town by storm" with a novel that evoked sympathy from readers by portraying "an unfortunate man whose wife was raving mad."[63] He was, of course, referring to *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, in which Rochester is shown to be "tied by an iniquitous law" to his mad wife, unlike Margaret who is, according to the article, lucky to be able to divorce the insane Hilary.[64] The review concluded by admiring Dane's objectivity in presenting different perspectives on divorce: "Clemence Dane, be it said, is not a propagandist. She presents both sides of the case with amazing aloofness."[65] Similarly, Dane's objectivity in the play was praised in *The Graphic*, which described the play as a "piece of psychology, but never of propaganda."[66]

The first aspect I find significant to address is the form of the play. *A Bill of Divorcement* can be described as a drawing-room play because it centres its narrative in the domestic sphere of the home and is firmly anchored in a specific middle-class context. Fairfield House, portrayed as a typical middle-class English home of the time, serves to evoke a collective sense of familiarity among interwar audiences. The somewhat hackneyed name 'Fairfield' is also often a place name, suggesting the family's 'natural right' of ownership. Nicholas Grene, in his study of domestic space in naturalist and realist drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describes how domestic dramas of the period used visible objects on the stage as a "metonymy" to represent larger realities, such as middle-class life: "The representative standing of the visible things the audience watches depends on them being individually specific and yet completely familiar. […] [they are] immediately recognisable as the type of any other middle-class […] home."[67] Hanna Scolnicov, in her study of the function of the drawing room in British realist dramas from the early twentieth century, highlights its importance to the middle class as a means of self-validation.[68] She notes that "[t]he drawing-room is seen as the bourgeois hallmark of success; the concrete proof of happiness and prosperity. […] The parlour is a pretentious, ostentatious show-case of the upwardly mobile who have cast aside […] modest living and thrift. "[69] Similarly, in a history tracing representations of the home, Ann Anderson has shown that the drawing room remained the heart of the upper-middle class Victorian house and stood as a space where the family strived to present a positive image to their guests and acquaintances.[70] Victorian architect Robert Kerr describes the drawing room as "the Lady's

[63] C. K. S., "A Literary Letter: Madness as Grounds for Divorce," *The Sphere*, April 2, 1921, 22. British Newspaper Archive.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] "'Clemence Dane' as a Dramatist," 350.
[67] Nicholas Grene, *Home on the Stage: Domestic Spaces in Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 6.
[68] Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 94.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ann Anderson, "Drawing Rooms: A Backward Glance—Fashioning an Individual Drawing Room," in *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns*, ed. Georgina Downey (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), 39.

Apartment, essentially," which emphasizes the strong association women historically had with the drawing room.[71]

In the same vein, Act I of *A Bill of Divorcement* presents a detailed description of the domestic setting to establish the Fairfield family's socio-economic status and create a façade of middle-class respectability. The setting is a "hall [...] used as the common-room of a country house." The stage is cluttered with domestic items such as a breakfast table that is "littered with paper and string," a "grandfather's clock" and numerous pictures of the family that are "wreathed with holly and mistletoe." The sense of Christmas and cheer is accentuated by the description of a "snowbound" garden and the fireplace "blazing."[72] Acts II and III are set in Margaret's drawing room, which is adorned with "gentle, white-walled, water-color-in-gold-frame fashion" and is "full of flowers" with a bird cage in the corner.[73]

A Bill of Divorcement embraces the everyday rituals of domestic life. It opens with a domestic scene showing Margaret Fairfield having breakfast with her aunt-by-marriage Hester on Christmas morning. They discuss mundane issues like going to church or Margaret's daughter Sydney's behaviour. In doing so, the play allows the audience to become privy to a private conversation within the home. The conflict is established early on with Aunt Hester, who is described by the stage directions as a "twitching, high-minded, elderly lady in black," giving the impression of a fearsome and unforgiving woman.[74] She is eager to exploit Margaret by making her feel guilty about her divorce and her impending marriage because Hilary, Margaret's institutionalised ex-husband, is still alive: "He is alive. You can't get away from it."[75] The wild lifestyle of Sydney, Margaret's seventeen-year-old daughter, adds even more fuel to Hester's moral concerns. This is evident from Sydney's failure to join the family for breakfast because she was "dancing till three" with her boyfriend Kit the previous night.[76] Sydney's rebellion against Aunt Hester is expressed in the way that her empty chair at the breakfast table mocks and infuriates Aunt Hester and the "old ways" she stands for.[77] The vacant chair symbolises Sydney's status as a modern woman who is able to leave, does not have to abide by common expectations and shuns dying ideals in favour of the new morals of the age. Described as "a bigger, fairer version of Margaret," Sydney does not possess her mother's meekness and compliance towards Hester.[78] Instead, she defies Hester by giving her a cigarette case for Christmas and declaring: "I'm not going to church to-day, or any day."[79]

This preview of the opening scene allows us to witness a generational conflict between Aunt Hester and Sydney. However, what matters is not the details of the strife between Sydney and Hester, but rather how the play reveals a private problem that unfolds behind closed doors. In doing so, the play echoes the popular domestic novels penned by middlebrow women authors such as E. H. Young, E. M. Delafield, Winifred Holtby, and Storm Jameson, who were widely read in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s. In their discussion of domesticity and the home in early twentieth-century fiction by women, Briganti and Mezei

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[71] Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House; or, How to Plan English Residences, from the Parsonage to the Palace; with Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans* (London: John Murray, 1865), 107.
[72] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 135.
[73] Ibid., 135, 161.
[74] Ibid., 133.
[75] Ibid., 136.
[76] Ibid., 135.
[77] Ibid., 141.
[78] Ibid., 237.
[79] Ibid.

explain that a defining characteristic of these novels is a celebration of "the everyday, the minute, the familiar."[80] Briganti and Mezei locate the origins of this exaltation of domesticity in British novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, corresponding with the rise of the figure of the "leisured middle-class woman."[81] According to Briganti and Mezei, some women writers such as Young "found amusement and pleasure in the drab and the everyday," whereas other writers voiced irritation with the "drudgery of domesticity."[82] Nevertheless, Briganti and Mezei observe that this fundamental aspect of the genre was "under attack" with the emergence of the suffrage movement at the turn of the twentieth century, which advocated for equality in marriage.[83] For instance, Delafield's *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924) and Young's *A Corn of Wheat* (1910) depict heroines who flee the ideal domestic lives of their middle-class country homes and set up flats in London.[84] Some of these narratives even reject "normalised heterosexual marital" relationships by celebrating sisterhood or female companionship.[85]

Thus, middle-class women and their private struggles within the home became central to the fiction and drama of early twentieth-century women authors. This interest in domesticity in these novels stems from the interwar period's interest in what Briganti and Mezei describe as a return to the "domestication, feminisation and privatisation of society."[86] Beddoe cites several factors which contributed to the reinforcement of the significance of the home, including the popularity of notions of "Englishness" and "a home fit for heroes," the spread of "domestically-oriented" women's magazines that glorified women's roles as mothers and homemakers, and the mass production of domestic goods.[87] According to Briganti and Mezei, as the focus in period fiction shifted from the exterior of the house to the interior, women and their domestic lives were brought to the forefront, making them "the subjects rather than the objects within domestic space."[88] Likewise, Cameron, in her study of early twentieth-century British women's theatre, argues that, following the abolition of most political and social constraints on women, playwrights like Dane and her contemporaries focused on the "emancipatory narrative" within the home, highlighting the "internal obstacles that linger after the systemic or institutional barriers are lifted."[89] She cites Cicely Hamilton's *The Brave and the Fair* (1920), Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*, Githa Sowerby's *Sheila* (1917), and Daviot's *Queen of Scots* (1934) and *The Laughing Woman* (1934) as plays that exemplify this "shift in focus […] toward the internalized ideological barriers to women's self-determination."[90] *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* by Delafield is, in my opinion, a fantastic illustration of a book from the era that captures the reality of women's lives in middle-class country houses. It details the minute-by-minute tasks of a provincial upper-middle class housewife who struggles with the everyday stresses of domestic life. The anonymous provincial woman is shown to be overwhelmed by her

[80] Briganti and Mezei, *Domestic Modernism*, 17.
[81] Ibid., 16.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 8.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 2.
[87] Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 3, 4, 90, 145.
[88] Briganti and Mezei, *Domestic Modernism*, 1.
[89] Rebecca Cameron, "The Limits of Emancipation: Changing Approaches to Feminism in Early-Twentieth Century British Women's Drama," *Women's Studies* 37, no. 2 (March 2008): 111.
[90] Ibid., 110–111.

mundane responsibilities. Her numerous tasks include running the household, caring for the children and managing the servants and their problems, in addition to her community duties. She also struggles with her wardrobe as she tries to stay up to date with the most popular fashions and hairstyles. She also attempts to write a book and the novel ends with her completing her first manuscript.[91] In the following volumes, the housewife is gradually emancipated from the mundaneness of her home life: in volume two, she moves to London; in volume three, she visits America; in volume four, she travels to Russia; and in the final instalment, she is seen working in her trousers outside the home during the Second World War.[92]

Humble refers to the prevalence of the image of the domestic sphere as "an emblem of difficult and disturbing change" in most of these novels.[93] She offers the example of Lettice Cooper's *The New House* (1936) which depicts a day in the life of an upper-middle-class family's move to a new home.[94] The central question left unanswered throughout the narrative is whether the upper-middle-class female lead would be able to break free from her "self-enslavement" in the home and pursue her ambition of working as a secretary in London.[95] Humble maintains that novels like *The New House* and *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* aim to "challenge, or at least to ironize, the growing assumption that middle-class women should find the meaning of their existence in actively caring for the home."[96] Because these works depict female protagonists who are "contained by their despised domestic roles" at the end, Humble argues that these "feminine" middlebrow novels do not provide a strong critique of the "pro-domestic ideology."[97]

The scholarship exploring the relationship between women and domesticity in middlebrow fiction by interwar women novelists is extensive, as demonstrated here and in the section of my introduction discussing middlebrow literature. I have cited a few of these in the introductory chapter as well when I discussed middlebrow literature. It is important to note that a significant portion of this scholarship is directed towards the middle class and middle-class households, often without exception. Regretfully, I have been unable to find the same level of engagement with domesticity in theatre scholarship on the interwar period. Nevertheless, there is much to be learned from McDonald's monograph on Dane. It tackles Dane's exploration of the relationship between the private and public spheres, focusing exclusively on her novels, including *Regiment of Women* (1912), *First the Blade* (1918) and *Legend* (1919).[98] McDonald argues that these novels allow their female heroines to build new self-defining and dwelling spaces, increasingly challenging repressive home conventions by "either bring[ing] domestic space and its occupants under their control or reject[ing] it.[99] This is certainly applicable to *A Bill of Divorcement*. As I see it, Margaret succeeds in redefining her relationship with the domestic sphere by walking away from Fairfield House at the end of the play. Nevertheless, her resolution remains connected to the traditional

[91] E. M. Delafied, *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* (London: Penguin Book, 2014).
[92] Following *The Diary of a Provincial Lady*, four additional volumes were published: *The Provincial Lady Goes Further* (1932), *The Provincial Lady in America* (1934), *I Visit the Soviet: The Provincial Lady Looks at Russia* (1937), and *The Provincial Lady in War-time* (1940).
[93] Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 111.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 112.
[96] Ibid., 128.
[97] Ibid., 130.
[98] Ibid., 134–144.
[99] Ibid, 8.

institution of marriage. She does not entirely reject domestic life as she remarries and starts a new life as a housewife in another household.

In the opening act of *A Bill of Divorcement*, it is revealed that Margaret remained in Fairfield House and stayed married to Hilary for fourteen years while he was confined in an asylum. She divorced him only a year before the events of the play started. She also hesitates to remarry her boyfriend of five years. This prompts her daughter Sydney to confront her. In a powerful speech, Sydney criticizes Margaret's failure to seize her freedom and exposes the broader dynamics of domesticity as a space of both comfort and control:

> What prevented you from marrying Gray ages ago? Father's been out of his mind long enough, poor man! You knew you were free to be free. You knew you were making Gray miserable and yourself miserable—and yet, though that divorce law has been in force for years, it's taken you all this time to fight your scruples. At least, you call them scruples! What you really mean is Aunt Hester and her prayer-book. And now, when you have at last consented to give yourself a chance of being happy—when it's Christmas Day and you're going to be married at New Year—still you let Aunt Hester sit at your own breakfast table and insult you with talk about deadly sin.[100]

Sydney attacks Margaret's prolonged passivity by stressing the time when she says, "ages ago," "all this time," and "for years" to highlight the time Margaret has wasted. Her phrase "free to be free" draws attention to the fact that Margaret is still emotionally and socially trapped despite her newfound legal freedom. For Sydney, Margaret's fear and inability to resist Hester's moral judgement have kept Margaret from moving forward. When Sydney mentions the divorce law being "in force for years," she points out the gap between what the law allows and what Margaret is willing to do. Sydney's sarcastic use of "scruples" implies that Margaret's indecisiveness has nothing to do with any moral qualms or any feelings of guilt about her divorce. Instead, she is concerned with social respectability, which Hester and her prayer book symbolise. The reference to Christmas and the New Year indicates a sense of renewal and transformation, but it is overshadowed by the foreboding presence of Aunt Hester at Margaret's breakfast table. The breakfast table represents domesticity and usually acts as a space for family gatherings and routine, but it becomes a site of judgement and repression. The irony here is that Margaret cannot exercise her authority in the very space she owns. "Breakfast table" and "deadly sin" are juxtaposed in the same sentence to imply that domesticity is both a refuge and a prison.

The idea of the home as a site of oppression gained symbolic significance in the first decades of the twentieth century. As a result, a critique of Victorian notions of domesticity developed and expressed itself in literary and dramatic writing. In her study of class and domesticity in British society during the first half of the twentieth century, Judy Giles explains that the "Victorian cult of domesticity," which confined women to the domestic sphere, began to be seen as "stifling, oppressive, and old-fashioned" in the late nineteenth century.[101] Similarly, Carol Dyhouse refers to the frequent "images of confinement, claustrophobia and belittlements" in literature and non-fictional writings from the 1880s to the 1930s that dealt with the domestic lives of women; the home was always portrayed as

[100] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 139.
[101] Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 3.

"a prison, or a cage (even if gilded or upholstered), where young female fledglings had their wings clipped against flight."[102] To illustrate, Dyhouse cites Florence Nightingale's 1879 essay "Cassandra" in which Nightingale expressed frustration at how restrictive the home was for women.[103] Later British feminists of the 1950s and beyond are better known for regarding the home as a place of "oppression, neurosis, and decay" and a means of "subjugating women."[104] Among these feminists are Viola Klein, Judith Hubback, and Hannah Gavron, who argued that the lack of prospects and the monotony of domestic life led to anxiety and depression among post-war housewives.[105] Dyhouse adds that criticism of the home as a confining space culminated in the image of the "doll's house" which gained popularity in feminist discourse in the early twentieth century in Britain after the production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in London in 1889.[106] Scolnicov, who examines the staging of the drawing room in *A Doll's House* (1879) and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1891), discusses how women's liberation in dramas of the early-twentieth century is symbolised in the "actual, physical act of leaving the house."[107] Nora's act of abandoning her home and slamming the door stunned spectators in the final decades of the nineteenth century.[108] It sparked contentious discussions, mainly when it was performed in England.[109] It even promoted sequels with alternative endings, including Shaw's "Still After the Doll's House" which was published in 1890.[110]

To explore the tension within the domestic sphere, *A Bill of Divorcement* uses auditory effects to highlight the fragility of its supposed stability. These sound effects foreshadow Hilary's dramatic return. In Act I, Margaret appears happy about her upcoming marriage, and her happiness is accompanied by the sound of the church bells, which she refers to as "wedding bells."[111] Church bells are traditionally associated with weddings and Mass. They symbolise joy and the promise of a new beginning. The bells, however, abruptly stop when the telephone suddenly rings. Margaret's reaction is curious; she speaks "in a strange voice" and simply says: "Yes, they stopped when the other bell rang."[112] The telephone, which was a relatively modern technology at the time and a marker of wealth and class, acts here as an external force that penetrates the domestic sphere (a telephone is also used in *The Pelican,* which I discuss later). The ringing of the telephone, which is followed by the silence of the church bells, indicates a disruption of the normal state of things. It foreshadows the upheaval caused by Hilary's upcoming return. That Margaret should speak in a "strange voice" and later "blindly" reflect her sense of foreboding which is further confirmed when she "wistfully" asks Gray: "It isn't too good to be true, is it?"[113] The presence of the telephone allows for an entirely minor yet quite effective intrusion. It

[102] Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England, 1888–1934* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 15.
[103] Ibid., 8, 9.
[104] Mark Jackson, "'Home Sweet Home:' Historical Perspectives on Health and the Home," in *Health and the Modern Home*, ed. Mark Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.
[105] Ali Haggett, "Housewives, Neuroses, and the Domestic Environment in Britain, 1945–70," in *Health and the Modern Home*, ed. Mark Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 84.
[106] Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England*, 16.
[107] Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space*, 8.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England*, 16.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 145.
[112] Ibid., 146.
[113] Ibid.

symbolises the connection of the world of the home to the outside world and, in some ways, it allows the outside world to disrupt the private space of the home.

The play demonstrates the influence of religious and Victorian morality on the issue of Margaret's divorce through Hester and other characters. It highlights their unwavering objection to divorce and adherence to traditional values. Act II has Hester quoting the Bible to remind Margaret that her divorce is no longer relevant now that Hilary has recovered his sanity. For example, Hester says Hilary arrived in time "to snatch a brand from the burning," a biblical phrase which refers to saving the soul of the wicked from eternal damnation.[114] When Margaret uneasily reminds her that she is a free woman who gained her divorce legally, Hester forebodingly responds "whom God hath joined let no man put asunder."[115] This verse, taken from the Christian Bible, specifically from the Gospel of Matthew, stresses the sanctity of marriage as a sacred bond that cannot be dissolved.[116] Dane, who criticised religious objection to divorce in *The Women's Side* as well, quoted the same verse six times, which reveals her strong frustration at the religious opposition to what she considered to be a human right.[117] The rector, who is scheduled to perform the marriage ceremony and happens to be the father of Sydney's boyfriend, is another character who supports Hester's attempts to force Margaret to conform to religious principles that forbid divorce. He is irreverently described in the stage directions as "an insignificant man, with an important manner and a plum in his mouth."[118] When he learns that Hilary is still alive but confined due to his mental illness, he vehemently refuses to officiate Margaret and Gray's wedding.[119] His hypocrisy is seen in the way his attitude changes from condemning Margaret to viewing Hilary's return as a sign of divine intervention: "Providence! It is providence […] My objection goes."[120] Dane does not specify what kind of church both Hester and the rector belong to, even when she discussed religious objections to divorce in *The Women's Side*. I, therefore, assume she is referring to the Church of England and that she found the Church of England's attitude towards divorce to be repressive. Since the play does not address religious objection to divorce in depth, I will not explore it in detail.

Dane thoroughly researched the Matrimonial Causes Acts and the clauses that fall under them, as indicated by Kit's remark to Sydney that, according to the bill, a priest is not required to remarry divorced persons.[121] This is a direct reference to clause 34 of the 1920 Matrimonial Causes Bill which states:

> A clergyman in holy orders of the Church of England shall not be compelled to solemnise the marriage of any person whose previous marriage has been dissolved either in the United Kingdom or elsewhere, and whose former husband or wife is still living, and shall not be liable to any suit, penalty or censure for solemnising or refusing to solemnise the marriage of any such person.[122]

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[114] Ibid., 169; William G. Moorehead, *Studies in the Four Gospels* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1900), 171.
[115] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 169.
[116] Matt. 19:6 (King James Version).
[117] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 120-134.
[118] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 174.
[119] Ibid., 177.
[120] Ibid., 178.
[121] Ibid., 148.
[122] HL Deb. (5th ser.) (11 May 1920) (40) col. 235

Smithers, who knew Dane long before she moved to London and lived close to her family home in Kent for many years, refers to an anecdote which confirms how personally invested Dane was in divorce and marriage laws in Britain.[123] He relates how her widowed father married her maternal Aunt Lydia in North America because it was against British law for a man to marry his wife's sister.[124] This was, however, before the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act was introduced in 1907 which lifted the ban.[125] Despite the lifting of the ban and the subsequent implementation of the Deceased's Brother's Widow's Marriage Act in 1921, Smithers confirms that religious disapproval and moral stigma continued to surround this type of marriage during the early twentieth century in Britain.[126] *A Bill of Divorcement* uses Dr Alliot, Hilary's doctor who appears in Act II, as a mouthpiece to explain how the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act (which permitted a man to wed his sister-in-law but not a woman to wed her brother-in-law) was the "beginning of the agitation against the marriage laws," which led to the creation of a commission to investigate marriage laws in Britain.[127] Dr Alliot further explains the new divorce law to the audience: "No man or woman to-day is bound to a drunkard, an habitual criminal, or […] to a partner who, as far as we know […] is incurably insane […] for more than five years."[128] This inclusion of detailed legal aspects and specific clauses from the marriage and divorce laws into the dialogue shows how dedicated Dane was to authenticity and historical context.

Despite her anxiety in the face of Hester's and the rector's objections, Margaret is determined to marry Gray. Yet, Hilary takes advantage of her feelings of guilt about her divorce to compel her to stay with him. His manipulation is a metaphor for the psychological barriers that women continued to experience even though new laws granted them greater freedoms. In this regard, the play echoes aspects of *The Women's Side*, where Dane claimed that what stands between women and their liberation from miserable marriages is their own conscience.[129] This is demonstrated in a scene between Margaret and Hilary in Act II. Margaret tells Hilary that she divorced him without his knowledge and is marrying Gray, which upsets Hilary. Dr Alliot arrives to calm Hilary and convince him to let Margaret go. After Alliot and Hilary leave, the rector arrives because he wants to know whether Hilary has truly returned.[130] Margaret is enraged by his and Hester's attempts to reassure her that the divorce "can be rescinded" and calls them "wicked."[131] Margaret is left alone and is startled by Hilary's hesitant reappearance.[132]

The stage directions describe Hilary as "too much like a hectored, forlorn child," which echoes his first appearance in Act I, in which he is shown sneaking through the French windows with his "bright eyes dancing with excitement, like a child getting ready to spring a surprise on somebody."[133] The image of Hilary as a child runs throughout the play and is significant on several levels. It symbolises his stunted emotional growth due to his long confinement in an asylum. I find this tragically ironic, given that Margaret has been confined,

[123] Smithers, *'Therefore Imagine,'* 11, 32.
[124] Ibid.,32.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 171.
[128] Ibid., 172–174.
[129] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 133–134.
[130] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 166–177.
[131] Ibid., 179.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid., 154, 179.

too, but in her own home. Hilary's vulnerability and child-like hesitation are shown in his short sentences and frequent pauses: "Yes—it's too late. It wouldn't be fair—to ask you—[…] it's just a case of—saying good-bye and going, because—because—I quite see—there's no chance—."[134] His frantic need for Margaret is emphasised in his repetitive pleas: "Listen to me! Listen to me! You don't listen. Listen to me!"[135] Hilary's speech evokes his feelings of isolation and abandonment; he begs Margaret to stay with him, yelling: "You can't drive me out—the wilderness—alone—alone—alone."[136] Hilary's reference to the wilderness reflects his sense of loss and despair. It also ignites Margaret's fear that Hilary's insanity might return if she abandons him, a fear she expresses to Gray in Act III.[137] Hilary's helplessness also touches upon Margaret's maternal instincts, which further weakens her resolve. She tells Gray that Hilary needs her because he is "weak" and that he "cried."[138] Hilary uses another tactic. He reminds Margaret of their sacred marriage vows: "But it's me you married. You promised—you promised—better or worse—in sickness and health—you can't go back on your promise."[139] Through this, Hilary persuades Margaret that breaking her marriage vows to him would be morally wrong.

What further complicates Margaret's position is Hilary's status as a war veteran, as the play implies that divorcing a war hero would be a moral violation. In Act II, Hilary delivers an emotional speech in which he frames his service in the war as an ultimate sacrifice, not only to his country but also to his family: "I've been to the war, to fight, for her, for all of you, for my country, for this law-making machine that I've called my country."[140] He paints himself as a victim of both systematic betrayal and his illness and claims that Margaret, the country, and the law "conspired" against him.[141] According to Hilary, he received nothing for his heroic sacrifice but "sixteen years in hell."[142] He thinks that his emotional and physical suffering, from both the war and his time in the asylum, are aggravated by Margaret's decision to divorce him. His rhetorical question "[c]ould I help being ill?" is meant to absolve him of any responsibility for his condition and transfer the moral burden to Margaret.[143] According to Hilary, his wartime service entitles him to certain privileges, including his wife's loyalty and forgiveness. Hilary emphasises that his illness, which caused the breakdown of their marriage, is not his fault and does not diminish his previous sacrifices.[144] In this light, Hilary's war hero status becomes symbolic of a moral high ground and that abandoning him is an act of both moral and national betrayal. Margaret seems to realize this as she admits to Gray that her sense of responsibility towards Hilary outweighs any moral or religious objections to her remarriage.[145] At the end, Margaret decides to stay at Fairfield House and allow Hilary and Hester to control her life.

My interpretation of the play's resolution necessitates a brief reference to *A Bill of Divorcement*'s discussion of eugenics because Margaret's dilemma is resolved by revealing to

[134] Ibid., 180.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., 181.
[137] Ibid., 193.
[138] Ibid, 191–192.
[139] Ibid., 181.
[140] Ibid, 173.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid., 192.

Sydney that hereditary madness is a family trait.[146] The play makes a clear reference to eugenics early on when Sydney affirms that she and her fiancé are "keen on eugenics."[147] The play touches upon the eugenic fear of passing on 'defects' in Act II when Sydney learns that Hilary, who was supposedly 'shell-shocked,' used to get "excitable" before the war, and her Aunt Grace was "out of her mind" for many years.[148] Sydney is dumbstruck: "Insanity! A thing you can hand on!"[149] Likewise, the psychologist Dr. Alliot defends Margaret's decision to leave her mentally ill ex-husband behind and supports her choice to create a new and healthy family with her future husband: "One of you must suffer. Which is it to be? The useful or the useless? The whole or the maimed? The healthy woman with her life before her, or the man whose children ought never to have been born?"[150] Here, however, the main concern of this chapter is Dane's treatment of divorce. Eugenics and the birth control movement will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

A Bill of Divorcement provides a complex resolution to Margaret's emancipation from her metaphorical confinement in Fairfield House and the oppressive forces of Hester, Hilary, and the rector. Her freedom is achieved through Sydney's sacrifice. Sydney, who questions whether it is "wicked" for her future children to be burdened with the possibility of inheriting insanity, breaks up with Kit and urges her mother to leave Hilary with her.[151] In a poignant scene between Sydney and Margaret at the end of Act III, a sad Margaret wonders about Sydney's desire to start a family: "[What about] the love—the children?" To which Sydney answers: "(strained) No children for me, Mother […] I've lost my chance forever […]. Go away, Mother! Go away quickly! This is my job not yours."[152] The stage directions paint a tragic picture of Sydney at the end: [Gray] takes the cloak and throws it around [Margaret]. They go out together. Sydney, forgotten, stands looking after them."[153] Margaret's physical departure from Fairfield House symbolizes an escape from the shame that kept her there for fifteen years. However, this happy ending is overshadowed by Sydney's tragic decision which demonstrates the high personal cost of freedom for women. Significantly, when Margaret eventually exercises her right to divorce, she does not make any major changes to her life. For example, she never considers finding a job or becoming financially independent. Instead, she leaves in the arms of another husband, and we assume she will financially rely on him.

Divorce, Class and The Russell Case in *The Pelican* (1924)

Dane's use of facts to create a captivating narrative is not unique to *A Bill of Divorcement*. It reflects a popular trend in middlebrow theatre at the time, one that other women

[146] Eugenics and the idea of population control were intensely discussed in interwar Britain and in the circles to which Dane belonged. Eugenics, which started to gain popularity at the turn of the twentieth century in Europe and North America, is an ideology grounded in science and heredity. It refers to the idea of promoting healthy reproduction and discouraging unhealthy reproduction using a variety of methods. Among these methods were sterilization, birth control, public health initiatives and environmental changes. Eugenics' ultimate goal was to produce humans who would be advantageous "to the state, the nation, the race, [and] future generations." Philippa Levine and Alison Bashford, "Introduction: Eugenics and the Modern World," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–4.
[147] Dane, *A Bill of Divorcement*, 142.
[148] Ibid., 140, 152,
[149] Ibid., 153.
[150] Ibid., 174.
[151] Ibid., 185.
[152] Ibid., 194–195.
[153] Ibid., 196.

playwrights were keen to explore too. While both *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* combine dull legal facts regarding popular debates around divorce to create an engaging plot, other plays, such as Stopes's *Our Ostriches* (1923), incorporate facts from the author's life. Other playwrights were inspired by real-life historical figures, such as Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters, and famous English monarchs including Elizabeth I. Among these plays, I discuss Dane's *Wild Decembers* (1933) and Daviot's *The Laughing Woman* (1934) in Chapter Four. Integrating fictional and real-world elements gave these plays a sense of authenticity. It made them relatable, enjoyable, and likely to achieve commercial success. At the same time, it enabled the articulation of a nuanced social critique on areas ripe for reform. In what follows, I discuss *The Pelican*, as it tackles aspects that are not foregrounded in *A Bill of Divorcement*: the ways in which divorce had distinct implications when class and inheritance were at stake.

The Pelican (1924) was the result of a collaboration by Fryn Tennyson Jesse and her husband H. M. Harwood. Tennyson Jesse and Harwood were an acclaimed couple who created several hit comedies beside *The Pelican*, such as *Billeted* (1919) and *How To Be Healthy Though Married* (1930).[154] Tennyson Jesse (born Winifred Margaret Tennyson Jesse) was the daughter of a clergyman who was the nephew of the great Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Tennyson Jesse (1888-1958) was a novelist, playwright, journalist and criminologist.[155] She was also an adventurer. *The Daily Mirror* described her in 1924 as an "interesting personality" who had coasted off North Africa, could sail a boat and had crashed an aircraft.[156] She had many literary connections as well. Her biographer and close friend Joanna Colenbrander noted that many well-known women writers including Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, G. B. Stern, Rose Macaulay, Dodie Smith and Enid Bagnold frequented her fashionable Campden Hill flat in London.[157] Tennyson Jesse married Captain Harold March Harwood in 1918.[158] Her husband was a medical doctor who wrote plays at night and practiced medicine during the day.[159] Hailing from a wealthy family; Harwood was the son of a liberal MP and the grandson of a merchant.[160] During the First World War, he served as a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC).[161] Harwood produced several successful plays of his own, including *Honour Thy Father* (1912) and *Please Help Emily* (1916).[162] Tennyson Jesse's dramatic career was boosted by Harwood's prominent position in the West End theatres. From 1919 until 1930, he served as manager of the Ambassadors Theatre.[163] Aside from their joint collaborations, he also produced some of her solo plays, including *Any House* (1925).[164] Tennyson Jesse was also a prominent novelist who published several short stories and novels. Her debut novel, *The Milky Way*, was published in 1913.[165] However, her most well-known novel is *The Lacquer Lady* (1929), which takes place during the fall of

[154] Hartley, *A Historical Dictionary of British Women*, 499.
[155] Ibid.
[156] "Author of 'The Pelican,'" *Daily Mirror*, October 21, 1924, 9. *Daily Mirror Historical Archive, 1903–2000.*
[157] Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn*, 87.
[158] Ibid., 106.
[159] Ibid., 67.
[160] Ibid., 68.
[161] Ibid., 84.
[162] Ibid., 102.
[163] Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *The Theatres of London* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), 27.
[164] Mander and Mitchenson, *The Theatres of London*, 28.
[165] Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn,* 72–74.

Upper Burma under British rule in 1885.[166] During the First World War, Tennyson Jesse worked as an independent reporter on the front; she famously reported on the Battle of Aalst in Belgium and boarded a ship to Britain a day before the Germans seized control.[167]

Tennyson Jesse was captivated by criminality or, more specifically, disregard for the law. As a journalist, she covered many sensational murder trials for *The Daily Mail*.[168] Her expertise in true crime culminated in the publication of *Murder and Its Motives* (1924), in which she categorised the motives for murder into six categories: gain, revenge, elimination, jealousy, lust of killing and [political] conviction.[169] She demonstrated her knowledge by using real historical and contemporary murder cases for each motive.[170] Her background in criminology led to an invitation to edit and write prefaces for multiple volumes of Notable British Trials.[171] The murder trial of Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters, two lovers convicted of plotting to kill Thompson's husband, particularly captivated Tennyson Jesse.[172] Although Bywaters committed the actual murder, both were hanged in January 1923.[173] Tennyson Jesse was so fixated on this case that she based her 1934 novel *A Pin to See the Peepshow* on it.[174] As has been shown, writing was a continuous professional activity over the course of ten years for her. What connects the diverse threads of her writing is that she was a social observer preoccupied with facts. Of all her work dealing with real court cases and true crime stories, I believe that *The Pelican* is the most compelling. It was certainly recognised as such at the time.

The dramatic elements of the Russell case made it ideal for theatrical adaptation. The case details are as follows: in 1922, the Honourable John Hugo Russell, son and heir of the second Baron Ampthill, petitioned the court for divorce.[175] He accused his wife, Christabel Russell, of adultery with two co-respondents and one unknown man, and asserted that his son, Geoffrey Russell, born in October 1921, was not his.[176] What made the case scandalous at the time were the intimate details which were extensively reported to the public in the newspapers. For instance, Christabel countered John Russell's claim that their "partial" intercourse could never result in a child by revealing "hunnish scenes" (implying rape or other forms of sexual violence) in which John threatened to shoot her cat or himself if she did not consent to sexual intercourse.[177] According to Christabel, this 'semi' sexual intercourse led to the pregnancy.[178] What made the case even more captivating were the strange details that emerged. For example, Christabel revealed that she was examined by a doctor who confirmed she was, despite her pregnancy, still a virgin and had an "intact

[166] Ibid., 133.
[167] Ibid., 83.
[168] Ibid., 64, 204.
[169] Fryn Tennyson Jesse, *Murder and Its Motives* (London: Heinemann, 1924), 13.
[170] Ibid., 5.
[171] See Fryn Tennyson Jesse, *Trial of Samuel Herbert Dougal*, *Notable British Trials* (Glasgow: William Hodge, 1928); and *Trial of Alma Victoria Rattenbury and George Percy Stoner*, *Notable British Trials* (Glasgow: William Hodge, 1935).
[172] Victoria Stewart, *Crime Writing in Interwar Britain: Fact and Fiction in the Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 63.
[173] Stewart, *Crime Writing in Interwar Britain*, 63.
[174] Ibid., 66.
[175] Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby*, xvii.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby,* 45, 113.
[178] Ibid.

hymen."[179] Moreover, it was revealed that John enjoyed cross-dressing as a woman, and some of his photographs in women's attire made their way to newspapers.[180]

The notorious trial was open to the public and transcripts of the case, including cross-examinations between attorneys and gynaecologists regarding the intimate details of the sexual act and Christabel's hymen, were widely published.[181] It brought all sorts of discussions regarding sex and marital relations into the public realm. Stopes commented on the case in her 1935 book, *Marriage in My Time*.[182] She even claimed that she should have been consulted in court owing to her expertise in "physiological" matters.[183] In Stopes' view, John was indeed the father as she explained that the "penetration of the woman" is not required for a women to conceive as the man's sperm "[can] travel from the external parts of the woman right up the vaginal canal."[184] When this happens, Stopes elaborated, the sperm "fuses" with the egg cell, resulting in the conception of the child.[185] Stopes appeared to be particularly moved by Christabel's case because she had found herself in a similar situation: she had to petition to annul her marriage on the grounds that her husband was impotent and that she was a virgin.[186] Unbeknownst to her, Stopes played a minor role in the Russells' marriage. According to Hillier, Christabel was evidently "disgusted" by the sex act, seeing it as the "lower side of nature," and made John promise not to consummate the marriage for a while.[187] He reluctantly agreed, but sent her a copy of Stopes' notorious sex manual *Married Love* (1918), which promoted Christabel to criticise Stopes' description of the beauty of sexual intercourse as "self-justified" and a "camouflage."[188]

In the first trial, the jury rejected the evidence linking Christabel to the two co-respondents but they were unable to reach a verdict on the "unknown" man, leading the judge to arrange a new trial.[189] The second trial found Christabel guilty of adultery with an unknown man, prompting her to appeal to the High Court but this action failed.[190] Christabel then appealed to the House of Lords in 1924, which resulted in victory and legitimacy for her son as the future Lord Ampthill.[191] The House of Lords based its verdict on a 1869 Act stating that "[t]he law of England is clear that the declarations of a father or mother cannot be admitted to bastardise the issue born after marriage. […] The child of a married woman is *prima facie* legitimate."[192] The baby was officially legitimised in 1926.[193] John, who became Lord Ampthill in 1935, and Christabel remained separated until 1937, when John

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[179] Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 177.
[180] Ibid., 185.
[181] Ibid., 180, 191.
[182] Marie Stopes, *Marriage in My Time* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1935), 153.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid., 154.
[186] Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes: Sexual Revolution and the Birth Control Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 64.
[187] Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby*, 12.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid., xvii.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby,* 30; *Russell v. Russell*, [1924] AC 687 (UKHL), https://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKHL/1924/1.html.
[193] Bland, *Modern Women on Trial*, 179.

was finally granted a divorce.[194] John passed away in 1973 and Geoffrey, his son, succeeded him as Baron Ampthill at the age of fifty one.[195] His twenty-five-year-old half-brother from John's third marriage challenged Geoffrey's claim to the title in the House of Lords the same year but failed because the House of Lords decided to uphold its fifty-year ruling.[196] The case and the details that emerged in the newspapers during the 1920s scandalised George V and led to the implementation of the Judicial Proceedings (Regulation Of Reports) Bill in 1926, which restricted the publication of divorce-related material in public newspapers.[197] This shows how printed media played an important role in influencing public opinion about divorce at that time and occasionally led to legislative changes.

The Pelican premiered at the Ambassadors Theatre in October 1924.[198] While Tennyson Jesse and Harwood adapted the broad outlines of the case, they took liberties with the details. Most importantly, they refrained from including the intimate and lurid details regarding the Russells' marriage which would have been inappropriate for the stage and would have enraged the censors. *The Pelican* was received favourably. Coward, who attended the performance, wrote to congratulate the authors: "[D]ear Brutus and Fryn. I have seldom been so moved by a play. It is perfectly written, perfectly constructed and perfectly acted. This isn't effusiveness, I really mean it. All congratulations. We left the theatre shattered."[199] Actor and manager Gerald du Maurier (Daphne du Maurier's father) was equally impressed and wrote: "Gladys [Cooper] took me to The Pelican this afternoon, and I came away with a red nose and a pain in my 'innards.' My word; what a good play! And beautifully done all round."[200] Du Maurier apparently enjoyed the play to the extent that he had it revived in 1931 at the Playhouse.[201] Du Maurier played the small role of Paul, Wanda's boss and lover, and gave the role of Wanda to Cooper, whose intense performance (together with her Parisian-imported attire) received praise in *The Daily Mirror*.[202] Nonetheless, *The Daily Mirror* noted that the play, which debuted six years ago, appeared "old-fashioned now" and that "artificial plays of the emotional type age quickly."[203] *The Evening Telegraph* complimented it as "a good play well acted" but objected to the title, which refers to the myth of the mother pelican who plucks her chest and bleeds to death to revive her offspring.[204] According to the review, the title holds no symbolic significance to the play the way Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* does and is more suited to a novel.[205] The play's popularity is demonstrated by Fox's 1926 American silent film adaptation titled *Marriage Licence?* which starred Alma Ruben as Wanda Heriot.[206] Additionally, a television

[194] Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby*, 203.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid., 203, 256.
[197] HC Deb. (5th ser.) (16 April 1926) (194) col. 737.
[198] Fryn Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood, *The Pelican: A Play in Four Acts*. London: Ernest Benn, 1926.
[199] Qtd. in Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn*, 139.
[200] Qtd. in Colenbrander, *A Portrait of Fryn*, 139.
[201] "'The Pelican Again': Gladys Cooper's Acting in Revived Play—Her Paris Frocks," *The Daily Mirror*, February 9, 1931, 4. Mirror Historical Archive.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.
[204] "The Pelican at the King's Theatre: A Good Play Well Acted," *The Evening Telegraph*, November 17, 1925, 4. British Library Newspapers.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Aubrey Solomon, *The Fox Film Corporation, 1915–1945: A History and Filmography* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 84, 300.

film adaptation directed by Lanham Titchener was produced in 1939.[207] The play also travelled across the Atlantic: it was staged in New York at the Times Square Theatre in 1925, but the authors were unable to attend.[208]

The events in Act I of *The Pelican* – the only act that is clearly influenced by the Russell case – take place in 1919 in the dining room of Sir John Heriot and Lady Heriot (Acts II, III, and IV take place seventeen years). The dining room is described as a "gloomy room of Victorian atmosphere" with "heavy mahogany furniture," bringing to mind the 600-year heritage of the family.[209] The stage directions emphasize how the room becomes "more oppressive" due to the contrast between the Victorian-style furniture and the presence of modern facilities like the telephone and electric light.[210] This contradiction indicates that the house, like its owners, remains partially trapped in the past and cannot escape the influence of tradition and class. The Heriots discuss the outcome of the divorce case, but their dialogue provides no exposition or background information to the audience regarding the details of the case. For example, Lady Heriot wonders, without going into further detail, and without indicating who the child is and what the verdict is: "Why was another case necessary? If the child is not illegitimate, what did the verdict mean?"[211] The fact only becomes clear halfway through Act I when Cheriton, the Heriots' attorney, appears to discuss the illegitimacy case they want to file against Wanda and her child. This suggests that the play's original audience was probably aware that the play was based on the well-known Russell case.

The Pelican sheds light on the devastating social implications of illegitimacy for a child and the social downfall for the divorced woman. These issues become clear with the Russells' case: Christabel's desperate need to defend her child's right to the title and protect her reputation from being labelled a "loose" woman prompted her to spend all of her remaining money on an appeal to the Supreme Court and then the House of Lords.[212] Moreover, in his closing statement in the second trial, Christabel's attorney implored the jury not to condemn the baby's future and Christabel's reputation with illegitimacy: "Don't go to your homes with the thought that in twenty years' time, when this child has grown up into the living image of this man, he will be branded with the infamy that cannot be redressed that his mother was a woman of no reputation, and he was a nobody's child."[213] In her first appearance in the play, Wanda is depicted as an unhappy woman who is judged and falsely convicted of adultery. Modelled on Christabel, she is shown to be the person who suffers the most: she never acknowledges being an adulterer and there were no witnesses to defend her. Yet, her admission on the stand that she 'loves' her male friends and her flight once she learned of the pregnancy worked against her in court by proving her infidelity and helping Marcus obtain a divorce.

The Pelican significantly deviates from the actual details of the case by making Wanda's child illegitimate: the real Russell baby retained his legitimacy. This change not only adds dramatic tension but also highlights the suffering of children as a result of divorce,

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[207] "Television," *The Daily Mirror*, August 22, 1939, 18. Mirror Historical Archive.
[208] "'The Pelican' in Times Square," *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, September 10, 1925, 9. Daily Mail Historical Archive.
[209] Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, *The Pelican*, 11, 16.
[210] Ibid., 11.
[211] Ibid., 12.
[212] Hillier, *The Virgin's Baby*, xvii.
[213] Qtd. in Bland, *Modern Women on Trial*, 198.

which is a weight women often bear. In this scene, Wanda is shown to be aware that having her child labelled as illegitimate would have disastrous consequences for their future in a society where illegitimacy is highly stigmatised, especially in the aristocratic circles in which the Heriots move. Therefore, she sacrifices her pride to fight for her son one last time by imploring the Heriots to take him at the end of Act I. The stage directions indicate the strain that the divorce proceedings have taken on her: "As Wanda sits, the light falls on her face, showing a woman at the very extremity of her endurance, her nerves strained to breaking-point."[214] This portrayal demonstrates how the court battle and the consequences of the trial have damaged her both emotionally and physically. She nonetheless shows admirable dignity: she remains composed in the face of Lady Heriot's taunting and chooses to put her child's future first. In this scene, Wanda attempts several things at once. First, she tries to leverage Sir John Heriot's desperate desire for an heir: "You want a grandson—an heir—a Heriot to carry on the family."[215] Then, she repeatedly confirms to Marcus that Robin is without a doubt his son.[216] Finally, she makes the Heriots an offer that comes at the personal expense of losing her baby but it shows how determined she is to give her child a chance at social respectability: "If you want to take him as yours, you can; I won't interfere—I won't claim him—I won't even see him."[217] Wanda's hurried offer indicates her dread of seeing her son lose his social prospects. She seems aware that her already fragile status as a woman divorced for adultery will be further complicated by the illegitimacy of her child, and seems to dread appearing as a 'fallen' woman of questionable morality.

Wanda delivers a powerful speech at the end of Act I. It reveals her profound sense of entrapment within the Heriot's household. It also explains the deeper motivation behind her decision to leave and frames her departure as an act of resistance against the oppressive force of upper-class morality. In this speech, Wanda emphasises how the Heriot's aristocratic mansion was an oppressive space in which she felt confined:

> Do you think I want you to believe me? Do you think I *want* you to take him? My child! The only thing I've got left? To keep him here, where I shall never see him—here in this house of bitterness and God-forsaken respectability, where I've spent the most miserable years of my life. (*Turning on Marcus*) You asked me why I ran away. I'll tell you. I ran away because I couldn't breathe here any longer. When I knew I was going to have a child I felt that if I stayed here it would be poisoned— (*to herself*) all the unkindness, all the hatred![218]

Her speech paints Heriot House as a place full of negativity and a false façade of upper-class morality. Wanda finds this mansion to be occupied by individuals who are as oppressive as the mansion itself and have no genuine love or kindness towards her or her child. The word "here," repeated multiple times, emphasizes her deep distaste for this house and everything related to it. Her exclamations indicate her profound feeling of distress. Her fear that her child will be "poisoned" if she stays there shows how psychologically damaging and toxic she perceives the Heriots' home to be, much like real poison. This speech is important because it reveals that Wanda's escaped out of desperation rather than guilt. Her escape from this

[214] Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, *The Pelican*, 25.
[215] Ibid., 28.
[216] Ibid., 26.
[217] Ibid., 27.
[218] Ibid., 28.

oppressive house is a statement of resistance that challenges their false accusations of infidelity. In spite of her poignant speech, Marcus and his parents reject her son. This prompts Wanda to declare that the Heriots will never have anything to do with her son again. She then exits "violently," leaving the door open.[219] The act of leaving the door open rather than slamming it is symbolic. It symbolises Wanda's escape from this stifling house into freedom and the possibility of a new beginning granted to her by the divorce. However, leaving the door open also implies that the connection with the Heriots is still open and that reconciliation is possible. This is evidenced by Marcus' return to Wanda's life and their subsequent remarriage.

The following three acts depict Wanda's life after the divorce. She is shown to have enjoyed a prosperous seventeen years: she is living comfortably with her son in Paris and is thriving in an undisclosed business venture. She also has a lover who wishes to marry her. In showing us Wanda's happiness post-divorce, I argue that the play emphasizes the tension between what could have happened to Wanda as a divorced woman and what mercifully did. The play shows that divorce can provide women greater freedom. It also suggests that she and her son could have suffered a great deal had her life taken a different direction. In Act II, it is revealed that Wanda faced financial problems when she first arrived in Paris. Not many details are provided, but her maid Anna mentions that Wanda had worked as a stenographer for £3 a week.[220] Act II of *The Pelican* revisits the issue of money again. It is revealed that Marcus regretted how the divorce unfolded and asked Cheriton to find Wanda to arrange a financial allowance for her.[221] Through small allusions such as these, *The Pelican* sheds light on the financial strain of divorce; in contrast, *A Bill of Divorcement* never discusses the costs of divorce nor the hardships faced by Margaret: ironically, she continues to live an affluent life, despite being divorced and unemployed. This paradox has been noted by Clark, who notes how *A Bill of Divorcement* obfuscates the way Margaret gained her divorce and the financial struggles she might have faced.[222] Clark suggests that the play prioritises the "psychological aspect" over the economic.[223]

I must stress that for many British women in the early-twentieth century, the ability to obtain divorce was a matter of class. This was mainly due to the high costs of legal proceedings and insufficient spousal maintenance. This made divorce a choice primarily only available to the wealthy. The expenses of divorce became a significant problem that was discussed by many concerned parties. For example, the Women's Co-operative Guild raised this issue in their 1911 report to the Royal Commission on Divorce, stating that in cases of divorce, the wife is entitled to "housekeeping money" because "it is the utter impossibility of supporting young children on a woman's wage, especially if she has ceased wage earning for some years and has household work to do, that binds the mother of children to her husband far more strongly than the law."[224] Furthermore, spousal and separation maintenance was debated in Parliament, which led to the introduction of several bills under the Married Women Act of 1895. In 1920, the Lord Chancellor introduced a bill "for the

[219] Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, *The Pelican*, 29.
[220] Ibid., 36.
[221] Ibid., 56.
[222] Michael J. Clark, "A Bill of Divorcement: Theatrical and Cinematic Portrayals of Mental and Marital Breakdown in a Dysfunctional Upper-Middle-Class Family, 1921-1932," in *Health and the Modern Home*, ed. Mark Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 30.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Women's Co-operative Guild, *Working Women and Divorce* (New York: Garland, 1980), 35.

maintenance of the children of the marriage under sixteen."[225] He proposed an increase to the alimony granted to the separated wife with children, which was £2 in the original bill, and demanded that "[…] in addition to the £2 which the husband may now be ordered to pay for the support of the wife in such a case, he may be also ordered to pay 10s. a week for each child."[226] The costs of the proceedings of divorce were also discussed, as expressed by Mr Randell who commented in the House of Commons in 1920 on the limitations of the current divorce laws in having "practically one law for the rich and one for the poor, and that those who could not afford to make use of the divorce law […] were practically denied the value of it."[227] In addition, attorneys were expensive and divorce cases must be conducted by the High Court of London, which increased the expenses on the poor.[228] Due to the costs of divorce, over 87,000 separation and maintenance orders were issued for poor people between 1897 and 1906.[229] Between 1901 and 1919, more than 7,500 petitioners per annum were granted a separation order, while only 800 were granted divorces due to the associated expense.[230]

In *The Pelican*, despite not receiving any spousal alimony, Wanda leads a comfortable life. However, her lifestyle is jeopardised when Marcus shows up in Act IV with a proposal to remarry to ensure that Robin receives the army commission and all the perks that come with the Heriot name: "There is the estate-the title-everything. He's the last. It is all his, by right."[231] When Marcus implies that Wanda is being selfish by declining to give Robin all of his desires, Wanda responds that she has made significant sacrifices for Robin all her life and that he should understand her decision to marry her lover, Paul, because Paul represents "the one chance of happiness [she's] ever had."[232] Robin unhappily accepts his mother's decision, but makes her feel guilty by saying he will reject the army commission if it is not under the Heriot name.[233] Wanda, devastated, begs him not to resent her: "Don't hate me, Robin! Don't hate me!."[234] Then "she embraces him but he keeps his back to her," the stage directions indicate.[235] Wanda's repeated pleas to Robin not to hate her show her fear of losing his affections. His turning of his back indicates his desire to create a distance between them to emotionally manipulate her. Even more frightened by Robin speaking "coldly" to her, Wanda eventually gives in and consents to marry Marcus.[236]

The play concludes on a tragic note. According to the stage directions, Wanda reacts with "utter desolation" to Cheriton's remark that she will receive Robin's "love and gratitude" as a "reward" for her sacrifice.[237] She states that it will be Marcus, not her, who receives that because he will give Robin everything he desires. The stage directions highlight Wanda's suffering, resignation and deep anguish: "Wanda stands motionless, wiping away

[225] HL Deb. (5th ser.) (29 November 1920) (42) col. 712.
[226] Ibid.
[227] HC Deb. (5th ser.) (14 April 1920) (127) col. 1759.
[228] Richard I. Morgan, "The Introduction of Civil Legal Aid in England and Wales, 1914–1949," *Twentieth Century British History* 5, no. 1 (November 1994): 46.
[229] Pat Thane, *Happy Families? History and Family Policy* (London: British Academy, 2010), 29
[230] Ibid.
[231] Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, *The Pelican*, 91.
[232] Ibid., 93.
[233] Ibid., 101.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid., 101–102.
[237] Ibid., 102.

her tears. The telephone bell rings."[238] With the ringing of the telephone, reality intrudes into her moment of grief. When Wanda picks up the telephone and hears Paul's voice on the receiver, she "slowly puts back the receiver and lets the telephone fall forward in her lap."[239] Her gesture symbolises her decision to relinquish control over her life and happiness for the sake of others.

Throughout this chapter, I have pointed out many parallels between Dane's and Tennyson Jesse and Harwood's plays about divorce. A meaningful parallel can be drawn between Wanda and Sydney, who both sacrifice their happiness and plans for a loved one; in each case, the primary obstacle to happiness is a man. Although men are not the main focus of these plays and serve as supporting characters with various functions, they nonetheless play crucial roles in these female-centred dramas. The men in *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* are portrayed as incompetent and a hinderance to women's progress. In *A Bill of Divorcement*, Margaret is surrounded by either selfish and manipulative men like Hilary and the rector, or weak and inactive men like her fiancé, Gray, and Kit, Sydney's boyfriend. It is only her daughter who gives her a way out of her dilemma. In *The Pelican*, Marcus, Wanda's ex, and his son Robin coerce her in the end to give up everything for them, not caring about her feelings and needs. Even her lover, Paul, is as passive as Gray in Dane's play. While the authors' exact intentions behind portraying male characters this way remain a matter of speculation, it could be an attempt to show how disadvantaged Margaret and Wanda are as divorced women; they receive no real support from the men around them and have to fight a system that limits their options and keeps them trapped, even if they gain a few legal rights. Additionally, in making the men in both plays the cause of women's suffering, *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* carry a profound message: women will never be free as long as they allow men to intrude on their happiness. True liberation is not simply granted by law but must come from within through their strength and determination. It is embodied in their ability to resist a society that attempts to confine them in their homes, resist the men who compel them to compromise what makes them happy, and, most significantly, resist the inclinations that drive them to give up.

[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid.

Chapter Two
Eugenics and Birth Control: Marie Stopes

In this chapter, I discuss two plays by Marie Stopes: *Vectia* (1926) and *Our Ostriches* (1923). The messages in these plays complement her work in real life; she dedicated herself to teaching people about sexual pleasure and to helping mothers through her birth control clinic. Therefore, it is fair to say that her considerable efforts offered women of all social classes greater control over their bodies and liberated them from the risks of unwanted pregnancies. Nevertheless, through my analysis of *Vectia* and *Our Ostriches*, as well as Stopes' life and activism, I argue that Stopes' efforts to give women bodily autonomy were constricted by her views on class because she believed that the type of sexual education women should receive depended on their social and marital status: if a woman was from the upper or middle class and married, she should be educated about the values of sexual pleasure.[1] However, unmarried women and working-class women should not be taught about the pleasures of sex.[2] I demonstrate, through a close reading of the plays, that her birth control efforts were subject to the same double standards: she advocated birth control and sterilisation of the working-class while encouraging upper and middle-class women to procreate to improve the 'racial' composition of the population. In addition, her plays and public advocacy reveal an effort to reinforce traditional gender roles for upper- and middle-class women by promoting the notion that wives could still fulfil their wifely role and improve the 'racial' and national profile by giving birth to white, healthy, upper-middle-class children without it becoming a point of subjugation and discomfort. In a eugenicist ideal, she pushed for women to embrace their responsibilities and take pleasure in them.

The first play that I will discuss is *Vectia*. *Vectia* was never performed. The play was banned by the censor due to its depiction of male impotence. Heavily informed by Stopes' first marriage, the play, which ends with the female protagonist Vectia leaving her 'impotent' husband, implies that Vectia could only achieves liberation after gaining knowledge about sex. The play strongly insinuates that the husband's impotence is due to his homosexuality, which leads Vectia to choose a heterosexual man who can give her a child. In this way, the play promotes reproduction rather than sexual pleasure as the main purpose of marriage. Moreover, it emphasises the eugenic notion that an upper-middle-class white like Vectia has a 'racial' duty to give birth to healthy babies. The second play I discuss is *Our Ostriches*, which further reveals Stopes' contempt and intolerance for the working class. At first glance, the play appears to carry a message of emancipation for poor mothers by teaching them about birth control. Nonetheless, the play's message is tainted by a eugenicist urge to stop the reproductive rate of the 'lower' classes because it advocates the sterilisation of working-class mothers. However, the sympathetic way in which Stopes portrays working-class mothers in *Our Ostriches* and the fact that she made it her life's

[1] See Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995).

[2] Stopes' 1918 sex manual, *Married Love*, in which she discussed at length sexual pleasure between married couples, is explicitly aimed at women of the upper and middle classes, while her manual, *A Letter to Working Mothers on How to Have Healthy Children and Avoid Weakening Pregnancies* (London: Mother's Clinic for Constructive Birth Control, 1931) included blunt and straightforward contraceptive advice to working-class mothers and no discussion of sexual pleasure. This discrepancy in her attitude is evidenced in *Our Ostriches* as well; the play focuses on contraception without mention of sexual pleasure.

mission to improve their lives indicate that she believed her eugenicist political agenda was a kindness to them and that sterilisation would save their lives.

The central paradox this chapter brings to light is how someone with such prejudices and a deep resentment of those who are different could work so hard to improve the well-being of women and be widely influential. Investigating the convoluted legacy of Stopes provides insight into the complex relationship between British feminism, the birth control movement and the eugenics movement. It provides a perspective on what these movements did for women in terms of emancipation and reveals that although women were beginning to gain access to birth control and sexual knowledge, they were still restricted by class and eugenicist ideas which imposed the belief that their primary role was to be mothers for the betterment of the 'race.'[3] In the following section, I explore Stopes' life and work, as her biography significantly influences both plays examined here. Although the majority of scholarly work on Stopes focuses on her biography and scientific accomplishments, her dramatic writing has received some, albeit limited, critical attention.[4] I address this gap by examining Stopes' theatrical work in light of her eugenicist views and feminism, as well as by exploring her views on the theatre as a medium and a political tool. In doing so, this chapter contributes to a wider scholarly field, demonstrating that the celebration of eugenics as a movement was more ingrained in interwar British culture and British feminism than is commonly believed.[5]

Marie Stopes: A Biographical Overview

Dr Marie Carmichael Stopes (1880-1958) was a renewed scientist of palaeobotany, a sexologist and a birth control pioneer.[6] Her mother, Charlotte Carmichael, was a Victorian suffragette and a well-respected Shakespearean scholar, while her father, Henry Stopes, owned a brewing business and was interested in fossils which influenced his daughter's passion for palaeobotany later.[7] She led an illustrious career in science, earning a BSc in Botany from University College London in 1902 in just two years and a DSc from the University of Munich in 1904.[8] She was the first woman in Britain to hold the position of

[3] The belief that women were naturally suited for motherhood in service of the nation strongly influenced social attitudes and behaviours in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout this thesis, I cite several primary sources from the interwar period that promote these ideas, including G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene* (London: Appleton, 1909); Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex Extinction* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920); Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995); Marie Stopes, *Wise Parenthood: A Practical Sequel to 'Married Love'* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1918); Marie Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood: A Book for Those Who Are Creating the Future* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921); Anthony Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London: Constable & Co., 1929); Havelock Ellis, *A Study of British Genius* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926); and Osias Schwarz, *General Types of Superior Men* (Boston: Badger, 1916).

[4] Some recent work has been done on her drama, including Helen Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Esther Beth Sullivan, "Vectia, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," *Theatre Survey* 46, no. 1 (2005): 65–86; and Christina Hauck, "Through a Glass Darkly: 'A Game of Chess' and Two Plays by Marie Stopes," *Journal of Modern Literature* 21, no. 1 (1997): 51–67.

[5] Pioneering work on the intersection of scientific and evolutionary ideas with theatre has been done by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[6] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, xiii.

[7] Ibid.,23–27.

[8] Ibid., 3.

Lecturer of Science at the University of Manchester in 1904.[9] In 1906, she received another DSc from University College London, becoming the youngest Doctor of Science in Britain.[10] During her postgraduate studies in Munich, she fell in love with Kenjiro Fujii, a visiting professor from Tokyo's Imperial University, who was married, but the relationship ended in 1909.[11] Stopes claimed that the cause was "his weak and ever-weakening body could not bear the strain of masculine desire."[12] This implies that Stopes perceived Kenjiro as sexually impotent. June Rose, one of Stopes' biographers, speculates that Stopes' heartbreak at the hands of Kenjiro could be one of the reasons why she disapproved of interracial marriages later.[13] This episode also demonstrates Stopes' propensity to convert personal failures and grudges into political ideology. Stopes later accused her first husband, Reginald Ruggles Gates, a Canadian biologist she met in 1911 whilst conducting fieldwork for the Canadian government, of being unable to consummate their marriage for three years.[14] She argued that she was still a virgin and used this as grounds for annulment, which she obtained in 1916.[15] Stopes went on to marry the wealthy aviator and philanthropist Humphrey Verdon-Roe, who had been interested in birth control long before he met her.[16] He encouraged her to pursue this cause and provided financial support.[17]

To understand why her first marriage failed, Stopes embarked on a mission to learn about sex and spent hours in the British Museum reading about the cultural and physiological aspects of it.[18] The result was a book which, according to what Stopes told the American birth-control pioneer Margaret Sanger, would "electrify England."[19] Stopes became a celebrity overnight when her sex book *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* was published in March 1918.[20] The book stated that its purpose was to "increase the joys of marriage" by helping married people solve their sexual problems.[21] Although Stopes' mention of contraception in *Married Love* was brief, it was sufficient for her to received hundreds of letters requesting more information about birth control.[22] Her interest in birth control was first piqued when she met Margaret Sanger in 1915.[23] Sanger, who coined the phrase birth control, showed some birth control devices to Stopes, such as the French pessary (an older version of the cervical cap).[24] Eight months after the publication of *Married Love*, Stopes published a birth control manual: *Wise Parenthood: A Practical Sequel to "Married Love"* in 1918.[25] Stopes felt that this work would

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 42.
[11] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography* (London: Virago: 1977), 46–57.
[12] Qtd. in Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 54.
[13] June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 57.
[14] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, xiv, 66.
[15] Ibid., 64.
[16] Ibid., 76.
[17] Ibid., 76, 80.
[18] John Peel, "Introduction," in *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995), 10.
[19] Qtd. in Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 116.
[20] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 103,105.
[21] Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995), 31.
[22] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 157–158.
[23] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 90.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Marie Stopes, *Wise Parenthood: A Practical Sequel to "Married Love"* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1918), iv.

not reach working-class mothers and that they were more in need of contraceptive knowledge than upper and middle-class mothers, which is why she published a 15-page-pamphlet entitled *A Letter to Working Mothers on how to have Healthy Children and Avoid Weakening Pregnancies* in 1919.[26] Contrary to the flowery depiction of sexual pleasure in *Married Love*, her manual for working-class mothers had very practical and blunt advice regarding contraception. It was distributed in poor neighbourhoods and, later, in her clinic.[27] In 1919, she was appointed a member of the National Birth-Rate Commission in recognition of her efforts.[28] In March 1921, Stopes and her husband finally opened the Mothers' Clinic for Constructive Birth Control, Britain's first birth-control clinic in Holloway, London.[29] She also founded the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress in 1921 and her own newspaper, *Birth Control News,* in 1922.[30] Social welfare was a major focus of Stopes' work for the rest of her life. *Radiant Motherhood* (1920), *Sex and the Young* (1926), *Enduring Passion* (1928) and *Mother England* (1929) are just some of her works in this field. *The Truth about Venereal Diseases* (1921) and *Contraception (Birth Control): Its Theory, History, and Application* (1923), for example, were written expressly for the scientific community.[31] Stopes was a highly controversial figure who fascinated many of her contemporaries. In fact, she has been the subject of eight biographies that are filled with intriguing stories.[32]

Beside her welfare activities, Stopes ventured into drama early on. During a trip to Japan on a grant from the Royal Society (being the first woman to do so) to study coal fossils, she became fascinated with Japanese Noh plays.[33] Together with the Japanese Professor Joji Sakurai, she translated several Japanese Noh plays and published them in 1913 under the title *Plays of Old Japan*.[34] Stopes described these plays as "unique, exquisite, individual and so full of charm" and stated that the language barrier makes it "a great loss to the Western World."[35] However, her interest in Japanese Noh plays is not reflected in her own works, which remain conventional. The earliest of her original plays include *Conquest or a Piece of Jade* (1917), *Gold in the Wood* (1918) and *The Race* (1918).[36] Her early attempts at playwriting were mediocre, as demonstrated by Shaw's reaction to *The Race*, which Stopes sent him to review. Shaw told her to give up drama altogether "until the stage interests [her] as seriously as fossils do."[37] Stopes, clearly undeterred, replied to him promising to improve

[26] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 174.
[27] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 70.
[28] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 124.
[29] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, xiv.
[30] Ibid., 83.
[31] Peter Eaton and Marilyn Warnick, *Mary Stopes: A Checklist of her Writings* (London, Croom Helm, 1977), 30–36.
[32] Alymer Maude, *The Authorized Life of Marie C. Stopes* (London: William & Norgate, 1924); Alymer Maude, *Marie Stopes: Her Work and Play* (London: Peter Davies, 1933); Keith Briant, *Marie Stopes: A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962); Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1977); June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); Harry Verdon Stopes-Roe and Ian Scott, *Marie Stopes and Birth Control* (London: Priority Press, 1974); Stephanie Green, *The Public Life of Charlotte and Marie Stopes* (London: Routledge, 2013); Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes: Sexual Revolution and the Birth Control Movement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
[33] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 44.
[34] Marie Stopes and Joji Sakurai, *Plays of Old Japan: The Nō* (London, Heinemann, 1913).
[35] Stopes and Sakurai, *Plays of Old Japan,* 2.
[36] Eaton and Warnick, *Mary Stopes: A Checklist of her Writings*, 47.
[37] Qtd. in Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 97.

herself.[38] Stopes also reportedly sent *Gold in the Woods* to Coward, who replied that the play gave him an "unpleasant sensation of vilely sophisticated decadence."[39] In spite of their criticism, Stopes felt confident in her love for the theatre. In her preface to *Vectia*, she called the theatre her "chief interest and delight, the complement to the hard intellectual grind of academic science on the one hand and, on the other, to the torturing personal sacrifice involved in [her] psychological work for the community."[40] Her next play, *Our Ostriches* (1923), is regarded as her most successful play and became remembered for its explicit birth control and eugenicist propaganda. *Our Ostriches* is, in fact, a replacement for *Vectia*; the latter was banned by the Lord Chamberlain, who told Stopes he did not object to a single word but he "[could not] allow the theme."[41]

The story behind the censorship of *Vectia* and the subsequent creation of *Our Ostriches* reveals the shifting boundaries of acceptability in 1920s British theatre. Stopes, who published *Vectia* in 1926, along with a "Preface on the Censorship," argued that there was no reasonable justification for the banning of *Vectia* because "there is no adultery, no prostitute, no illegitimate child, no erotic intensity, no sex vice of any sort."[42] Stopes' outrage is understandable. *Vectia,* according to Sullivan, was one of a few plays banned during the 1920s, a decade when many previously banned plays were finally authorised for release.[43] Notable among these were Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1902), which addresses prostitution, and Harley Granville Barker's *Waste* (1907), which makes clear references to abortion.[44] Despite banning *Vectia*, Lord Cromer, who served as the Lord Chamberlain from 1922 until the late 1930s, approved *Our Ostriches* only after Stopes removed references to syphilis and reattributed lines about sterilisation to a male doctor, rather than the play's female lead as originally intended.[45] The play's licensing upset the Westminster Catholic Federation, which objected to the play's attack on Catholic views against contraception.[46] The Lord Chamberlain's office declared that it could not take sides on controversial matters.[47] This incident reflects the Lord Chamberlain's increasing tolerance: he tolerated birth-control plays as long as they did not promote abortion as a birth control method, but he drew the line at more sensitive topics like male impotence, which he deemed offensive and unsuited for the stage.[48] Although Stopes removed clear references to the husband's homosexuality, *Vectia* was refused a license again.[49] Another of her plays, *The Vortex Dammed*, was not licensed in 1926 and was refused again in 1930, even after being revised.[50] Stopes consistently returned to the theme of male impotence: *The Vortex Dammed* refers several times to male impotence, while another of her banned plays, *Her*

[38] Qtd. in Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 97.
[39] Qtd. in Barry Day, ed., *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 69–70.
[40] Marie Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," in *A Banned Play and a Preface on the Censorship* (London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, 1926), 3.
[41] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 15.
[42] Ibid., 1.
[43] Sullivan, "*Vectia*, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," 80.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900–1968: Volume One: 1900–1932* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), 216.
[46] Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama*, 216.
[47] Ibid., 217.
[48] Ibid., 217–18.
[49] Ibid., 218.
[50] Helen Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing, Censure and Suppression* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36–37.

Wedding Night, depicts a groom who could not consummate his marriage and left his bride unsatisfied.[51] In 1923, Stopes was able to produce one film that escaped censorship which she originally titled *Married Love*.[52] The British Board of Film Censors approved the film on the condition that the title and a few scenes were altered, so it was renamed *Maisie's Marriage*.[53] The film is loosely based on the notion of women's sexual freedom which she advocated in her sex manual, *Married Love*.[54]

In the Preface, Stopes narrated the story of the play's production, and how confident she, the manager and the producer were that the play would be licensed.[55] When the play was banned, Stopes refused to abandon *Vectia'*s slot to another play or revival and told her producer: "Give me a day, and I'll give you a play."[56] Her preface describes how she composed a new birth control play in a single day with the assistance of a Central Criminal Court clerk who typed it in six hours.[57] Stopes was pleased with *Our Ostriches*' success and told those who opposed its propagandistic tone that the Lord Chamberlain had forced her hand.[58] Stopes' constant run-ins with censorship and her repeated revisions show how navigating censorship in the 1920s was not easy. There was a thin line between what was considered morally acceptable and what was not on the stage, particularly when it came to women. As Freshwater argues in her study of censorship and Stopes' plays, the opposition Stopes encountered in her defiant attempt to represent "sticky" themes like birth control, sterility, and childbirth on the stage exposes deeply rooted cultural fears around sexuality and the feminine form.[59] Stopes shows resilience in pushing the boundaries of censorship, even if she failed sometimes. This determination is something that many of her contemporaries never dared to pursue.

Anxious to prove herself as a playwright, Stopes solicited feedback on *Vectia* from famous authors such as Shaw, Coward, Alfred Sutro and Thomas Hardy. Her need to be endorsed by prominent names can be explained in several ways. On a personal level, *Vectia* was her story. Therefore, Stopes may have wanted to see her depiction of herself as the victim in the story validated. On a professional level, the play faced repeated bans. Earning praise from influential dramatists like Hardy and Coward might have been her way of challenging the censor's decision. Sawin, Sutro's biographer, shares a similar opinion. He suggests that Stopes approached these dramatists in an effort to get the play's licensed.[60] In her preface, she admitted to something similar: "If a serious play is banned by the Lord Chamberlain, its author should have the right to obtain […] a unanimously signed and written statement by any twelve authors of recognised standing that his play should be licensed."[61] A third possible reason is that Stopes, who had already written several plays before *Vectia*, hoped to establish herself in London's theatre world as a professional playwright by seeking acknowledgement from her peers. Stopes, a social activist, saw an opportunity to advance her work on the ground by using the theatre. She may have believed

[51] Hauk, "'Through a Glass Darkly,'" 116.
[52] "Married Love Film Surprise," *Birth Control News*, July 1923, 1.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 72.
[55] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 4.
[56] Ibid., 5.
[57] Ibid., 5–6.
[58] Ibid., 6.
[59] Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain*, 35–48.
[60] Lewis Sawin, *Alfred Sutro: A Man with a Heart* (Niwot: University of Colorado, 1989), 209.
[61] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 45.

that establishing herself as a dramatist would provide her with easy access to a new medium with wider reach.

Nonetheless, the responses she received were far from encouraging, which deeply upset her. Hardy's review of *Vectia* particularly frustrated Stopes. He found the whole premise of the play entirely implausible: "It seems to me that the situation and events are improbable for art, which must keep far within actual truth. I cannot conceive a young woman not an imbecile who has been married three years being in such crass ignorance of physiology."[62] The virginity of Vectia during her marriage was, for Hardy, completely improbable. He also questioned the suitability of the subject-matter to the stage, remarking: "The question arises, is an abnormality ever a fit subject for a work of art, even though not immoral."[63] Sutro echoed Hardy's concerns. He also expressed scepticism about the plausibility of Vectia's ignorance: "Is such ignorance possible? Could a healthy woman have been happy with a man for three years under such circumstances? There, to me, is the blot and blemish of your play."[64] Like Hardy, Sutro felt uneasy about the subject matter of impotence as a dramatic theme and claimed that such a topic required a strong dramatic motive to justify its presence on the stage: "Impotence in man is an appalling and ghastly infliction; and could only be justified as a theme for the stage if some great dramatic motive underlay it. I don't see that motive in your play."[65] According to Sawin, Stopes perceived Sutro and Hardy's comments as attempts to question her allegations that she remained a virgin throughout her marriage to Ruggles Gates.[66] Stopes even revealed personal details about her marriage to Sutro in an effort to persuade him that Vectia's account was her own.[67] The piece, she said, was an "unadulterated biography," and she wrapped up her letter by stating "*I* am Vectia."[68] Sutro was moved by her letter but thought it was too intimate and decided to destroy it.[69]

Despite Stopes' efforts, *Vectia* never saw the light of day on stage. The only performance to ever be staged was at the Savoy Theatre in Sydney, Australia, in 1929 and 1932. This was due to the efforts of an Australian birth-control activist named Marion Piddington, who had previously met Stopes at a eugenic conference.[70] Unfortunately, the play was not a great success according to Australian newspapers. One magazine described it as a "a stalking-horse for the author's sex propaganda."[71] The review attributed the play's failure to reasons similar to those referred to by Hardy and Sutro: the "incredible situation" it portrays, which involve a man unaware of his "physical disabilities" and a wife ignorant of basic facts about marriage.[72] What I find extraordinary about the performance is that men were "not admitted" to the performance and that the ushers and ticket sellers were women.[73] I could not find any explanation for this unusual decision to exclude men from

[62] Qtd. in Thomas Hardy, "Thomas Hardy to Marie Stopes, April 16, 1926," in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Letters*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 405.
[63] Qtd. In Hardy, "Thomas Hardy to Marie Stopes, April 16, 1926," 405.
[64] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro,* 210–211.
[65] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro*, 213.
[66] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro,* 213.
[67] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro,* 216.
[68] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro*,216.
[69] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 96.
[70] Sullivan, "*Vectia*, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," 101–102.
[71] "Marie Stopes' Play," *The Sun*, July 2, 1929, 15. British Newspaper Archive.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

attending. It might have been done because the producers thought that men would not react positively to the play or might be outraged by the discussion of male impotence. In contrast, women might have been expected to be more sympathetic to Vectia's plight. The exact reason may never be known, but this decision likely had the opposite effect; it must have alienated male critics and audiences and potentially contributed to the play's failure. In what follows, I will begin with *Vectia*, which closely reflects Stopes' life and political agenda, and it also addresses the failure of a marriage, which is a topic that remains relatable to many women, even today.

Vectia and the Empty Bed

Vectia, like many plays produced in West End theatres during that era, is a drawing-room play focused on conflict within the domestic sphere of the home. It takes place primarily in the living room of William and Vectia Rees' home, while giving teasing glimpses of their bedroom.[74] We follow a day in the life of the young and naive Vectia who has been married to William Rees, a junior partner at a publishing company, for three years and is yearning for a baby.[75] The setting maps onto the life of this young couple. It is evident that Vectia and William are wealthy and live in comfort. The stage directions describe their drawing room as being "comfortable": "It has obviously been furnished during the last years by young people who have sufficient means for both comfort and beauty."[76] Their affluence is further accentuated in Act I in which Vectia receives parcels and opens them to reveal "domestic luxuries—a box of chocolates, some almonds, olives, Turkish delight etc."[77] The Rees' drawing room is furnished elegantly with pictures, bookcases, a fireplace "with a mirror above it," a writing table, several statuettes scattered around the room, a Chesterfield sofa and a grandfather clock.[78] The play features only three characters. In addition to William and Vectia, there is Heron Armitage, their friend and neighbour, who shares a wall with them. In the preface to *Vectia*, Stopes expressed her pride in creating a three-act play with just three characters.[79] She explained that she wanted the play to be "taut, stripped, and lean" and aimed to reflect "real life," where only those directly involved in the events would be part of the action.[80] Heron is indeed an essential part of their lives, as evidenced by the presence of a unique language of communication they have invented. Heron would give "four sharp knocks on the back wall," to which Vectia would respond with "quick taps" that rhythmically say, "come along, come along," prompting Heron to appear.[81]

The most dominant feature of the drawing room is the closed bedroom door: "In the centre wall is a large door, now closed, when it is open within it can be seen a double bed with its two pillows."[82] Throughout the play, the door is closed. It tempts the audience with the promise of intimacy only to reinforce its absence. This closed door is a powerful symbol of William and Vectia's unconsummated marriage and the emotional and physical block in

[74] Marie Stopes, *Vectia: A Play in Three Acts*, in *A Banned Play and a Preface on the Censorship* (London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, 1926).
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 56.
[77] Ibid., 61.
[78] Ibid., 56–57.
[79] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 4.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Stopes, *Vectia*, 60.
[82] Ibid., 56.

their relationship. It stresses the gap between the couple's public display of wealth and their inner marital problem. Notably, William and Vectia are never seen together in their bedroom. For example, in Act I, Vectia briefly enters the bedroom alone with William's suitcase to "lay out [William's] things" after he returns from a business trip.[83] While William, a few moments later, enters the bedroom alone to dress for dinner.[84] At the end of Act II, however, Vectia and Heron enter the bedchamber together after William, ashamed of his impotence, accuses Vectia of having an affair with Heron and demands a divorce.[85] In this scene, Vectia begs Heron to pretend they are having an affair to expedite the divorce.[86] What Vectia refers to here was commonly known as a "hotel divorce," which, according to Kha, was a popular practice during the 1920s and 1930s in Britain.[87] In such cases, a couple who wants to divorce would stage a scenario in which the husband would book a hotel room with a woman (other than his wife) and arrange for witnesses to testify in court that he had committed adultery.[88] Although in Vectia and Heron's case, the 'pretend adultery' happens in the bedroom rather than a hotel. Heron reluctantly agrees to the charade, and they enter the bedroom, hoping to be caught by William. The stage directions position Heron "on a pillow" while Vectia sits with her knees drawn up, back to both the audience and Heron.[89] They end up "sitting at the edges of the head of the bed, back-to-back."[90] There is contrast between the intimacy of the setting and the artificiality of the charade. Their specific position on the edge of the bed, back-to-back, shows how emotionally distant they are and the performative nature of their actions. Ironically, Vectia, who has been denied the chance to experience true intimacy with her husband, is now forced to stage it in an act of deception.

The marital bed was rarely depicted on stage during that time. Other plays from the 1920s and 1930s that depict married couples in domestic settings do not show the marital bed or bedroom on stage in the way *Vectia* does. For instance, in Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930), a divorced couple on their honeymoons with new spouses unexpectedly find themselves at the same hotel, and all the action takes place on a shared terrace, never in a bedroom.[91] Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931) shows the married life of the protagonist Daryll, yet the bedroom remains offstage.[92] William Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* (1921), which shows a wife preparing to leave her husband for another man, unfolds entirely in a Dorset drawing room.[93] Likewise, St. John Ervine's *The First Mrs. Fraser* (1929), which explores a divorced man's rekindled love for his first wife after his second wife leaves him, takes place within the confines of a Knightsbridge flat and we never see a bedroom.[94] The bedroom scene I have described above is unique to *Vectia* (although the marital bed also appears on stage in *Our Ostriches*, which I will discuss later). There is little scholarship on the significance of the marital bed on stage. However, Grene, in his analysis of interior

[83] Ibid., 79.
[84] Ibid., 80.
[85] Ibid., 94.
[86] Ibid., 105.
[87] Kha, *A History of Divorce Law*, 156.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Stopes, *Vectia*, 111.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Noël Coward, *Private Lives: An Intimate Comedy in Three Acts* (London: William Heinemann, 1930).
[92] G. B. Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (London: William Heinemann, 1931).
[93] William Somerset Maugham, *The Circle: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921).
[94] St. John Ervine, *The First Mrs. Fraser: A Comedy in Three Acts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929).

space in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, speculates about the absence of Nora and Torvald's marital bed on stage: "It is not clear whether there has ever been a full maturity in their lovemaking. Of this, the absence of the marital bedroom from the implied ground plan of the stage setting may be taken as emblematic."[95] Grene concludes that Ibsen "never encourages his audience imaginatively to explore this private space."[96] In contrast, *Vectia* actively invites the audience to intrude into the protagonist's intimate life. The Rees' bed becomes a pivotal space where Vectia discovers the truth about her sexless marriage. It is on this bed that Heron asks her about her sex life: "I want you to tell me about Will's behaviour—here—in this room—this place."[97] The "behaviour of William" in this bed lies at the heart of the play's conflict. Sex—or the lack of it—is presented as the root of everything wrong in this marriage. Stopes' play displays the bed on the stage to encourage the audience to accept her idea that sex is fundamental to a healthy marriage. Any sex-related problem, the play suggests, must be addressed and resolved; otherwise, it will destroy the marriage.

Vectia was initially titled *Married Love* after Stopes' iconic sex book, as was her only film, *Maisie's Marriage* (1923).[98] Nevertheless, *Vectia* proposes that procreation is the primary objective of marriage, which contrasts with Stopes' assertion in *Married Love* that sexual pleasure is a primary factor in a happy marriage.[99] Act I reveals that Vectia's greatest wish is to have a child. The play opens with Vectia sculpting a baby statuette with affection, kissing each hand and foot and begging the statuette to come to life: "Come! Step down."[100] When the statuette does not respond, she "with almost a sob falls on her knees before it."[101] This scene indicates that her happiness with William, despite her claims that she and William are "one of the happiest married couples," is incomplete.[102] Heron feels that something is amiss in their marriage because he keeps pressing Vectia with questions such as "[h]ave you touched all the heights and depths of married love?"[103] The carefully- worded inquiry posed by Heron could be a coded reference to orgasm which Vectia, of course, does not catch on. She answers: "(Slowly, as though puzzled): I suppose so—yet—perhaps not at all." [104] When Vectia decides to leave William at the end of the play, he begs her to stay with him and live like a brother and sister: "Why not go on as we are, as we have been for three years?"[105] And when he reminds her of the vows they made during their wedding, Vectia replies: "That promise—was never ratified—by the physical completion of our marriage."[106] She also indicates that things will never be the same now that she knows the truth about sex: "It can't be as it was before, when I thought we were really married. Now I know we aren't and never can be."[107] Although Vectia falters when William threatens to kill himself, she is reminded by Heron that procreation is the important thing in life:

[95] Grene, *Home on the Stage*, 28.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Stopes, *Vectia*,
[98] Sullivan, "Vectia, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," 100.
[99] Stopes, *Married Love*, 29–30.
[100] Stopes, *Vectia*, 59.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 63.
[103] Ibid., 64.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid., 136.
[106] Ibid., 139.
[107] Ibid., 137.

> Heron: But life needs the third!
> Vectia: A third?
> Heron: The third partner in a home…
> Vectia: Ah, yes! The child that so urges me to give it life? Dare I deny it life? (passionately) No! No! I cannot. Love means life renewed. (She turns passionately to William) Will, you care for me, but it's not married love.[108]

The phrase *married love* sums up Stopes' perspective on marriage. For Stopes, *married love* signifies marriages fulfilled by sexual pleasure and shared with a loving partner, whom she described as "a mate."[109] It appears, however, that *Vectia* promotes reproductive marriage rather than pleasurable marriage. Freshwater highlights the same point in her discussion of *Vectia*'s censorship: "Given [Stopes'] emphasis upon sexual pleasure in *Married Love*, *Vectia* characterises women's sexuality as defined by desire for children. Vectia's interest in sex […] is ultimately motivated by the need to procreate, reinscribing reproduction as the primary aim of intercourse."[110] Vectia learns this in the end, which makes her choose Heron for his ability to give her the child she wants. In a particularly memorable line, Vectia differentiates between the two men she has as options: "the weak and the maimed and the strong and the joyous," transforming her own need into their need: "Which of you needs me most?"[111] At the end, Vectia becomes sufficiently empowered to leave William and his empty bed, and start a new life with Heron armed with her new knowledge of sex.

Vectia serves as a mouthpiece to remind the audience that her predicament is real and that many wives face similar problems due to a lack of understanding about conception. Vectia exclaims at the end of the play: "I wonder how many childless women, who have been sneered at as barren, […] who have been blamed and scorned…I wonder how many of them were and are like me!"[112] In *Married Love*, Stopes asserted that, like Vectia, many women she knew or encountered were unaware of what occurs in the marriage bed and attributes their ignorance to society: "It has become a tradition of our social life that the ignorance of woman about her own body and that of her future husband is a flower-like innocence."[113] The book emphasised how society shamed women into believing they were to have "no spontaneous sex impulse" because "only depraved women" do.[114] Stopes thus attempted to dispel this misconception by asserting that women did, in fact, experience orgasms and then described in detail how this occurs.[115] For example, Stopes developed her own theory, which she called "the Law of Periodicity of Recurrence of Desire in Women," to advise husbands on the optimal time to have sex.[116] She estimated that a woman's "love tide" peaks every two weeks.[117] She was able to develop a chart that detailed the peaks and troughs of the wave of desire in healthy women, without drawing on scientific data but, rather, on the experiences of married women she had interviewed.[118] This material

[108] Ibid., 143.
[109] Stopes, *Married Love*, 39–40.
[110] Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing,* 42–43.
[111] Stopes, *Vectia*, 143.
[112] Ibid., 135.
[113] Stopes, *Married Love*, 57.
[114] Ibid., 61.
[115] Ibid., 83.
[116] Stopes, *Married Love*, 63.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid., 61, 67.

demonstrates that Stopes' greatest achievement was illustrating how healthy and normal sexual urges are in women and effectively refuting previous notions that female sexual desire is unnatural. Freshwater praises Stopes for setting herself apart from other organizations that promoted birth control and women's sexual health during the interwar period in Britain, such as the Malthusian League, which was established in 1877.[119] While these groups depicted women as "asexual" creatures, Stopes, according to Freshwater, "celebrated female desire" and "idealized the joys of sexual satisfaction within loving marriages."[120] Freshwater stresses the significance of Stopes' work on sex education and the public's demand for it, as demonstrated by the book's phenomenal success in its first week of publication (2,000 copies were sold).[121] Sheila Jeffreys notes that Stopes' writings contained a "vital ingredient" missing from sexology books written by men in the early-twentieth century.[122] According to Jeffreys, Stopes "wrote about sex from a woman's point of view, showing a clear and urgent understanding of the pain and distress caused to women by men who satisfied their sexual needs on women in a blatantly insensitive matter."[123]

The idea that women have the right to experience sexual pleasure was not unique to Stopes. This view was shared by several British feminists of her generation like the sexologist and birth control advocate Stella Browne. In a paper presented at the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology in 1915, Browne challenged the common belief that women were incapable of sexual desire: "The sexual emotion in women is not, taking it broadly, weaker than in men. But it has an enormously wider range of variation; and much greater diffusion, both in desire and pleasure, all through women's organisms."[124] Dora Russell, a socialist and new feminist who was also the wife of renowned philosopher Bertrand Russell, echoed this sentiment. Writing in 1925, Russell believed that feminists should focus on securing women's access to sexual pleasure and asserted that "[t]he most important task of modern feminism is to accept and proclaim sex; to bury forever the lie […] that the body is a hindrance to the mind, and sex is a necessary evil to be endured for the perpetuation of our race."[125] Nevertheless, Stopes, who advocated sex education, held more conservative views than Browne and Russell. Stopes believed in sexual knowledge within the boundaries of marriage and strongly emphasized that the services of her clinic were for married people only.[126] In *Married Love*, she explicitly stated that the sexual material she provided was intended for those seeking "an ordinary course of life," which she defined as "settl[ing] down and marry[ing]."[127] Moreover, Stopes was reluctant to entrust unmarried women with sex education. For example, she reportedly instructed a 'spinster' who sought guidance on how to enjoy sex to either seek a husband abroad or take a hot bath.[128] These examples illustrate that while Stopes saw herself as a liberator of all women, her approach was actually quite

[119] Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain*, 38.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (North Melbourne, Spinifex, 1985), 157.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Stella Browne, "Sexual Variety and Variability Among Women and Their Bearing Upon Social Reconstruction" (paper presented at the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, London, October 14, 1915).
[125] Dora Russell, *Hypatia* (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), 24–25.
[126] Stopes, *Wise Parenthood*, xxi.
[127] Stopes, *Married Love*, 40.
[128] Susan Pederson, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Consciousness* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 173.

conservative. She limited information about sexual pleasure to married women and encouraged them to use this information to fulfil their wifely duties, such as keeping their husbands sexually satisfied and bearing children, not as obligations but as responsibilities to be understood and enjoyed. After all, she was a eugenicist who aimed to improve the country's birth rate and believed that happy reproductive marriages are the key to that. Moreover, her message was not intended for all married women, but rather for those from the upper and middle classes. The relationship between eugenics and class is a theme I will explore further in my analysis of *Our Ostriches*.

Stopes, who sought to help women control their fertility, did not support abortion as a means of liberating women from unwanted pregnancies. Her position puts her at odds with Browne and Russell, who advocated the decriminalisation of abortion.[129] Stopes remained firm in her public condemnation of abortion. For example, she never replied to letters requesting help terminating a pregnancy.[130] In *Dear Dr Stopes,* Hall includes a letter that Stopes received in 1931 from an anonymous correspondent asking for her opinion on abortion: "I believe it would be possible in the early stages of pregnancy to remove the embryo from the womb by means of suction […]. The suction would be caused by withdrawing a plunger or piston […]."[131] To this Stopes responded: "What you suggest is not birth control at all but its direct opposition, namely criminal abortion, and I would strongly advise you […] to drop all thought of considering the practice of abortion."[132] Stopes was occasionally touched by some of the cases she heard about. She replied with sympathy to a woman who had experienced so much suffering with pregnancy and childbirth that she tried to end her life: "You should see your own doctors and see if they will not on medical grounds clear the uterus." [133] Nevertheless, she warned the woman not to do anything dangerous to herself and promised she will help her avoid getting pregnant again.[134] Some notes and letters were found in Stopes' handwriting that recommend hot baths or pennyroyal as abortifacients, although there is no proof that she sent them to anyone.[135] She did, however, refer extreme cases, such as that of a woman who fell pregnant while suffering from a venereal disease, to Dr Norman Haire, a renowned gynaecologist who conducted abortions only in medical emergencies.[136] In my opinion, these inconsistencies on the subject of abortion indicate that Stopes was not as rigid in her beliefs as it seems. She thought abortion necessary depending on the urgency of the situation. Debenham argues that Stopes was anti-abortionist in public to avoid risking the reputation of the clinic by supporting

[129] Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95.
[130] Lesley A. Hall, "Marie Stopes and her Correspondents: Personalising Population Decline in an Era of Demographic Change," in *Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement*, ed. Robert Peel (London: The Galton Institute, 1997), 35.
[131] "Mr. MS to Marie Stopes, September 17, 1931," in *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, edited by Ruth Hall (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 36.
[132] Marie Stopes to Mr. MS, September 18, 1931, in *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, edited by Ruth Hall (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 37.
[133] Marie Stopes to Mrs. KE, March 16, 1923, in *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, edited by Ruth Hall (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 23–24.
[134] Marie Stopes to Mrs. KE, March 16, 1923, 23–24.
[135] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 123.
[136] Lesley A. Hall, "Marie Stopes and Her Correspondents: Personalising Population Decline in an Era of Demographic Change," in *Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement*, ed. Robert Peel (London: The Galton Institute, 1997), 42.

something illegal.[137] Hall also acknowledges that due to her fame, Stopes was forced to maintain all appearances of respectability.[138] Stopes' views on abortion and traditional marriage, compared to Browne's, for example, show that she was indeed cautious.[139] Nonetheless, her unwavering advocacy for sexual education for women remains her most important political message because it stems from a personal experience: her first troubled marriage.

Stopes created *Vectia* to tell the world about her sexual failure and her own desire to help women avoid the heartache she had experienced in her first marriage. She stated in *Married Love*: "In my own marriage I paid such a terrible price for sex ignorance that I feel knowledge gained at such a cost should be placed at the service of humanity."[140] Like Vectia, Stopes' sexual awakening came with her discovery that her marriage to Gates had been unconsummated and that she was a virgin. Alymer Maude, whose biography of Stopes was, by all accounts, dictated by Stopes herself, reports the following: "At the time of her marriage she was still, in spite of her zoological training and her travel and experience of men of many countries, amazingly innocent […]. She began instinctively to feel something was lacking in her marriage."[141] Stopes' repeated visits to her gynaecologist and mother, both of whom convinced her that there was nothing wrong with her or her marriage, demonstrate the extent to which access to sexual information was restricted at the time and veiled in old prejudices.[142] Gates considered Stopes to be someone who made him feel emasculated, according to several events detailed in her biographies of Stopes. For example, Stopes infuriated her husband when she insisted on keeping her maiden name (as Maude notes, it was "a name which was then already recorded in thousands of card indexes in universities all over the world").[143] Stopes was a well-established scientist and academic in Britain, while he, an unknown Canadian botanist at that time, struggled to find a position to suit his qualifications in England.[144] He eventually found a job at St Thomas's Hospital as a lecturer in Biology, which was, according to Rose, another of Stopes' biographers, beneath his capabilities.[145] Gates must have resented Stopes' success and was well aware of his sexual impotence; he allegedly fondled and caressed her in public, causing her embarrassment.[146] He also tried to control her in other ways, such as preventing her from owning her own copy of *The Times*.[147]

In *Vectia*, Stopes uses the character of William, modelled on Gates, to highlight the detrimental impact of sexual ignorance on marriage. William is portrayed as deeply insecure about his sexual inadequacies. For example, he becomes furious when he discovers Vectia

[137] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 105.
[138] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 123.
[139] For a discussion of British debates around contraception and abortion at a later stage, see Melissa Oliver-Powell, "Scroungers, Strivers, and Single Mothers: Reproductive Justice and the British Welfare State in Ken Loach's Social Realism," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Reproductive Justice and Literature*, ed. Beth Widmaier Capo and Laura Lazzari (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 513–538, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99530-0_24.
[140] Stopes, *Married Love*, 31.
[141] Christina Hauck, "Through a Glass Darkly: 'A Game of Chess' and Two Plays by Marie Stopes," *Journal of Modern Literature* 21, no. 1 (1997): 73.
[142] Maude, *Marie Stope*, 73.
[143] Ibid., 72.
[144] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 72.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid., 73.
[147] Ibid.

reading books about sex: "Ellis's Sex Psychology! Stopes' Married Love! Stopes' Radiant Motherhood! Robie's Sex Ethics!"[148] The stage directions make his rage explicit: "Hurling them one by one into the corner of the room, his rage increasing. Comes back menacingly to Vectia."[149] Stopes obviously could not resist adding her works to Vectia's collection of sex literature, perhaps to assert herself as an authority on sexual education to the audience. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr describes this technique by Stopes as a "metatheatrical trick […] of incorporating references to herself in a scene in which William denounces Stopes's books. It is a strange moment for the audience, when real life intrudes onto a staged representation of it."[150] When William sees the baby statuette, he breaks the statuette's foot violently and accuses Vectia of cheating on him: "Babies! You have been with some man."[151] William also acts jealous and possessive: he reads her letters in secret and becomes furious when she wins in a game of chess between them.[152] In his critique of *Vectia*, Sutro objected to the way Stopes portrayed William's treatment of Vectia, commenting: "You also go out of your way to make the wretched husband a brute. Is this fair? The unfortunate creature, for those three years, was evidently kind and affectionate. Suddenly he became horrible. Why?"[153] Stopes replied that she had "toned down" the "brutishness and unreasonableness" of the real William (referring to Gates), even revealing to Sutro that Gates had once tried to kill her with a bread knife.[154] Sullivan argues that *Vectia* is Stopes' attempt to "purge her own experience of ignorance and testify to her redemption through sex education."[155]

The play ultimately indicates that William's inability to consummate his marriage stems from his homosexuality. Homosexuality is something that Stopes disapproved of in her writings and correspondence. Her friend and ex-lover Keith Briant published a biography of her in 1962 that includes a letter in which she expressed a disparaging view of homosexuality:

> Homosexuality […] varies in its nature with the contingent circumstances: e.g. two adult men, congenially abnormal in this way, living together, commit no social crime, only "sin": but an adult who corrupts and uses young normal boys commits a social crime of revolting nature that may most probably destroy the soul and body of those boys rendering them useless as adult fathers and husbands. Hence, by this crime the state is deprived of useful citizens for two generations and their potential potency is destroyed […]. The punishment however should not be vindictive, only to prevent the spread of what tends to become epidemic and a real social disease.[156]

Stopes clearly viewed homosexuality (particularly in young men) as a threat to the state and the 'race,' which demonstrates her extreme intolerance of any union that is not heterosexual and reproductive. Briant, however, attempted to defend her by noting that in

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[148] Stopes, *Vectia*, 84.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 176.
[151] Stopes, *Vectia*, 85.
[152] Ibid., 88, 89.
[153] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro*, 211.
[154] Qtd. in Sawin, *Alfred Sutro*, 211.
[155] Esther Beth Sullivan, "Vectia, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," *Theatre Survey* 46, no. 1 (2005): 85.
[156] Qtd. in Keith Briant, *Marie Stopes: A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 212.

her friendship and support of Lord Alfred Douglas (who became notorious after his highly public affair with Oscar Wilde) she demonstrated "a keen understanding of the reasons for homosexuality," although he acknowledged that she "had no love for homosexuality."[157] In her book *Enduring Passion*, Stopes condemned lesbian relationships as well, arguing that "[l]esbian love" is a "homosexual vice" that, according to her, does not give "actual physiological nourishment" for men and women, resulting in marital discontent.[158] Stopes' intolerance of any sexual practices other than heterosexual relations within the boundaries of marriage is further seen in her disapproval of masturbation, which she called "self-abuse."[159] In her defence of *Vectia*, Stopes stressed that the play deals with the serious problem of a "normally sexed" wife and a man who is "futile and weak as a result of the poisoning of his youth."[160] In this statement, Stopes clearly implied that William engaged in masturbation and homosexual activities frequently when he was young and that is why he became impotent in adulthood. At the end of the play, Vectia reminds William that the core problem is his sexuality: "But—women—don't matter to you," to which he replies: "*Women* don't; but *you* do."[161] William tries to defend himself, claiming: "I've done nothing wrong. Till I married Vectia I had never touched a woman—," but Heron scoffs at him: "Women! Bah! —they're not the only—."[162] In light of Stopes' eugenicist and political agenda, the play can be interpreted as Stopes' warning that homosexuality is destructive to reproductive marriages and a source of anguish and misery. As a young, healthy, middle-class, white woman, Vectia has a 'racial' obligation to fulfil and the homosexual William stands in her way. Therefore, in the logic of the play, he must be eliminated and replaced by Heron, a physically fit, white, heterosexual, middle-class man who can assist Vectia in her national duty.

Stopes' stance towards homosexuality earned her the reproach of some contemporary historians, such as Florence Tamagne, who condemned both Stopes and Browne for "sharing a heterosexual ideal that included stigmatising lesbians" and of "[doing] nothing to help the lesbian cause," although she gives them credit for carrying "the torch of sexual reform" in Britain.[163] It is clear that Stopes had no interest in the subject of homosexuality, as evidenced by her declaration in *Married Love* that she did not intend to "touch upon the many human variations and abnormalities."[164] In light of this, it is ironic that during her teenage years, Stopes was sexually attracted to several women, including her vivacious high school teacher Miss Clotilde van Wyss, with whom she exchanged passionate love letters.[165] According to Hall, Stopes continued to feel attracted to women well into adulthood, which may have affected her heterosexual relations with men and resulted in her condemnation of homosexual sentiments altogether.[166] Indeed, Stopes maintained a complex perspective on the sexual and reproductive roles of women, which were further

[157] Briant, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 194.
[158] Marie Stopes, *Enduring Passion* (London: London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929), 41–43.
[159] Marie Stopes, *Sex and the Young* (London: London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), 45.
[160] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 10–11.
[161] Ibid.,138.
[162] Ibid., 134.
[163] Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919–1939*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Algora, 2006), 226.
[164] Stopes, *Married Love*, 30.
[165] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 39.
[166] Ibid.

complicated by race and class. I will explore these issues further in my analysis of *Our Ostriches*.

Our Ostriches and the Marital Bed of the Working Class

Ironically, the Lord Chamberlain, who banned *Vectia* repeatedly, licensed and personally attended the premiere of *Our Ostriches*.[167] *Our Ostriches* opened at the Royal Court Theatre on 14 November 1923.[168] Stopes proudly declared that the play drew "a magnificent first-night reception."[169] According to Maude, the audience erupted in loud cheers during Act III when Evadne, the female lead, argued for access to birth control with a Catholic priest and several Anglican bishops.[170] On opening night, the audience called for a curtain call and Stopes gave a short speech about how her birth-control play was accepted but her "pro-baby" play (*Vectia*) was denied.[171] The play, while commercially successful, received mixed reviews, particularly in relation to the quality of Stopes' dramatic writing. For example, an article in *The Daily News* acknowledged the play as "an earnest pamphlet in favour of birth control among the diseased or unfitted" but criticised the "dummy opposition" which rendered Roman Catholic arguments against birth control "ridiculous."[172] The cast were lauded for doing their best "to make the stupidity of the characters […] seem natural."[173] Dorothy Holmes-Gore, the lead actress playing the role of Evadne, was complimented for portraying Evadne "with considerable force and sincerity."[174] Another review in *The Manchester Guardian* accused Stopes of putting the argument above the dramatic aspect, "trampl[ing] on every tradition of stage technique."[175] According to the article, the "weakness of the play lies in […] the opposition" and mentioned that members of such a commission will not "blurt out their views in a way so exceptionally convenient to the enemy."[176] The reviewer, however, did praise Stopes' argument for birth control, calling it "vital."[177] The casts' efforts were recognised, particularly the portrayal of Mrs Flinker as "a social fact, as her tenement is a social disgrace."[178] Stopes responded directly to the magazine's editor, which indicates that she closely monitored reviews of her plays.[179] What triggered Stopes is the critique that the play's shortcomings lay in the "weak opposition" and that commission members spoke in a way that was "convenient to the enemy."[180] To support her point, she referenced the exact pages from the National Birth-Rate Commission papers

[167] Sullivan, "*Vectia*, Man-Made Censorship, and the Drama of Marie Stopes," 79.
[168] Marie Stopes, *Our Ostriches* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923), 7.
[169] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 6.
[170] Maude, *Marie Stopes: Her Works and Plays*, 164.
[171] Ibid.
[172] E. A. B., "Marie Stopes as Dramatist: 'Our Ostriches' at the Court Theatre," *The Daily News*, November 15, 1923, 6. British Newspaper Archive.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.
[175] L. B., "Dr. Marie Stopes's Play," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 15, 1923, 10. British Newspaper Archive.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Marie Stopes, "Our Ostriches," *The Manchester Guardian*, November 21, 1923, 3. British Newspaper Archive.
[180] Stopes, "Our Ostriches," 10.

where she had obtained these opinions.[181] Stopes concluded by stating that she did not intend to ridicule the opposition's viewpoints, asserting: "The actual arguments of the actual opposition are childish," and explaining that she had simply presented them as they were.[182]

The opening scene of *Our Ostriches* takes place in a public park. Although there is no drawing room as in *Vectia*, the exquisite park serves as an extension of it due to its spaciousness, abundance of chairs, and sense of structure that evoke a drawing room. The main characters introduced in Act I are socially-privileged individuals: Evadne Carrillon, her mother Mrs Carrillon, her fiancé Lord Simplex, and Lady Carfon are shown as strolling idly in the park, discussing a dance they had attended the night before.[183] The print edition of the play includes a stage drawing before each act to illustrate how the characters move around the stage (See Figure 1). None of Stopes' other plays contain stage drawings, which makes this a unique feature of *Our Ostriches*. The stage directions include further instructions for the actors' movements on the stage, which is indicated by (L) for the left side of the stage, (R) for the right, and (C) for centre.

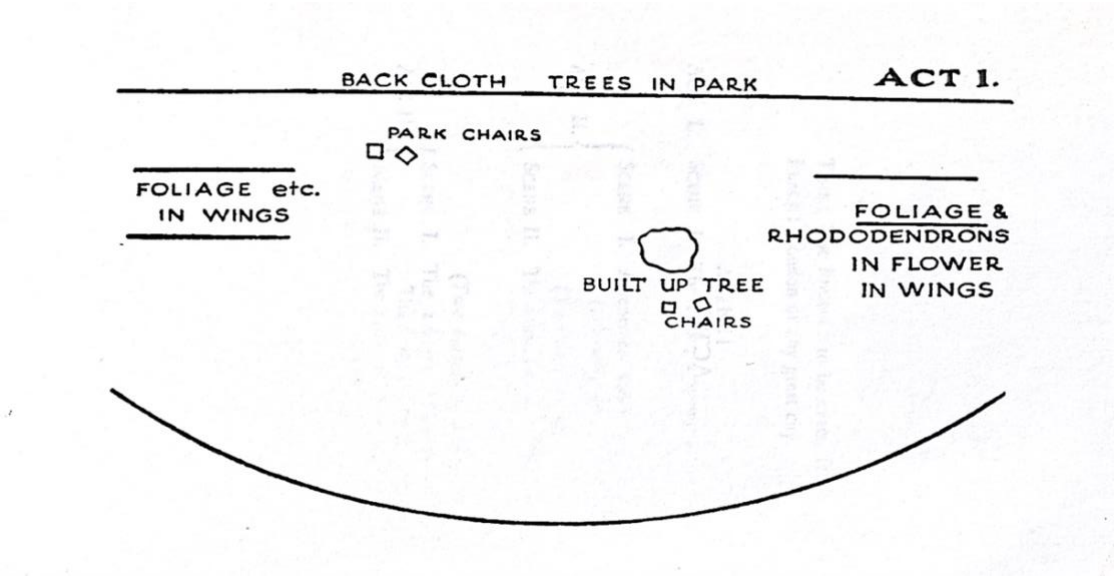

Figure 1. Drawing of the stage in Act I, in Marie Stopes, *Our Ostriches* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923), 12.

I have not come across many drawings of this nature in plays from that era, although some playwrights occasionally include visual material. For example, *Nine Till Six* (1930) by Aimée and Philip Stuart contains stage photographs, which I discuss in Chapter Three. Whether drawings or photographs, what is reflected here is the early twentieth-century theatre's fixation with elaborate stage props. The theatre critic William Archer argued in 1912 that "furniture, properties, accidents of environment, play a much larger part in modern drama than they did on the Elizabethan, the eighteenth century, or even the early-Victorian stage. […] Carelessness of the environment […] is no longer possible."[184] For Archer, playwrights must "visualise the stage-picture in considerable detail, […] and that almost most modern

[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] William Archer, *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1912), 64.

dramatists […] pay great attention to what may be called the topography of their scene, and the 'shifting' position of their characters."[185] The elaborate and plush setting in *Our Ostriches* reflects Stopes' desire to create a backdrop that conveys her vision of class strife as an issue central to the play and to society.

Stopes' attitude towards class is complex. In the words of Rose, her biographer, Stopes was an "elitist" who believed in the class system and that the welfare of upper and middle-class women depended on the service of working-class women.[186] Stopes was indeed familiar with this social world because she herself came from a well-off family.[187] In the play, the first evidence of class conflict emerges in Act I. Mrs. Carrillon makes a snobbish remark about the handsome Dr. Verro Hodges, whom Evadne admires, suggesting that he, as a middle-class professional, is inferior to Evadne's privileged fiancé, Lord Simplex. [188] The entrance of Mrs. Flinker brings a full-on class shock as she enters the stage, pushing "an old pram" with three of her children.[189] Their filthy and unkempt features are striking: Mrs. Flinker is wearing a "clumsy skirt" and a blouse "tucked irregularly," with an "untidy screw of hair" covered by a "man's cap."[190] Her "three ragged children are with her, one dragging to her skirts and sucking a dirty thumb."[191] The stage directions further accentuate their filthiness in an unsettling manner: "Their noses run, their mouths hang open, and their voices are shrill."[192] The dehumanizing rendering of the children, who are made up to resemble animals, combined with Mrs. Flinker's de-gendering (as demonstrated by her donning a "man's cap"), creates a chillingly view of the working class as inhuman.

The two classes clash physically when Mrs Flinker accidentally bumps her pram into Lord Simplex's legs. He moves away and "brushes" his trousers with a handkerchief."[193] Mrs Flinker then bumps the pram into her younger child Dickie, who falls over and cuts his hands.[194] Evadne askes Simplex for his handkerchief and he, repulsed, gives it to her, responding: "Really—too disgusting."[195] Evadne's behaviour contrasts with his and shows kindness to the poor child as she cleanses his blood-smeared face and exchanges pleasantries with Mrs Flinker.[196] When Evadne attempts to return the handkerchief to Simplex, he "tosses it down in disgust."[197] Mrs Flinker takes it and "dabs her nose with it, sniffing the scent appreciatively," while the children "clamour together for a sniff."[198] Mrs. Flinker does not know how to use the handkerchief and attempts instead to "squeeze the lovely smell out": this is how the play demonstrates the working class's egregious lack of hygiene and its association with germs, disease, and unpleasant odours.[199] Lord Simplex emphasises the same point when he objects to Evadne going "slumming" to visit her old nurse, who lives in the same apartment building as Mrs. Flinker, exclaiming: "[What about]

[185] Ibid., 64–65.
[186] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 134.
[187] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 23–26.
[188] Stopes, *Our Ostriches*,19.
[189] Ibid., 15–16.
[190] Ibid., 16.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid., 27.
[194] Ibid., 28.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid., 29.
[198] Ibid., 30.
[199] Ibid.

Germs! Small-pox! Measles! Microbes!"[200] The handkerchief, which moves from the hands of Simplex to Evadne and eventually the Flinkers, is an object that transcends social barriers. This item, which symbolizes Lord Simplex's privilege and class, is used to make a derogatory statement about the working class and illustrates Stopes' profound social intolerance, which is lined to her eugenicist beliefs.

The harrowing and grimy appearance of the working class is a repeated motif in Stopes' writings, which openly discuss the 'inferiority' of the working class. Stopes and her first and second husbands were all members of the Eugenics Society.[201] The Eugenics Society, founded in 1907, was influenced by the ideas of Sir Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, who first coined the term "eugenics" in his 1883 book, *Inquiries into the Human Faculty and Development*.[202] Galton believed that there is such a thing as a "low race" and proposed that this "low race" should be "subjected to rigorous selection."[203] He argued that "[t]he best specimen of that race can alone be allowed to become parents, and not many of their descendants can be allowed to live."[204] Stopes, who joined the Society in 1912, was a particularly enthusiastic member.[205] She stated that her interest in eugenics was sparked by her reading of Darwin's books and meeting Galton when she was young.[206] She was obsessed with eugenics and strongly suggested in her writings that the poor, whom she called "vicious," "feeble-minded" and "thriftless" should not be allowed to "breed rapidly" because they "bring forth children who are weakened and handicapped by physical as well as mental warping and weakness."[207] Mrs Flinker and her children in the play are a clear embodiment of Stopes' eugenicist fears. In Stopes' opinion, women like Mrs Flinker should use birth control to avoid having more children like Dickie Flinker and his siblings, whom Evadne describes in the play as having "snivelling, half-witted faces."[208] When viewed in the context of Stopes' own political agenda, the message in her plays appears to be that contraception should be strongly encouraged for working-class women (like Mrs Flinker), while upper-and middle-class women (like Vectia) are encouraged to procreate and produce healthy and 'intelligent' children.

Stopes' anxiety about the reproduction of the working classes was prevalent in most of her social welfare books, which she specifically addressed to the 'educated' classes in Britain.[209] *Married Love* expressed particular fears for the 'race' if poor women continued to have children: "What about others, born dead, born imbecile, thwarted of life by miscarriage, which tear the over-burdened mother so that she is forced to neglect the children she has, and her neglect turns them into thieves?"[210] Stopes' eugenicist obsession with improving 'the race' is also apparent in her book dedications. She dedicated *Wise*

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[200] Ibid., 26.
[201] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 123.
[202] Geoffrey R. Searle, "Eugenics: The Early Years," in *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, ed. Robert A. Peel (London: The Galton Institute, 1998), 20–22.
[203] Francis Galton, *Inquires into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: J. M. Dent, 1883), 199.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 124.
[206] Richard A. Soloway, "The Galton Lecture 1996: Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the Birth Control Movement," in *Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement*, ed. Robert Peel (London: The Galton Institute, 1997), 54.
[207] Stopes, *Wise Parenthood*, 19.
[208] Stopes, *Our Ostriches*, 49.
[209] Stopes, *Married Love*, 44.
[210] Ibid., 36.

Parenthood to "all those who wish to see our race grow in strength and beauty."[211] Similarly, in the preface to *Vectia*, Stopes clearly stated the 'racial' theme of *Vectia*: "The theme is the desire of a sweet girl wife to have a baby by her husband and to carry on the race."[212] The harrowing appearance and behaviour of the Flinkers should be considered in this wider context. In Act III, Evadne implores the Birth-Rate Commission to "make a statement in favour of birth control—so that these poor women should not have all these wretched unhealthy children they do not want."[213] She pointedly suggests to Sir Theodore Ravage, the government representative in the play, that this should be done "through the Ministry of Health."[214] The involvement of a government representative in the play indicates that Stopes viewed the working class and their birth rate as a national issue that needed urgent government intervention.

Stopes' extreme disparagement of the working class and the 'racial' problem they represent aligns with mainstream eugenicist ideologies of race and class in 1920s and 1930s Britain. In another context in a discussion of imperialism and eugenics in Kenya, Chloe Campbell points out that "[t]he eugenic movement in Britain was particularly concerned with heredity traits associated with social class."[215] British Eugenics, according to Campbell, was sponsored particularly keenly by the upper and middle classes.[216] Recent scholarship has shown not only the degree to which eugenics was prevalent in English culture and elsewhere across Britain but also the degree to which it was foundational to philosophies of empire. Richard Overy, in his history of Britain between the wars, presents the era after the First World War as being driven by fear that "the quality of the population was declining to a point that threatened the continued existence of a vigorous imperial race" which he claims was, in turn, the impetus for the rise of eugenics and, by extension, awareness of birth control.[217] Concerns about "uncoordinated population changes for race, nation and/or empire" were major issues for eugenicists elsewhere too, which sparked their interest in the reproductive capacities of women.[218] As Holstein explains in her analysis of the relationship between the eugenics movement and birth-control campaigns in the US between 1920 and 1960, the two movements eventually aligned because American eugenicists wanted to reduce the reproductive rates of African Americans and poor people.[219]

During the period between the wars, British eugenicists remained divided on the issue of birth control. Earlier members of the Eugenics Society such as Galton, Leonard Darwin and W.C.D. Whetham promoted "positive eugenics" and focused on encouraging the "fit" members of the society to reproduce as many healthy children as they could.[220] They also disapproved of the practice of birth control among the upper classes because they

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[211] Stopes, *Wise Parenthood*, v.
[212] Stopes, "Preface on the Censorship," 1–2.
[213] Stopes, *Our Ostriches*, 76.
[214] Ibid., 80.
[215] Chloe Campbell, *Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 2.
[216] Ibid., 1.
[217] Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919–1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 96.
[218] Susanne Klausen and Alison Bashford, "Fertility Control, Eugenics, Neo-Malthusianism, and Feminism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Lavine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 98.
[219] Peyton P. Holstein, "The Use of the Birth Control Movement as a Eugenics Weapon, 1920s–1960s," (paper presented at the Young Historians Conference, Portland State University, March 10, 2020), 2.
[220] Klausen and Bashford, "Fertility Control," 100.

believed it would lead to "race suicide."[221] When attempts to entice the educated classes to reproduce appeared to be failing, subsequent eugenicists (sometimes called Neo-Malthusians) advocated "negative eugenics" which essentially entailed changing their focus to limiting the fertility of the "unfit" classes and supporting birth-control campaigns.[222] Birth control was eventually regarded as a useful eugenic tool by many young, scientifically minded members of the British Eugenics Society in the mid-1920s, including Julian Huxley and C.P. Blacker.[223] Furthermore, the British Eugenics Society found it difficult to ignore something so inevitable: feminist activists such as Stopes, Dora Russell and Browne were giving lectures across the country, voluntary birth control clinics were opening, conferences were being held and by 1929, fifteen million manuals, books and brochures on contraception were available in England.[224] As early as 1930, the British Ministry of Health had given local governments permission to offer birth control information in cases where a pregnancy posed a risk to the mother's health.[225] Similar changes were happening in the United States. For example, in 1933, the American Eugenics Society officially endorsed Margaret Sanger's birth control efforts and financially supported her clinics.[226]

Stopes promoted several birth-control methods including condoms, spermicides and her "Pro-race cap," and went so far as to suggest that the golden pin (an intra-uterine device) offered the best birth-control method for "the lowest and most negligent strata of society" and that if it failed, "such cases should be sterilised."[227] According to her, birth control was the most effective means of achieving 'negative eugenics': "There can be little doubt in the minds of rational people that heredity does tell, and that children who descend from a double line of healthy and intelligent parents are better equipped to face whatever difficulties in their environment may later arise than children from unsound stock."[228] In 1919, she suggested to the National Birth-Rate Commission that parents with alcoholism, criminal tendencies or inherited diseases should be sterilised.[229] She was furious when her extreme recommendations were rejected by the Commission.[230] Sterilisation of the 'unfit' was, in fact, a continuous source of debate among eugenicists across numerous countries. It was, according to Klausen and Bashford, largely dependent on whether these countries were predominantly Catholic or Protestant.[231] Some predominantly Protestant countries, such as Germany, several US states, the western Canadian province, some Scandinavian countries and the canton of Vaud in Switzerland actively promoted legalizing sterilisation during the interwar years.[232] Stopes' own newspaper, *Birth Control News*, reported in its October 1922 issue that fifteen US states had legalised compulsory sterilisation of the

[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Soloway, "The Galton Lectures," 58.
[224] Lesley Hoggart, "The Campaign for Birth Control in Britain in the 1920s," in *Gender, Health, and Welfare*, ed. Anne Digby and John Stewart (London: Routledge, 1996), 144.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Klausen and Bashford, "Fertility Control," 102.
[227] Stopes, *Wise Parenthood*, 42.
[228] Ibid., 1, 18, 19.
[229] Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution*, 134.
[230] Soloway, "The Galton Lecture," 55.
[231] Klausen and Bashford, "Fertility Control," 105.
[232] Ibid.

mentally "unfit" before 1920, including Indiana (1907), Washington (1909), California (1909), New York (1912) and Michigan (1913).[233]

Act III of *Our Ostriches* features a pivotal scene in which sterilisation of the working class is explicitly brought up with the Birth-Rate Commission, which comprises of ten prominent figures from various sectors of society including several Anglican bishops, a Catholic priest, a doctor, two upper-class ladies and a government representative.[234] In this scene, Evadne tries to push the idea of sterilisation of the 'unfit' and calls for the government to impose regulations to that effect. However, as previously mentioned, in order to avoid censorship, Stopes had to make it Dr Hodges' suggestion instead of Evadne's:

> Dr Hodges: Then I suppose you agree the Government should step up and sterilise them.
> *A shock of horror convulses the whole Commission.*
> Brother Peter: (*looks black*): Sterilise!
> Evadne: Yes, I think so, otherwise the worse kind of babies would be born.[235]

Elsewhere, Stopes advocated sterilisation as a solution to Britain's 'racial' problem if less healthy and intellectual individuals continue to multiply. In *Radiant Motherhood*, for example, Stopes insisted that sterilisation offers the best solution to "cleanse the race" of those whom she called "parasites upon the healthy tree": "I would like to see the sterilisation of those totally unfit for parenthood made an immediate possibility, indeed made compulsory."[236] She suggested that "a very few quite simple Acts of Parliament could deal with that."[237]

Although Stopes in real life strongly opposed the reproduction of the working classes, *Our Ostriches* depicts Mrs. Flinker and her plight with compassion. In light of this, I contend that this play exposes a serious contradiction in Stopes' attitude towards the working class—a contradiction that was also reflected in her real-life views. In *Married Love,* Stopes acknowledged that working-class mothers were victims: "The poor, uneducated mother commits this crime through ignorance: it is *we who know* and allow her to remain in ignorance who are really responsible."[238] Likewise, in Act II of *Our Ostriches*, Evadne accuses the upper classes, the medical profession and the Catholic Church of being the perpetrators of those poor women's suffering in their opposition to birth control.[239] And to make a powerful statement about the misery of poor women's lives due to their ignorance of birth control, the play includes a detailed drawing and an extensive description of Mrs. Flinker's shabby residence in Act II. (See Figure 2).

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[233] "Sterilization by Law in the U.S.A," *Birth Control News*, October 1922, 4.
[234] Stopes, *Our Ostriches*, 97–98.
[235] Ibid., 81.
[236] Marie Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood, a Book for Those Who Are Creating the Future* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), 249.
[237] Ibid., 247.
[238] Stopes, *Married Love*, 36.
[239] Stopes, *Our Ostriches*, 51.

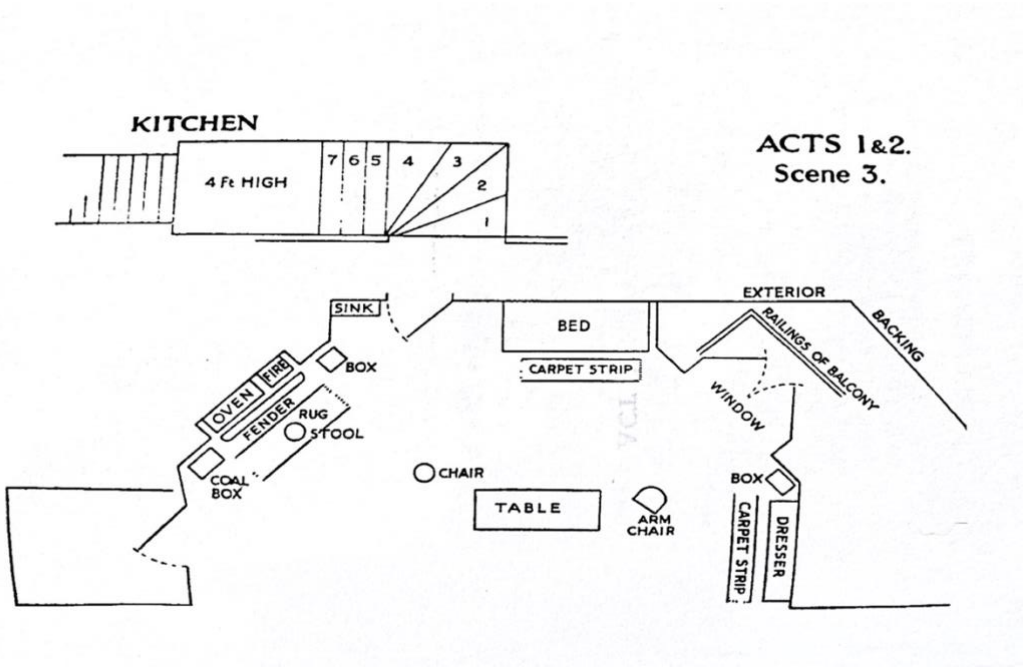

Figure 2. Drawing of the stage in Act II, from Marie Stopes, *Our Ostriches* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923), 36.

Every stage prop in this play is intended to expose the harsh realities of working-class life. Unlike the opulent middle-class settings typical of drawing-room plays of the era, the depiction of a run-down location is unusual. I view this aspect of the play positively because it sheds light on the experiences of poverty and overcrowding that are often overlooked in these dramas. But there is judgement and caricature everywhere. The flat is described as "terribly dirty and ill-kept," the bed has a "dirty coverlet," the chair has "a broken back" and there is a clothes line on which "tattered and dirty garments of various sorts, badly washed, are hanging to dry."[240] The children squabble and trip over each other as they run around the tiny apartment which is in stark contrast to the spacious park Act I.[241] The use of such contrasting locations (i.e., the park and the flat) serves to create a physical barrier between social classes, a barrier transcended only by Evadne. The other wealthy characters are never permitted to enter the Flinkers' apartment. For example, Lord Simplex peeks onto the stage in Act II but refuses to enter what he considers "this filthy den."[242] As is the case with the other privileged characters, he is never subjected to the suffering of the working class. Despite coming from the same class, I argue that Evadne and Simplex symbolise distinct factions of the eugenic approach. Simplex, an arrogant fool, represents a severe racist attitude that demeanes the lower classes as filthy and diseased. In contrast, Evadne, who is kind and empathetic and has no problem exposing herself to the working class, conveys the same message as Lord Simplex regarding the sterilisation of the working class and the prevention of their procreation but in a manner that is framed as an act of kindness.

One of the features of the Flinkers' apartment is that Mr and Mrs Flinker's marital bed is in full view. It is wedged into the living room with no separation from the kitchen (see Figure 2). One might argue that poverty justifies the display of the Flinkers' marital bed on

[240] Ibid., 37.
[241] Ibid., 38–39.
[242] Ibid., 50.

stage. However, the marital bed also appears on stage in *Vectia*, which indicates that Stopes had a particular fascination with the bed as a symbol of the struggle over women's sexual liberation. In both plays, the marital bed becomes a place for negotiating these issues. This bed is shown to be a source of anxiety for Mrs Flinker as her perpetual state of pregnancy brings her misery rather than joy. Due to her ignorance of birth control, Mrs Flinker will never be able to take control of her body as Vectia does at the end of *Vectia.* Stopes conveys an important message here: women require knowledge to achieve liberation. For her, awareness of birth control is the key to women's autonomy. As for sexual pleasure, it is never discussed in *Our Ostriches*. This is because from Stopes' perspective, low-income women like Mrs. Flinker have no need to understand sexual pleasure. One more issue worth mentioning here is the absence of Mr Flinker. In fact, Mrs Flinker only makes passing reference to him once in Act II when she smacks the child who is responsible for putting beads in the pastry she is baking for Mr Flinker: "Serves yer right. Putting beads in yer father's pastry. Supposing he had swallowed one?"[243] The absence of Mr. Flinker serves to highlight Mrs Flinker's suffering as a heavily-pregnant woman who is responsible for caring and feeding her six children and their father.

Our Ostriches further highlights the misery of working-class life when Mrs Flinker collapses from labour pains in Act II.[244] Dr Hodges, who has been upstairs delivering a woman's third stillborn baby, is summoned and is struck by the overwhelming wailing and howling of Mrs Flinker's six children.[245] The stage directions state that their cries should create an "unpleasant, stuffy effect."[246] Evadne is clearly articulating Stopes' own opinion when she wonders: "What a hopeless muddle. What a dreadful life."[247] The doctor answers: "Not exceptional. There are lots like this. London is packed with them."[248] To this Evadne responds defiantly: "Well, it should not be."[249] The stage directions attempt to further shock the audience: Evadne sees the dead baby and believes it to be alive:

> She advances happily as tho' going to coo to a tiny, smiling thing and lifting the cover peeps in. She sees the stark horror there and remains frozen. The change from happy smile to this must be played with change of intense expression which make the audience see the dreadful remains in the cradle and feel the horror she feels.[250]

The play's use of stage props, such as the handkerchief and the dead baby, as representations of deeper issues in a provocative way shows inventiveness. The sight of the dead baby marks a turning moment for Evadne. It makes her recognise the urgent need to address the plight of these mothers. When Evadne encounters hostility from the family's priest, Brother Peter, and helplessness from Dr Hodges, she succinctly voices her outrage and disappointment:

> You good, religious priests, you humane and learned medicals, you paternal Government officials, all of you—are in the secret for yourselves—but what

[243] Ibid., 39.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid., 45.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid., 47.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid., 56.

> do you care for Mrs Flinker really? Nothing! She's a practitioner, a patient, a subject! You will not give her the knowledge you possess so that she may be saved torturing misery. You— (to Dr Hodges)—serve a Ministry of Health that is a farce! That thinks always of disease—that keeps health secrets that the poor are crying for—and you help to keep these secrets.[251]

The play exposes the hypocrisy of the upper classes in practicing birth control in private while denying the same knowledge to the working classes. In Act III, Mrs Flinker bursts into the Commission meeting and accuses Lady Highkno of using birth control in secret: "You didn't get only two kids just by nature […], but yer'd stop me knwoin' 'ow to stop at me twelfth. You rich folk know some dodge you won't let us poor folk know."[252] Filled with sympathy at the way Mrs. Flinker's objections are dismissed by the Commission, Evadne, as Stopes' mouthpiece, expresses a strong determination to help Mrs Flinker and women like her. In reality, Stopes devoted much of her efforts to assisting impoverished mothers; in an article she wrote for *The Woman's Leader*, Stopes acknowledged that "middle-class, educated and moderately well-to-do women" can easily seek the help of a doctor or read Stopes' books if they want to know about birth control but "poor women are still immensely at the mercy of ignorance and prejudice" and that is why she and her husband "decided to take this knowledge to the slums."[253] She also published many of her articles on birth control in cheap magazines such as *John Bull* and penned her manual *Letters to Working Mothers* using simple and accessible language so that it could be understood by all readers.[254]

Stopes was eventually no longer welcome at the Eugenics Society due to her belligerent nature, which manifested itself in public fights with the Catholic Church and other birth-control clinics, as well as her scorn for the medical profession and the ignorance of doctors in contraception, many of whom were also members of the Society.[255] She lost interest in the Eugenics Society after founding her own organisation, the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress, which was dedicated to improving 'the race' through birth control and other means.[256] Another reason for her dismissal by the Eugenics Society is that some members disapproved of her sex books, including Blacker, who referred to them as prostitution manuals.[257] Freshwater affirms that Stopes' sexual manuals and birth-control efforts were indeed "radical" and shocking to some circles at that time.[258] Reportedly, a member of the Lord Chamberlain's staff resigned after being horrified by some of her plays.[259] Moreover, numerous individuals pleaded with the Lord Chamberlain to prohibit Stopes' plays.[260] However, the biggest attack came from the Roman Catholic Church.[261] One of those attacks led to a legal battle for Stopes when a Catholic medical

[251] Ibid. 51.
[252] Ibid., 93.
[253] Marie Stopes, "Birth Control, the Foundation Stone of Women's Freedom and Power," *The Woman's Leader*, May 6, 1921, 211.
[254] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 4.
[255] Solloway, "The Galton Lectures," 58.
[256] Overy, *The Morbid Age*, 95.
[257] June Rose, "The Evolution of Marie Stopes," in *Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement*, ed. Robert Peel (London: The Galton Institute, 1997), 15.
[258] Freshwater, *Theatre Censorship in Britain*, 36.
[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid., 37.
[261] Ibid., 36– 37.

doctor named Dr Halliday Sutherland wrote scathingly about Stopes and her birth-control clinic, accusing her of "experimenting on the poor:"

> The poor are the natural victims of those who seek to make experiments on their fellows. In the midst of a London slum a woman, who is a doctor of German philosophy (Munich), has opened a Birth Control Clinic, where working women are instructed in a method of contraception described by Professor McIlroy as "the most harmful method of which I have had experience." […]. It is truly amazing that this monstrous campaign of birth control should be tolerated by the Home Secretary.[262]

Sutherland clearly intended to discredit Stopes by emphasising her non-medical background. Anxious to clear her name, Stopes sued Sutherland for defamation in 1923 and lost in the High Court, won on appeal but lost again in the final appeal in the House of Lords.[263] The outcome did not surprise Shaw, who wrote to Stopes in December 1924 after her loss: "The decision is scandalous; but I am not surprised at it […]. The subject is obscene: no lady would dream of alluding to it in mixed society: reproduction is a shocking subject."[264] In another letter, written in October 1928, Shaw even asked her to distance herself from birth control and stick to instructing people about sex: "You are really a matrimonial expert, which is something much wider and more needed than a specialist in contraception. You should make it clear you are a doctor, not a Malthusian nor a trader in sterilising devices."[265]

Gale, like Freshwater, calls Stopes' work "radical" and offers an apt diagnosis: "[Stopes'] work as part of the contraceptive movement was in its time radical, although she was at the time (and is still is) criticised for her eugenicist beliefs."[266] Indeed, Stopes provoked, and still provokes, disgust for her attempt to reach out to Adolf Hitler in 1939 (one month before the outbreak of the Second World War), sending him some of her love poems and asking him to distribute them to young people in his country.[267] It is difficult to assume that this gesture was innocent due to the troubling similarities between Stopes' views and Hitler's own eugenicist propaganda and celebration of the Aryan race which must have been known during the interwar period. However, her own son reportedly defended her, claiming the gesture was less driven by support for Hitler's policies than by her own inflated ego and belief in her abilities to change the course of history, pointing out that she also sent her poems to King George VI.[268] Utterly convinced of the importance of her work, Stopes sent *Married Love* to Queen Mary and Queen Alexandra, the Queen mother, in 1920 and 1921, respectively.[269] While the former never responded, the latter was unable to accept it due to its controversial nature.[270] Stopes was eventually able to present *Married*

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[262] Halliday G. Sutherland, *Birth Control: A Statement of Christian Doctrine against the Neo-Malthusians* (New York: Kennedy and Sons, 1922), 101–102.
[263] Muriel Box, *The Trial of Marie Stopes* (London: Macdonald, 1967), 12.
[264] "Bernard Shaw to Marie Stopes, December 7, 1924," in *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, ed. Ruth Hall (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 205.
[265] "Bernard Shaw to Marie Stopes, October 28, 1928," in *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s*, ed. Ruth Hall (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 207–208.
[266] Gale, *West End Women*, 90–91.
[267] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 219.
[268] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 128.
[269] Rose, *Marie Stopes*, 137.
[270] Ibid.

Love as a wedding gift to Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip in 1947, who graciously accepted it, demonstrating how much the world had changed since the 1920s.[271] These testimonials indicate a sense of inevitability to Stopes prejudice and her legacy will always remain dubious. Her explicit books on sex and her ardent support for contraceptive rights for women are regarded as her greatest achievements today but her prejudice and racism remain a source of unease.

It is true that Stopes prided herself on being a champion of women of all classes, yet her feminism is exclusionary. She seems to have had an extremely narrow understanding of what a woman can be. I will include several anecdotes from her biography to offer a more nuanced understanding of her complex attitude towards women. For example, Stopes rejected her son's fiancée, Mary Wallis, because she wore spectacles owing to myopia.[272] She even disinherited him and refused to attend the wedding.[273] Stopes felt that her daughter-in-law's condition was "dysgenic" and would contaminate the future generation of her line.[274] *Radiant Motherhood* clearly states her eugenic vision regarding the future generation: "It is my prayer that I may live to see in the generation of my grandchildren a humanity from which almost all the most blackening and distressing elements have been eliminated."[275] Ironically, Stopes' own husband, Humphry Roe, wore glasses in several of his photographs.[276] This indicates that he, like his daughter-in-law, had vision problems but Stopes did not view his flaw as a blemish on future generations the way she did Wallis'.

Unsurprisingly, Stopes never mentioned women of colour in her writings. It is as though they never existed in her world yet she expressed extreme disproval of interracial marriages.[277] Stopes, who documented her relationship to Fujii in *Love Letters of a Japanese* (1911), a collection of letters exchanged between two lovers in an episodic style, ended the relationship with the death of the lovers.[278] This may be interpreted as Stopes' attempt to suggest that interracial relationships have no future and should not be encouraged. Apparently, Stopes' views on interracial marriage became more extreme as she aged. Hall references a disturbing newspaper interview in 1934 in which Stopes argued for the sterilisation of infants born to parents of mixed race, whom she referred to as "half-castes."[279] She reportedly even agreed with the socialist thinker Sidney Webb that Polish, Irish Catholics, Russians and German Jews were having too many children, which she considered to be problematic.[280] In many ways, Stopes' racism proceeds only by elimination. Although there is no doubt to the extent of her racism, she never imagines anybody who is not white and purely English and this is evident in her writings.

It is undeniable that Stopes' writings express many abhorrent ideas but it remains the case that her contribution to the feminist cause was substantial. The connection between the emergence of modern feminism and the eugenics movement are immensely complicated and I believe Stopes to be crucial to understanding this relationship. It is

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[271] Ibid.
[272] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 127.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood*, 243.
[276] Debenham, *Marie Stopes' Sexual Revolution*, 127.
[277] Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 182.
[278] Tomoe Kumojima, *Victorian Women's Travel Writings: Hospitable Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 153–154.
[279] Qtd. in Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography*, 180.
[280] Clyde Chitty*, Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education* (London: Continuum, 2007), 60.

certainly troubling that British interwar feminists and eugenicists found it beneficial to collaborate in advancing each other's agendas due to their mutual interests. Scholars have only begun to comment on this relationship and there are isolated examples in the published literature. According to Klausen and Bashford, many historians disagree whether early twentieth-century British feminists used eugenics rhetoric to advance the woman's cause and many of those historians define the relationship between the two movements as "strategic."[281] The critic and historian Linda Gordon is of the same opinion, arguing that "[f]eminists used eugenic arguments as if aware that arguments based solely on women's rights had not enough power to conquer conservative and religious scruples about reproduction."[282] This, Gordon infers, is why British feminists in the 1920s and 1930s "combined eugenics and feminism to produce evocative, romantic visions of perfect motherhood."[283] Other historians have recognised that eugenics was an integral component of feminist ideology during the interwar period in Britain.[284] For example, Lucy Bland discusses the continual use of the word "race" by feminists of the period in their promotion of mothers' role as creators of a "fit" race and producers of healthy children who are "of a superior race, be it white, Anglo-Saxon or British."[285] Bland acknowledges that the language of race permeates feminist thought and asserts that these feminists "spoke the language of maternalist imperialism, held in common by many, if not most, English middle-class feminists of [that] time."[286]

According to Ann Taylor Allen, whose research focuses on the intersection of feminism and eugenics in Germany and Britain between 1900 and 1940, interwar British feminists used eugenics rhetoric to provide "a scientific legitimacy to their political demands" but they were equally invested in eugenics and, as a result, "critiqued, expanded and promoted it."[287] Lesley Hall cites a number of feminists who advocated a eugenic view of motherhood and were at one point of their life members of the Eugenics Society, such as Lady Barrett, a gynaecologist and Eugenics Society member, who argued that healthy women should be encouraged to have "fit" children, while unhealthy women should be restricted.[288] Barrett, nevertheless, vehemently discouraged women from using contraception.[289] Arabella Kenealy, a known anti-feminist, and Stella Browne, a radical feminist, were both members of the Eugenics Society who promoted a motherhood that benefits the nation.[290] In *Feminism and Sex Extinction*, Kenealy presented an understanding of race as being reliant upon mothers: "The momentous function of motherhood empowers [women] to make or to mar the race."[291] Like Stopes, Kenealy supported motherhood in a traditional heterosexual marriage, while Browne favoured sexual emancipation for women

[281] Klausen and Bashford, "Fertility Control," 109.
[282] Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 68.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Klausen and Bashford, "Fertility Control," 110.
[285] Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 231.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ann Taylor Allen, "Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain, 1900–1940: A Comparative Perspective," *German Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (October 2000): 479.
[288] Lesley A. Hall, "Women, Feminism, and Eugenics," in *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, ed. Robert A. Peel (London: The Galton Institute, 1998), 37–38.
[289] Ibid., 37–38.
[290] Ibid., 38–40.
[291] Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex Extinction* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920), 252.

and advocated the right of unmarried women to enjoy motherhood, even recommending that eugenically healthy men sell their services as "studs."[292] Despite their diverse views on women and motherhood, these activists had a nationalistic interest in eugenics and ideas of 'racial' purity. They not only used the popularity of eugenics to advance their feminist agendas but also genuinely believed in eugenics as an important cause in itself.

Among the forgotten dramatists that I discuss in this thesis, Marie Stopes is arguably the only woman contemporary readers will recognise today. Although she died in 1958, the tragic paradox of her legacy is still apparent: in November 2020, Marie Stopes International, which emerged from her organisation and continued her efforts to spread birth control knowledge, changed its name to MSI Reproductive Choices to distance itself from Stopes' racism and eugenics beliefs.[293] The decision seems hardly surprising given that the memory of her remains tainted by her extreme views. However, Stopes' impact as a woman who wrote about scandalous subjects from a woman's perspective cannot be contested. She spoke candidly about women's intimate needs and aspirations and ruthlessly addressed the taboos society imposed on them. Seen from this perspective, Stopes emerges as a crucial figure in understanding the intricate workings of interwar British feminism. Scholar Helen Jones concurs, stating that Stopes was "the first British birth controller to make the connection between birth control as a means of improving the health of women and improving the health of the race at the same time."[294] What particularly fascinates me about Stopes is how easily she ventured into commercial theatre despite not being a professional dramatist but rather a scientist and activist. Unlike Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Aimée Stuart, Daviot or Stern, Stopes was wealthy and unconcerned with making money or establishing a career in the West End. While she produced drawing-room plays that, on the surface, resemble those of her contemporaries, her primary aim was not entertainment or profit. Instead, she used theatre to connect with those who did not have the luxury of time or money to read detailed and descriptive books like *Married Love* but could occasionally attend the theatre. The ease with which she managed to enter the world of London's West End theatre testifies to the resilience of the middlebrow commercial theatre in providing opportunities for women like Stopes.

[292] Lesley A. Hall, "Women, Feminism and Eugenics," 40.
[293] Barbara Baird, *Abortion Care is Health Care* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2023), 113.
[294] Helen Jones, *Women in British Public Life, 1914–50: Gender, Power and Social Policy* (London: Routledge, 2000), 77.

Chapter Three
Marriage and Work: G. B. Stern and Aimée and Philip Stuart

In this chapter, I examine G. B. Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931) and Aimée and Philip Stuart's *Nine Till Six* (1930), two plays that depict the struggle of career women in the world of retail and dressmaking amid many social and economic changes that happened to British society following the First World War. These changes included more job opportunities that promise greater freedoms, such as financial independence and the chance to improve their social status. In my analysis of both plays, I argue that *The Man Who Pays the Piper* and *Nine Till Six* demonstrate that while a career might offer women new opportunities, it sometimes fails in its promise, compelling them towards more traditional choices like marriage. I further demonstrate how the two plays show their female protagonists facing two polarized choices: marriage or career. They fall under the assumption that they cannot successfully pursue both paths and must choose one. As a result, some abandon their jobs to marry, while others treat their jobs as stepping stones to marriage. Part of my overall purpose in this chapter is to illustrate how the 'return to the home' mindset was widely spread in 1920s and 1930s British society, which, as I show, compelled women to prefer marriage over a career.

The first play that I address is *The Man Who Pays the Piper.* Daryll, the female protagonist, is miserable as the head of the household: the play makes that clear, and through Daryll, questions the degree to which giving women more power liberates them and brings satisfaction. While Daryll owes much to the suffragettes, due to her strong sense of independence and resistance to marriage, her younger sister Fay stands for the new generation of women or 'flappers' who prefer to be free and fun-loving with no responsibilities. *The Man Who Pays the Piper* proposes, through contrasting Daryll and Fay, that the financial independence that suffragettes fought for may have seemed less enticing for the women of Fay's generation. In a contrived twist, Daryll's mother unexpectedly inherits a fortune, which compels Daryll to quit her job and ask her long-time boyfriend to marry her. I perceive Daryll's choice to abandon her job to reflect her conviction that she cannot balance her career and marriage. Unfortunately, her married life proves to be equally dull and unfulfilling. The play insinuates that Daryll's plight reflects the dilemma many British women of her generation faced. Although they enjoyed better career options and freedoms during and after the war, they also faced immense social pressure to return home.

The second play that I examine in this chapter is *Nine Till Six*. It represents a type of play that emerged in the interwar period: what I call the professional play. The setting is a dressmaking shop which also functions as a disguised drawing-room play. *Nine Till Six* suggests that jobs in retail might seem to offer women a chance to move up in society, but in reality, that promise often falls short. This is clear in Gracie's story: she is a working-class shop girl who, despite her ambitions, finds no real way to change her circumstances and ends up stealing a dress to secure a wealthy husband. In addition, the play depicts a group of models who quit their glamorous jobs to seek work where they can meet eligible bachelors due to their fears of missing their chance to marry. In this instance, *Nine Till Six* insinuates that women who worked in department stores and dressmaking businesses in early-twentieth-century London might have treated their jobs as a stepping stone to marriage.

Both *The Man Who Pays the Piper* and *Nine Till Six* show women involved in the fashion and dressmaking business in London. This is a familiar way of representing working women; Lynn Alexander, in her investigation of the images of the Victorian seamstress in literary texts, explains that depictions of women as knitters, seamstresses, or dressmakers were common in nineteenth-century literature.[1] According to Alexander, this profession appealed to the Victorian middle classes because "[t]he seamstress as a figure allowed social critics to portray workers in ways less offensive to middle-class readers. Sewing was allied with images of domestic economy, with traditional female roles of wife and mother, with the home rather than the factory."[2] Therefore, the focus on dressmaking in the plays can be seen as highlighting the limitations of women's so-called liberation in the workforce: women were still regarded as belonging to fields that revolved around superficiality and consumption. Both plays also depict the dressmaking businesses as being centred in London. London (with its abundance of retail and department stores) was a significant hub for retail and fashion in the 1930s.[3] Michelle Jones, in her historical documentation of the development of couture in London during the twentieth century, argues that the 1930s marked a significant shift as a "small London couture industry" began to emerge, competing with the dominant Parisian couture.[4] Jones refers to how strong the effort was to reshape power within the global fashion industry, particularly amid the political and financial hardships Britain faced.[5] In my view, setting the plays in London could simply be a response to the practical demands of writing for the commercial West End theatre. London symbolized modernity and change. The audiences were also London-based. Thus, themes like fashion and the challenges of balancing work and marriage likely resonated with them. Before analysing *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, I will briefly consider Stern's life and relative obscurity compared to Dane and Stopes, who remain better known.

G. B. Stern: A Biographical Overview

Gladys Bronwyn Stern or G. B. Stern (1890-1973) was a novelist, playwright, critic and biographer.[6] Born into a wealthy Jewish family that suffered a financial misfortune during the Vaal River Diamond Rush, she spent her adolescence travelling from one place to another.[7] In 1919, Stern married Geoffrey Lisle Holdsworth, a New Zealander whom she divorced soon after.[8] Stern was prolific novelist who wrote more than 50 novels and short stories, several plays, biographies and semi-autobiographical books.[9] She also worked as a screenwriter on several Hollywood films.[10] Among her famous novels are *Twos and Threes* (1916) and *The Ugly Dachshund* (1938), with the latter being adapted into a popular Disney film in 1966.[11]

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[1] Lynn M. Alexander, "Creating a Symbol: The Seamstress in Victorian Literature," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 30.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Michelle Jones, *London Couture and the Making of a Fashion Centre* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2022), 3.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Julia Neuberger, Introduction to *The Matriarch*, by G. B. Stern (London: Penguin, 1987), x.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Linda Grant, Introduction to *The Matriarch*, by G. B. Stern (London: Daunt Books, 2013), 7.
[10] Ibid.
[11] *The Ugly Dachshund,* directed by Norman Tokar (Walt Disney Studios, 1966), film.

One of her most well-known fictional works, *The Rakonitz Chronicles*, consists of four novels which chronicle the lives of the wealthy and glamorous Rakonitz family, a group inspired by Stern's own relatives (some of whom, on her mother's side, shared the same name).[12] Stern, who kept publishing well into the 1960s, is largely unknown today. In her introduction to *The Matriarch* (2013), Linda Grant laments the fact that Stern's works fell out of print early: "Forty years after her death, almost everything but this novel is out of print, a warning from the past to the future that little in literature survives to the next generation."[13] In her foreword to the 1998 reprint of *The Ugly Dachshund*, a forgotten children's book, Barbara Holland praises a lost gem, noting: "A few people of a certain age remember it wistfully, the tale of the Great Dane raised among dachshunds, and search futilely for the copy they are sure they had, back in the 1930s or 40s. It's gone, of course. Gems vanish."[14] These testimonies indicate that recent scholars and publishers are only just beginning to recognise the value of Stern's works. I believe that her forgotten status is unjustified. Her work is valuable and continues to be relevant in terms of the social tensions it illustrates.

Stern was well-known among her contemporaries as a Jane Austen scholar and a biographer of Robert Louis Stevenson.[15] She was also close to many writers of her generation. For example, her writings frequently mention Dane, with whom she shared a strong friendship and whom she regarded as a confidante.[16] During her time at the Academy of Dramatic Art, Stern formed a lasting friendship with author and critic Rebecca West who affectionately referred to her as "my dear Tynx" in her letters.[17] Stern's friends, including West, Somerset Maugham and Coward, also referred to her as "Peter."[18] Being known for male nicknames implies that Stern might have been a closeted lesbian, although I could not find concrete evidence to support that. Stern had professional experience as an actress and adapted some of her novels for the stage.[19] For example, she adapted *The Tents of Israel* (1924) into the critically acclaimed play *The Matriarch* (1929).[20] Several famous writers attended the performance, including West and Virginia Woolf.[21] The popular stage actress Mrs Patrick Campbell played the role of Anastasia, the matriarch in the title.[22] The character is based on Stern's own great-aunt, whom she also referred to as the matriarch.[23] Her second play, *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931), which Gale describes as "less successful but in many ways far more searching," debuted at St Martin's Theatre in February 1931.[24] The production featured an impressive cast: the popular actress Diana Wynyard played the role of the main protagonist Daryll Fairley, while Jessica Tandy took the role of her flapper

[12] Neuberger, Introduction to *The Matriarch*, xi.
[13] Grant, Introduction to *The Matriarch*, 7.
[14] Barbara Holland, Foreword to *The Ugly Dachshund* by G. B. Stern (Exeter: J. N. Townsend, 1998).
[15] Stern published *Robert Louis Stevenson*, a biography of the author, in 1952 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1961). Along with Sheila Kaye-Smith, Stern also published several critical studies of Jane Austen's work, the most prominent being *Talking of Jane Austen* (London: Cassell and Company, 1943).
[16] Stern, *Monogram*, 266.
[17] Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *Selected Letters of Rebecca West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xiv.
[18] Neuberger, Introduction to *The Matriarch*, xi.
[19] Gale, "Women Playwrights," 27.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, vol. 1, *The Women of 1928* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 225.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Neuberger, Introduction to *The Matriarch,* x.
[24] Gale, "Women Playwrights," 27.

sister Fay.[25] The existing newspaper reviews of the play suggest that the response was mostly positive. A review in *The Stage* proclaimed it a success, stating: "Miss G. B. Stern has given us, if not another Matriarch, at least another masterful and all-dominating woman in this piece."[26] Nevertheless, a review in *The Scotsman* criticised the play as "tedious," arguing that "the characters, particularly the men, have no contact with real life."[27] The play's careful investigation of the controversial issue of women's changing roles in society caught the attention of another theatre critic from *The Express* who praised its depth after attending a performance in 1936: "Despite a conventionally domestic theme, […] it tackles the question of whether a woman's true place is in business or in the home, and delves into the further complication of how business demands and routine affect normal womanhood."[28] Despite the generally positive reviews, Stern, reflecting on the play in 1949, confessed that "her heart was broken" when the management withdrew the play after just three nights, indicating that it was not the success she had hoped for.[29] After Stern's death, the play vanished from the theatre for decades, only to be revived by the Orange Tree Theatre in London in 2013 to commemorate the anniversary of women's suffrage.[30]

The Dilemma of 'the Spinster' in *The Man Who Pays the Piper* (1931)

The Man Who Pays the Piper depicts the life of an affluent middle-class family whose lives were forever changed by the war. It portrays Daryll Fairley's transformation from a rebellious teenager who disobeys her father's commands in the prologue, set in 1913, into a responsible and financially independent woman who runs a successful dressmaking business thirteen years later. The play highlights the deep impact the war had on British homes during the interwar period: a change that led many women to assume the role of family breadwinner out of necessity. The events unfold over a period of eighteen years. They span from 1913 to 1926 and conclude in 1930.[31] The setting is the spacious, middle-class home of the Fairley family, which is located in Holland Park, London.[32] Holland Park was known for its affluence as well as its historical and artistic significance. Caroline Dakers, in her study of Victorian artists in London, corroborates this, describing Holland Park as "the most prestigious address" for artists' colonies during the second half of the nineteenth century.[33] Thus, Holland Park was clearly chosen as the main setting of the play to convey a sense of privilege and wealth. The stage directions further emphasize this illusion of wealth. The house, described as a "large but unfashionable house in London," features several markers of wealth, including a "grandfather clock" and elegant decorations such as "an antler or

[25] "The St. Martin's 'The Man Who Pays the Piper,'" *The Stage*, February 12, 1931, 16. British Newspaper Archive.
[26] Ibid.
[27] "'The Man Who Pays the Piper' by Our London Dramatic Critic," *The Scotsman*, February 11, 1931, 10. British Newspaper Archive.
[28] S. C. H, "The Man Who Pays the Piper (G. B. Stern)," *The Express*, February 1, 1936, 6. British Newspaper Archive.
[29] G. B. Stern, *Benefits Forgot* (New York, Macmillan, 1949), 21.
[30] Alexis Weedon, *The Origins of Transmedia Storytelling in Early Twentieth Century Adaptation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 100.
[31] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper: A Play in a Prologue and Three Acts* (London: William Heinemann, 1931), 1.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Caroline Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 1.

two," an "Indian gong" and a "fern in a pot," along with an enlarged photograph of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession.[34] The same setting is used thirteen years later in Acts I and II (both set in 1926), which highlights the Fairleys' ability to maintain their financial stability during and after the war. This unusual time jump introduces a dramatic shift, compelling Daryll to take her father's place in the house. Daryll's role as the head of the household is portrayed as an accident of fate rather than a conscious decision on her part. This emphasizes the arbitrariness of the circumstances that trapped women in the role of family breadwinners during the First World War.

Daryll is forced to bear the responsibility of supporting her mother, three sisters, younger brother, brother-in-law and unemployed father-in-law. This is a burden she deeply resents because it prevents her from marrying Rufus and undermines her personal happiness. The incompetence of the men around her further increases her frustration. For example, in Act II, Daryll is described in the stage directions as "control[ling] herself with difficulty" when her brother proves useless in fixing a shower problem (there is no hot water, and he has no idea what to do or whom to call).[35] Daryll's frustration finally erupts when Rufus accuses her of neglecting their plans to attend a performance: "The whole world is stuffed with idiots who can't do anything unless they are told, and then they do it wrong. […] And not a man in the whole world, except myself, to stop them. […] In this house […] there isn't a father—not one single father except me […]. I can't stand it anymore."[36] Here, Daryll refers to herself as a father. Gale explains how common it was for British drama between the wars to reflect this crisis in traditional gender roles in which the distinctions between femininity and masculinity become blurred.[37] According to Gale, one of the major changes in British society after the First World War was that economic authority within the household was no longer exclusively held by men and marriage was no longer the only choice for women living with their parents.[38] Clark highlights the growing fears that the traditional male-dominated family unit and the stability of marriage were threatened during 1920s and 1930s Britain.[39] In Clark's view, these fears stemmed not only from the war's traumatic events but also from the sweeping changes in women's rights and roles that the war had accelerated.[40] Gale attributes Daryll's situation in the play to the inevitable consequences of the war: "The heroine's femininity has been constructed by social and historical imperatives. She represents a whole generation of middle-class women who were required to leave their traditional feminine roles behind, take control during the First World War and were literally dropped from the public domain when the war was over."[41] McDonald, in her brief analysis of the play, explains that Daryll's position as the family breadwinner is a "microcosm of the widescale post-war gender reconfiguration which saw many women become wage earners, propping up other women and unemployable men."[42]

[34] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 1.
[35] Ibid., 58.
[36] Ibid., 60.
[37] Maggie B. Gale, "Errant: Women and the Interwar Theatre," in *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918–1939*, ed. Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Clark, "A Bill of Divorcement," 21.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Gale, *West End Women*, 82.
[42] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 76.

In the aftermath of the First World War, social tensions emerged between women's new-found independence (caused by their expanded wartime roles) and the post-war social pressure to return to traditional domestic roles. This created a dilemma for post-war women of Daryll's generation, who faced challenges in maintaining their independence and employment. Many historians of the period discuss this issue. As Beddoe points out, the First World War created many employment opportunities for women who were needed to fill the vacant positions of men who had departed for the war.[43] Women found work in munitions factories, trams, buses, railways, engineering and banking, among other fields.[44] Nevertheless, these women saw their positions terminated in large numbers when the war ended, particularly with the passing of the Pre-War Practices Act (1918) which restored men to their previous positions at a time when demand for munitions and wartime services diminished.[45] The rhetoric surrounding women's wartime contributions also shifted dramatically. Beddoe describes how the "gallant wartime girls," once praised for their service, were soon expected to "return to the home to fulfil their natural roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters."[46] Women who resisted this shift were harshly criticized and labelled as "hussies, pin-money girls, dole scroungers, and women who stole men's jobs."[47] Pugh similarly highlights the widespread desire among men and anti-feminists, in particular, to restore pre-war gender roles, with men returning to their jobs and women retreating to domestic life.[48] As Beddoe notes, multiple measures were employed to push women back into the home, including the manipulation of labour exchanges, the National Insurance Acts, unequal pay and marriage bars.[49] Although the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, which states that "a person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from entering, or working in, or carrying on any civil professional avocation" was in effect since 1919, the law did not necessarily guarantee employment opportunities for women.[50] The marriage bar, which mandated that once a woman married, she had to leave her job, was the "rule" among employers during the nineteenth century.[51] Gale notes that, unfortunately, the bar was still enforced until the Second World War.[52]

Many feminists such as Vera Brittain vehemently opposed marriage bars and the assumption prevalent at the time that a woman must choose between a career and marriage; as Brittain observed: "These regulations which forbid a woman to marry and keep her work are really antibiological because they mean you have to choose whether you will marry and have children or whether you will pursue a profession; it means you can only do either at a very heavy cost."[53] Kate Murphy, who has studied the role women played in the early days of the BBC, describes marriage bars as a "practical manifestation of the overriding

[43] Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 48.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 3.
[47] Ibid., 3.
[48] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914–1959* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992), 73.
[49] Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 8.
[50] HC Deb. (5th ser.) (27 Oct. 1919) (120) col. 359; Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870–1950: Sexual Division and Social Change* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 199.
[51] Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihood: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Routledge, 1992), 45.
[52] Gale, "Women Playwrights," 29.
[53] Brittain, *The Married Woman in the Modern World*, 13–15.

ideology of the period: that married women's sphere was the home."[54] However, Murphy adds that the interwar period in Britain saw a significant increase in employment prospects for women.[55] This made the continued implementation of marriage bars in areas like banking, teaching, civil service, as well as by large companies like the BBC, Boots, Great Western Railways, Sainsbury's and Cadburys, something of a paradox.[56]

Murphy's statement highlights the complexity of the predicament British women found themselves in during that era: they were more likely to find employment but were at the same time compelled to return to the home. *The Man Who Pays the Piper* highlights this paradox by showing how conflicted Daryll is about the alienating power she derives from her position in the house. For example, she admits to Rufus in Act II: "You don't know what a temptation it is, Rufus, if you are the man who signs the cheques. I never realised how it grows and grows. It bites into you."[57] In this instance, financial power is metaphorically compared to a monster that "grows" and "bites." This metaphor carries a warning to women who, due to the social changes brought about by the war, were forced to take roles that were more commonly associated with men. The play implies that women risk being consumed by this power, which potentially turns them into 'monsters.' The monster metaphor runs throughout the play, particularly in relation to Daryll, who continually expresses her fears of turning into a "an arrogant beast" and a "freak."[58] Stern, in her 1936 semi-autobiographical book *Monogram*, expressed concerns regarding economic power for women, describing it as a "dangerous type of intoxication."[59] For women, Stern claimed, this new power is both exciting and frightening: "Women […] fiddle with the psychological pros and cons of their recent accession to the throne. They realise this potency within them, and how it may grow, and where it may end. They are frightened to let it dominate them."[60] Stern's views regarding women's financial power reflect her ambivalence: she recognised its empowering potential but at the same time expressed anxiety about its possible consequences for women.

Through her independence and refusal to marry, Daryll comes out as the ultimate icon of the suffrage movement. Gale discusses how Daryll is a representative of many "identifiable female suffrage bodies" on the commercial stage in London.[61] According to Gale, they were used for many purposes, such as ridiculing a certain class or generation of women but were mostly "fully contextualised within the frame of a detailed emancipatory discourse, individuated beyond simple binary types, and shown working together as a collective."[62] In the play, Daryll is contrasted with her sister Fay, another strong woman who represents a different type of independence in the form of the typical 1920s flapper. Fay is described in the stage directions as "eighteen, and look[ing] very much as Daryll did in the Prologue, but in 1926 style: shingled hair, attractive clear profile."[63] Fay equates freedom

[54] Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 84.
[55] Ibid., 85.
[56] Ibid., 85.
[57] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 62.
[58] Ibid., 77, 99.
[59] Stern, *Monogram*, 98.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Maggie B. Gale, *A Social History of British Performance Cultures 1900–1939: Citizenship, Surveillance and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2020), 194.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 22.

with excessive partying, drinking, smoking and financial irresponsibility. Her first appearance in Act I is contrasted with Daryll's first appearance in the Prologue, which shows how dissimilar they are. The stage directions describe Fay, who returns home at 4:10 a.m. with a group of drunk men and women as "a good deal nosier and more uncontrolled than Daryll and Rufus were, in the Prologue, but not quite so naturally gay. General atmosphere of Fay and her crowd is far more sophisticated."[64]

The major difference between the two flappers is the right to get in and out of the house without justification. While Daryll's father forbade her from having a key like her brother in 1913, Fay already has one in 1926, which gave Fay greater freedom than Daryll ever had before the war. McDonald discusses the significance of the latchkey in the play, asserting that latchkeys in plays written by interwar women playwrights symbolise freedom and new possibilities for women: "Latch-keys work like electric lightening in inter-war women's drama, signifying new opportunities for liminal access to the outer world."[65] Unlike Daryll, Fay did not experience the war or work during that time. She exemplifies a new type of woman who does not take advantage of her freedom and shows no desire to compete with men for employment opportunities. For instance, during an argument with Daryll over her wild lifestyle, Fay sarcastically declares: "Darling, *this is* 1926! Independence and work and bright brave bachelor girls? —Oh, no, darling: I'd much better live at home!"[66] This astonishes Daryll, who retorts: "But don't you ever want to strike out completely on your own?"[67] Fay's uses of the word "bachelor" to describe other women comes across as an attempt to defeminise Daryll's generation of women and imply that they 'lost their femininity' in their battle for voting rights and employment opportunities. Ironically, Daryll finds herself replaced by the flapper, who takes these rights for granted and has fewer demands than the suffragette.

In the following discussion, I explain how the public perceived the flapper in 1920s and 1930s British society and whether she was considered a 'better' alternative to the suffragette. Newspapers and magazines from the period were filled with descriptions of real-life flappers as being selfish and irresponsible. For example, one newspaper described the flapper as "stressing the shortcoming of her sex" and being "eager to take, and enjoy a 'good time,' but declines to recognise any responsibilities and duties."[68] Even her representation in the theatre was satirised. For example, in his satirical 1926 piece, "The Stage Flapper," St John Ervine attacked the stage flapper, describing her as "always portrayed as an ill-bred, pert young person, incessantly uncivil to her elders" and "amazingly dense and stupid."[69] In another instance, he described her as the greatest threat to the stage and expressed his displeasure at the parade of flappers that dominated the stage at every performance he attended in the West End.[70] In her study of the flapper figure in the 1920s in England and North America, Billie Melman refers to the widespread social anxiety regarding the flapper's newfound freedom from traditional notions of femininity, as she was viewed as "androgyne, a figure characterised as sexless but libidinous; infantile but precocious; self-sufficient but

[64] Ibid., 43.
[65] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 76.
[66] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 70.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "The Flapper," *The Leeds Mercury*, November 17, 1920, 6. British Newspaper Archive.
[69] St. John Ervine, "The Stage Flapper," in *Ragtime to Wartime: The Best of Good Housekeeping 1922–1939*, compiled by Brian Braithwaite, Noelle Walsh, and Glyn Davies (London: Leopard, 1995), 60.
[70] Carleton Miles, "Flapper Actress a Peril to Our Stage," *Theatre Magazine*, October 1, 1923, 12.

demographically, economically and socially superfluous; an emblem of modern times yet, at the same time, an incarnation of the eternal eve."[71] In her historical tracing of the flapper in British and American cultures from the 1890s to the 1920s, Linda Simon notes that the term 'flapper' has been in use since at least the 1890s, originally to describe teenage prostitutes.[72] Nevertheless, by the early 1900s, it became associated with young ladies between the ages of 11 and 17 who had not yet come out in high society.[73] Simon also refers to the radical change in the flapper's attire and how liberated she was from the corsets and layers of clothing that constrained her Edwardian and Victorian forebears.[74]

Beddoe claims that the flapper is an extension of the late-nineteenth century 'New Woman' who also embodied the suffragettes' desire for equal political rights, education and employment opportunities. Like the flapper, the New Woman, Beddoe explains, was mocked in the media as "an ugly 'blue stocking,' wearing a high collared blouse and tie, smoking and adopting overtly masculine poses."[75] According to Beddoe, the flapper who emerged from the New Woman was "stripped of her serious side and hell-bent on having a good time."[76] Building on the connection Beddoe makes between the flapper and the New Woman, I perceive Fay as a metaphorical extension of Daryll; she enjoys greater freedom but lacks the drive to fully exploit it. McDonald describes Fay as "modern in a worldly and destructive way, Fay is paradoxical: carefree yet melancholy, and freer but less politically feminist than Daryll. Being modern ironically means conforming to older forms of economic gender stereotypes."[77]

McDonald's diagnosis of Fay as a modern woman who embodies an "older" way of thinking sheds light on some of the dialogues. For example, in Act II, Fay accuses Daryll of being a spinster whose domineering behaviour must be subdued by marriage: "The lord-of-the-household business is growing on you. [...] I suppose you've been a spinster too long and you've got inhibited. […] You ought to get married Daryll. It would do you good."[78] Daryll responds to the accusations "desperately," according to the stage direction, retorting, "How could I?" [79] Daryll believes she cannot marry because she needs to support them all.[80] The situation of Daryll, a 30-year-old unmarried woman who chose to earn her own living, reflects the situations of her generation: many British women experienced similar circumstances in the 1920s and 1930s. Jeffreys speculates on the increase of women who chose not to marry from the middle of the nineteenth century until after the First World War: "Numbers of spinsters, at least until after the First World War, made a positive choice not to marry […] either because they regarded marriage as a form of humiliating slavery and dependence upon men, or because they wanted to pursue a career and fulfil their potential in such a way which would not have been allowed to them by husbands."[81] Jeffreys' statement is supported by the statistics: Between 1918 and 1939, 18% of 20—to 45-year-old

[71] Billie Melman, *Women, and the Popular imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 1.
[72] Linda Simon, *Lost Girls: The Invention of the Flapper* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 9.
[73] Simon, *The Invention of the Flapper*, 9.
[74] Ibid., 8.
[75] Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 10.
[76] Ibid.
[77] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 77.
[78] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 68.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 88.

British women were never married.[82] Furthermore, there was a lack of marriage prospects due to the disparity in the number of women to men. In 1921, there were two million more young women than young men due to the significant loss of men during the First World War.[83] Single women were also regarded as being more employable. Horn reports that in both 1921 and 1931, 77% or 78% of working women were unmarried.[84]

Despite being preferred by employers, single women or 'spinsters' were not viewed favourably in 1920s and 1930s Britain. Beddoe alludes to the negative connotations behind the term 'spinster.'[85] The spinster was deemed to have failed in her obligation to marry.[86] During the 1890s, spinsters were even viewed as a "demographic, economic, and moral problem," according to Maroula Joannou.[87] Joannou references how the heated debate regarding "superfluous" women continued during the 1920s and 1930s.[88] Many British magazines and newspapers from the interwar period even suggested that these "two million superfluous" spinsters should emigrate to even the demographic numbers.[89] Melman terms this phenomenon "superfluous-women hysteria."[90] According to D'Monté, unmarried women were seen as "sexually disturbing" in British interwar society due to suspicions that they were lesbians, might have affairs with married men or could steal single men from younger women.[91] Spinsters were also widely featured in the theatre, according to Gale, who describes the stage spinster as a character type with a variety of functions, including serving as a foil to the married woman, a dour old relative, comic relief or a confidante to the main female protagonist.[92] Frequently, spinsters were portrayed as "sharp-minded businesswomen, typically dressed in pince-nez or tweed."[93] D'Monté contrasts the sexual freedom of the stage flapper with the sexless existence of the stage spinster who was portrayed with an "odd mixture of hysteria and sympathy, ranging from representations of her comic prudishness to mockery of her frigidity, and from emphasising her lesbian inclinations to focusing on her sexual psychosis."[94] Militant suffragette Cicely Hamilton reflected in 1935 on the era's hostile attitude towards spinsters:

> To-day, in a good many quarters of the field, the battle *we* thought won is going badly against us. […] Women […] are back at the secondary existence, counting only as 'normal,' as wives and mothers of sons. An inevitable result of this return to the 'normal' will be a revival of the old

[82] Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), 148.
[83] Maroula Joannou, "Introduction: Modernism, Modernity, and the Middlebrow in Context," in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920–1954*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 8: 11.
[84] Horn, *Women in the 1920s*, 76.
[85] Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, 26.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918–1948* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 77–79.
[88] Ibid.
[89] M. E. Lake, "Why Superfluous Women Don't Emigrate," *The Woman's Leader and the Common Cause*, April 13, 1923, 83. British Newspaper Archive.
[90] Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, 21.
[91] Rebecca D'Monté, "Passion, Penury and Psychosis: Representations of the Spinster by Interwar Dramatists," in *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*, ed. J. Dolan and E. Tincknell (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2012), 2.
[92] Gale, *West End Women*, 174–175.
[93] Ibid.
[94] D'Monte, "Passion, Penury, and Psychosis," 11.

> contempt for the spinster—the woman who has failed to attract a husband, and who has therefore failed in life.[95]

The Man Who Pays the Piper reflects these tensions by highlighting the deep conflict within Daryll regarding her role as the breadwinner. Although no one pressured Daryll, she decides that marriage is the right choice to make when she learns in Act II that her mother inherits a fortune. Daryll then begs Rufus to marry her and turn her into a traditional wife: "Rufus—take me and marry me—and *smash* me! Begin me all over again, and make me into the usual sort of wife. […] Oh God! I thought I'd have to sit here all my life, growing more and more of an arrogant beast […]. I can chuck my job—and—Rufus—I don't care how you do it, but—*break* me!"[96] Daryll's outburst is both shocking and uncharacteristic. She has been strong and dominant all her life, yet now she wants Rufus to dominate her and "break her." In her speech, we can sense a deep yearning to be a 'normal' woman like her sisters. This indicate that, all this time, she was feeling that her role was unnatural, but she was forced to take it on because no one in her family stepped up.

In this exchange and other conversations in the play, there are no lasting after effects after large emotional outbursts in which characters make significant decisions. For example, if we examine the conversation leading up to Daryll's outburst to Rufus, we can see unmistakable signals that foreshadowed it. Daryll and Fay had an argument earlier after Fay had fun with her drunken companions until the early hours of the morning, resulting in Daryll's inability to sleep. The stage directions describe Daryll as "exhausted and irritated from a bad night."[97] Throughout her argument with Fay, Daryll is shown to be speaking "impatiently" and "restrain[ing] herself."[98] This suggests that she is nearing a breaking point, which she ultimately reaches, ending their argument by shouting at Fay: "Because you're living in my house and *I pay*!"[99] It is ironic that after this outburst, Daryll informs Fay that there is a new music record coming out and they discuss mundane matters.[100]

The play introduces a startling inversion of traditional gender roles by using Rufus as a spokesperson for this radical arrangement. In Act III, he shocks Daryll by proposing a reversal of roles: he will leave his job and stay in the country house while she becomes the "husband" and main wage earner who will make all the major decisions as he takes care of domestic matters.[101] D'Monté comments on the image that Rufus conjures, arguing that by presenting this "tantalising vision of a new type of marital relationship," the play aims to illuminate the role that the war played, not only in "changing male/ female roles—a theme most writers had addressed—but also in proposing an alternative way of living, where gender roles have been refashioned."[102] In this exchange, Daryll's character regresses in the sense that she starts to act like a child. The stage directions describe her as speaking "pathetically, like a child" and "hotly and childishly, forgetting her poise."[103] Her child-like behaviour is accompanied by an increasing hysteria. She is described as "get[ting] in a rather

[95] Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1935), 251.
[96] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 77.
[97] Ibid., 66.
[98] Ibid., 68.
[99] Ibid., 73.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 103.
[102] D'Monte, *British Theatre and Performance 1900–1950*, 133–134.
[103] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 98, 102.

hysterical muddle" and having a "a slightly hysterical moment."[104] She even hesitates several times, with her dialogue on the page becoming riddled with ellipses, and Rufus, according to the stage directions, "gravely help[s] her" finish her sentences.[105] This hysterical, childlike Daryll is a stark contrast to the feared Daryll, the "father" and head of the household, whose entrance in Act I leaves her family paralysed with dread.[106] In her hysterical state, she is manipulated by Rufus into refusing to assert her agency: "There is a feeling in the air as though something has suddenly crashed. Daryll springs up, resisting his plan with the full weight of her body and mind. Daryll: *No!*"[107] The imaginative crashing effect echoes the sense of disruption in Daryll's emotions. Daryll finds his suggestion unthinkable: "It's unnatural and horrible. […] For me to be the husband; and you, the man—Oh, I know this sounds madly inconsistent, after all I've been fighting for, but I tried to picture it […]. I'd be ashamed…We can't change places in that way and still be happy."[108] In my perspective, Daryll's reaction reveals her internalised sexism: she cannot bear the thought of her husband being stripped of his 'natural' role as the man of the household.

In his suggestion to be a stay-at-home husband, Rufus deceptively appears as the play's true feminist. For example, he tells Daryll that he likes her best when she is "lordly and splendid" as the family head.[109] However, Rufus abruptly changes his stance. He reveals that he does not support this kind of subversion of gender roles that would strip him of his privileged position. He only suggests it to shock Daryll back to her senses and make her realise their respective positions. Rufus even abruptly changes his tone: "Rising; and dropping the sickly glamour in his voice and manner, reverts to his ordinary way of speaking, so suddenly that it comes as a shock."[110] His sudden change indicates that he is not the feminist we were led to believe. The structure of this anticlimactic encounter is similar to the pattern of Fay and Daryll's earlier argument. Following the pivotal moment in which Daryll and Rufus discuss changing their entire lives, Rufus kisses Daryll and mentions going to his Belgian dinner.[111]

Daryll's transformation from a feminist heroine to a woman who is financially and socially disempowered is shown to be her choice. However, even when Daryll attempts to embrace the role of a wife, she remains unhappy. She even tells Rufus at the end of the play that they should divorce, stating that she and her generation of women are "freaks" who were ruined by the war forever: "We are none of us fit for marriage, we fathers of nineteen-fourteen. […] I can't settle down: I am a freak. We're all freaks, my generation of girls; we were useful for a dozen years […]. I am not a wife—I'm not a mother, and I might have been so easily, if the War had let me be alone."[112] Daryll believes Rufus would be happier with "someone normal—a post-war girl, someone like Fay. They haven't been ruined."[113] Daryll's description of herself and her generation of women as "freaks" who are now unfit for traditional roles reflects a deep sense of displacement and loss. These women are caught between the old and new social orders and are uncertain where they belong. Daryll

[104] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 99.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 27.
[107] Ibid., 108.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid., 106.
[110] Ibid., 108.
[111] Ibid., 109.
[112] Ibid., 98–99.
[113] Ibid., 98.

contrasts herself with the so-called "post-war girls" like Fay, which reinforces the play's scepticism about women's pursuit of autonomy. Unlike Daryll, Fay represents a form of independence that does not challenge gender norms, as she is free yet unambitious. The play has an open ending. We are uncertain whether Rufus will 'allow' Daryll to return to her old business (she heard it was failing and wants to save it) or if she will ever find happiness as a housewife.

The trope of the successful career woman who faces hardships resulting in her choosing to abandon her career to marry can be found in other plays from the period, such as Tennyson Jesse and Harwood's *The Pelican* (1926) and Aimée and Philip Stuart's *Sixteen* (1934). From these texts we can conclude that plays which depict women dealing with marriage and career were popular on the West End Stages. They might appear to lack any political message or cause in contrast with suffrage plays before them, which advocated for the enfranchisement of women. In her study of Edwardian suffrage women playwrights, Sheila Stowell describes how suffragists, such as Cicely Hamilton, Elizabeth Baker, and Elizabeth Robins, turned to the stage to promote the political agenda of the Women's Social and Political Union. Robins, in particular, was the first to experiment with using the theatre to promote the suffrage cause.[114] Using the dramatic form of the drawing-room play, Robins produced *Votes for Women!* (1907), a political piece which promoted, as Stowell observes, the prevailing debates surrounding women's suffrage and encouraged the audience, using a familiar formula, to question the "separate-spheres ideology and the sexual double standards."[115] The success of Robins' play lead to the production of several suffragist plays that either praised the accomplishments of the movement or attacked the anti-suffrage argument.[116] Hamilton also produced several successful suffrage plays, such as *How the Vote Was Won* (1909) and *Pageant of Great Women* (1909).[117]

Compared to these suffrage plays, the plays that I discuss here might appear far less political. Reflecting on interwar theatre in general, Gale asserts that "[r]elatively few plays staged in London between the wars offered overt and direct commentary upon contemporary political events and movements."[118] However, the type of plays that women dramatists like Dane, Stern, Aimée Stuart and Tennyson Jesse produced reflected their awareness of their female spectators' need to see their personal experiences represented on stage. In 1951, while reflecting on the British stage of the 1920s and 1930s, Lynton Hudson described the interwar female spectator as a "realist" who viewed theatre as a reflection of her own life:

> To her the theatre was not an escape but rather a tonic. […]. She did not care about plot or play-structure. What she most enjoyed was character and chatter. The play must be authentic and true to her experience, about people she could recognise […]. Let them prattle and bicker over some domestic difficultly with a nice love story as a secondary theme, and she was quite content."[119]

[114] Stowell, *A Stage of their Own*, 2.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., 3.
[118] Gale, "The London Stage," 145.
[119] Hudson, *The Twentieth-Century Drama*, 198.

Hudson's description conveys the power of reciprocal relationships between playwrights and their audiences. Playwrights continued to be supported by their audiences as long as they catered to their tastes. This is also why 'professional' plays grew in popularity in West End theatres, a topic which is explored in detail in the following section.

Class and the Shop Girl in *Nine Till Six* (1930)

The significant cultural shifts in the role of women in British society during the 1920s and 1930s led to the growing interest in a genre of play that focused on the professional world. Pellizzi explored the appeal of what he called "professional realism" in British theatre during this period and defined it as follows:

> This form of drama puts us into direct contact with a professional experience which interests a large category of men, and makes us acquainted with the general outlook and daily experience of those in a certain vocation or profession. […] It is the curiosity of wanting to peep into closed places, of wanting to penetrate into the habits and feelings of people with whom we have no intimate contact in ordinary life. We might call it *Ulyssism*.[120]

Although Pellizzi did not expressly refer to women's professional world, he cited *Nine Till Six* by Aimée and Philip Stuart as the best illustration of this type of play.[121] He pointed out the fact that the entire cast was comprised of women: "In this comedy of three acts, all the characters are feminine, and the daily life of a millinery and dressmaking shop is shown, with all its exasperating likes and dislikes, its intrigues, its tragedy and comedy."[122] Pellizzi mentioned that the Stuarts sought to capitalise on the success of *Nine Till Six* by producing a succession of plays that applied the same formula, such as *Her Shop* (1930) and *Supply and Demand* (1931).[123] Sadly, however, these plays did not achieve the same success as *Nine Till Six.*[124] In his analysis of how social and economic changes brought about by the war affected London theatre between the wars, Clive Barker observed that many plays from this period shifted away from familiar settings like London flats and what he refers to as "middle-class villas under economic strain."[125] Barker cites Aimée and Philip Stuart's series of working girls' plays, John Van Druten's *London Wall* (1931) set in a lawyer's office, and Dodi Smith's *Service* (1932) set in a department store, as examples of plays that prominently feature workplace settings.[126] Gale attributes the success of professional plays to their focus on the working class who were becoming increasingly prominent among interwar audiences.[127] Erika Rappaport notes that during the 1920s and 1930s, the "New Drama" of Ibsen, which focused on domestic relations in the home, was being replaced by commercial comedies where

[120] Pellizzi, *English Drama*, 284.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Clive Barker, "Theatre and Society: The Edwardian Legacy, the First World War and the Interwar Years," in *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918–1939*, ed. Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Gale, "The London Stage," 159.

"trains, shops, hotels, and other sites of consumption became the locus of the bourgeois imagination."[128] The commercial theatre, she explains, portrayed modern life as "a richly material world of exteriors, interiors, furnishings, and costumes."[129]

Much shows that Aimée and Philip Stuart were at the forefront of this professional play trend. The Stuarts, according to Gale, dominated the theatrical scene in the 1930s.[130] Little is known about them, but Ian Mackersey, who studied young aviators who fought and died in the First World War, mentions a Captain William Bond who was married to Aimée Stuart (1886–1981) (formerly Amy McHardy).[131] Stuart, according to Mackersey, was an "exceptionally liberated feminist."[132] She met Bond when they were both working as journalists and the two had a wild affair, toured Europe and eventually settled in France where Amy "smartened her name."[133] After Bond's death during the First World War, Aimée married Philip Stuart, who was already a famous author and dramatist.[134] They both penned a substantial number of West End hits during the 1920s and 1930s.[135] The Stuarts led a bohemian life: Anne Witchard describes the "gay salon culture" in the wild parties thrown by Aimée and Philip in their fabulous London flat.[136] The author and critic Nerina Shute reminisces in her 1992 memoir on the sexually liberated parties Aimée held, in which they would "talk endlessly about free love and homosexuality."[137] Even in their professional lives, the Stuarts attracted controversy, particularly with their banned play *Love of Women* (1934) which made oblique reference to a lesbian relationship.[138] In her discussion of lesbianism and censorship in 1930s London theatre, Freshwater argues that the play's "ambiguity" regarding the nature of the relationship between two female writers living together caused the Lord Chamberlain's office to view it as questionable and a case on the verge of acceptability, leading to its banning.[139] Freshwater cites a letter from Aimée Stuart to the Lord Chamberlain in which she begs him to reconsider lifting the ban on the play because she and Philip relied on its success to support themselves: "Ours is a delicate play—entirely on the side of conventional morality—about two women, who, because of the shortage of suitable men, live for work, for ideas, for friendship!"[140] Regrettably, the ban was never lifted but the play was staged independently at the Phoenix Theatre in 1935.[141] After Philip's death in 1936, Aimée continued writing.[142] She lived to be 95 and continued to give public talks

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[128] Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 184.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Gale, "Errant Nymphs: Women and the Interwar Theatre," 124.
[131] Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs,*156.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid., 163.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Anne Witchard, "Sink Street: The Sapphic World of Pre-Chinatown Soho," in *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London, c. 1850 to the Present*, ed. Simon Avery and Katherine M. Graham (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 227.
[137] Nerina Shute, *Passionate Friendships: Memoirs and Confessions of a Rebel* (London: Robert Hale, 1992), 38.
[138] Helen Freshwater**,** "Suppressed Desire: Inscriptions of Lesbianism in the British Theatre of the 1930s," *NTQ New Theatre Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (November 2001): 312–13.
[139] ibid.
[140] Qtd. in Freshwater, "Suppressed Desire,"312.
[141] Gale, "Errant Nymphs," 124.
[142] Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 163.

about her writing career until her death.[143]

Nine Till Six (1930) debuted in January 1930 at the Art Theatre in London.[144] The play's success is evident in the glowing newspaper reviews, which largely highlighted the novelty of an all-women cast. An illustrated 1930 review of the play stated that the play is not missing out on anything by having no male characters: "As there are no love affairs to speak of in the story, the men are not missed. A fact which seems to place the masculine gender in its proper place."[145] The reviewer was also struck by the play's effectiveness despite its unconventional structure, noting: "A few years ago, this piece would not have been called a play at all due to its lack of dramatic situations, domestic crises, a villain who was nothing else, and a hero and heroine of flawless metal."[146] A 1934 article in *The Scotsman* was particularly captivated by the scenes in the junior girls' dressing room. In these scenes, the girls discuss their hopes and aspirations while changing their outfits, creating the illusion of peeping into a highly intimate scene: "When the mannequin [models] and work-room girls come into the dressing room and deftly proceed to change into their outdoor skirts and frocks, the scene has a reality about it that almost makes a male member of the audience feel like an interloper."[147] Another reviewer of a 1936 performance compared the play to R. C. Sherriff's 1928 drama *Journey's End*, which takes place on a battlefield and features an all-male cast: "[F]or if Sherriff's play is concerned with warfare, so too, is the lighter one. The difference is that in the one the warfare is that of the battlefield and in the other that of the commercial world."[148] The review further commanded the play in presenting women from various social classes, ranging from a "cockney charwoman to the daughter of a lord."[149]

Act I of *Nine Till Six* takes place on the "mezzanine floor of a millinery and dressmaking shop" on the fashionable Regent Street in London.[150] Clearly, Mrs Pembroke chose Regent Street as the site for her fashionable business to attract wealthy clients. Regent Street was constructed between 1817 and 1823 as an elegant front for the West End.[151] The purpose of building it was to divide the eastern slums of Soho from the affluent neighbourhoods of the West End, such as Hanover Square, and basically create a physical barrier between social classes.[152] This is evident by the fact that butchers and bakers were not permitted to open businesses along this street which was designed by the famous architect John Nash to serve as a "parade" for the aristocracy and their fancy carriages.[153] At first glance, the setting of Act I, which is Mrs Pembroke's office, appears far-removed from the popular plays of the period (which, as I have established, were often set in middle-class drawing rooms.) However, upon closer inspection, the office looks identical to a drawing room (see Figure 3). The mezzanine floor, which is described as a "musician's gallery at the

[143] Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 163.
[144] Aimée Stuart and Philip Stuart, *Nine Till Six* (London: Samuel French, 1930), 3.
[145] "Our Captious Critic on 'Nine Till Six,'" *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, April 5, 1930, 12. British Newspaper Archive.
[146] Ibid.
[147] "Edinburgh Repertory Theatre: 'Nine Till Six,'" *The Scotsman*, November 22, 1934, 9. British Newspaper Archive.
[148] "Nine Till Six," *The Scotsman*, July 2, 1936, 10. British Newspaper Archive.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six,* 5.
[151] Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 154.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.

back of the millinery showroom," includes props that are usually found in middle-class drawing rooms, including "grey velvet curtains" and two columns, along with several tables, chairs, flowers and a telephone.[154] The only evidence that this is the office of a dressmaking business is the presence of "fashion books" and "books of patterns" on the stage.[155] Ironically, any housewife interested in fashion would likely possess these items. The Stuarts took extra care with the staging of the play. The acting edition includes two lists entitled "Furniture and Property Plot" and "Lighting Plot."[156] The first list includes the necessary furniture for each scene, while the second list specifies the shade of light to be used in each scene.[157] For instance, deep amber light is used for Mrs Pembroke's office, and pale pink is used for the area behind the curtain overseeing the showroom (see Figure 3).[158] This careful attention to every detail down to the shade of light is a reminder of how overly full of stage props and scenery these plays are.

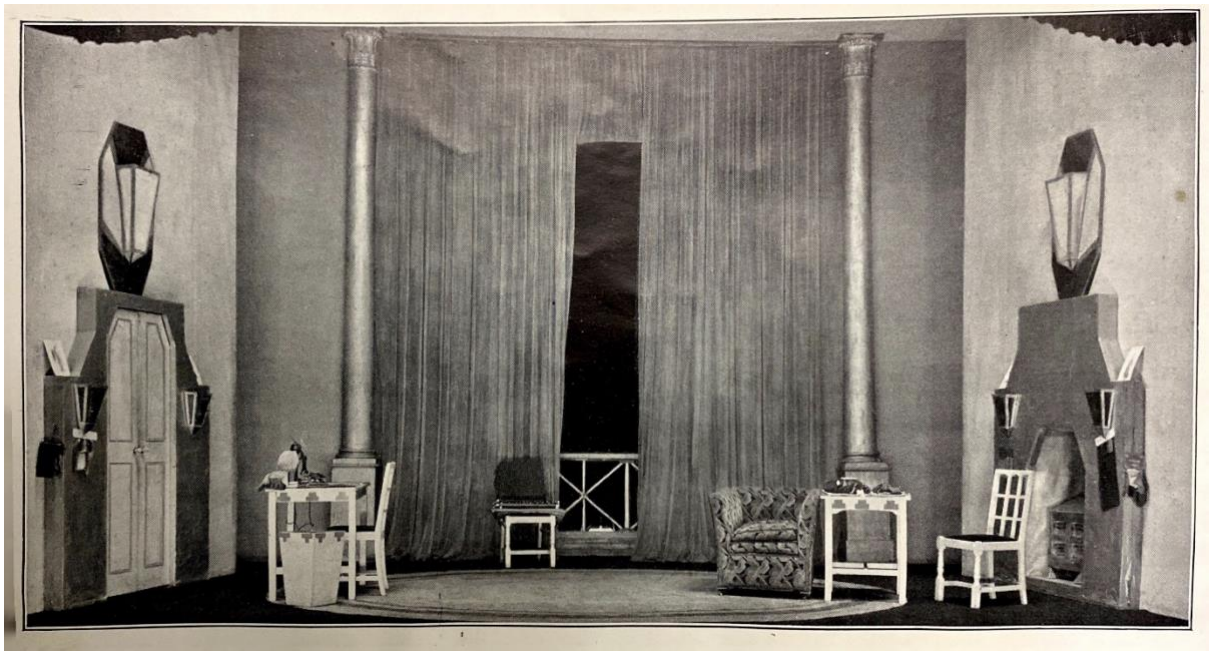

Figure 3. Photograph of the mezzanine floor in Act I, from Aimee Stuart and Philip Stuart, *Nine Till Six* (London: Samuel French, 1930), 4.

The list of characters consists of many girls whose identities are nearly indistinguishable. For instance, there are Daisy, Violet, Judy, Helen, Gracie, Carrie, and Beatrice, among others.[159] It is difficult to keep up with their numbers, which indicates that the girls are meant to be one-dimensional and not fully developed as characters. Instead, they represent social types that provide social commentary. Moreover, rather than following a traditional plot arc, the play consists of a series of dialogues between the various shop girls, each containing disguised commentary or satire. Therefore, they resemble a gallery of rotating figures who step forward, voice their thoughts and then withdraw. Only Mrs

[154] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six,* 5.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.*,* 83–84.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.*,* 84.
[159] Ibid., 3.

Pembroke remains a consistent presence throughout the play, tying everything together. I must note that the play lacks a central message in favour of a multitude of overlapping themes and concepts. It explores several themes such as poverty, difficult working conditions and low pay. Among these issues, I focus specifically on shop girls and class mobility. Throughout my analysis, I show how *Nine Till Six* reveals how women from working-class backgrounds, particularly those working in dressmaking businesses or department stores in London during the post-First World War era, face many social and class barriers. These barriers prevent them from socially advancing themselves or finding fulfilment in their careers. This compels them to consider marriage as a more convenient option.

Comparing Mrs Pembroke's interviews with Gracie and Bridgit provides a glimpse into the limits imposed by class and gender, which, as the play shows, trap shop girls at the bottom of the social ladder. When Gracie arrives for her interview, she is described as "ready for flight," which indicates her fear of overstepping her class by applying for this job rather than opting for something like domestic service.[160] The stage directions stress her working-class background: "Her enunciation is that of council school. Sometimes she drops the h's and sometimes she doesn't. […] One of her stockings has been carefully mended up the leg, the mend being worn on the inside." [161] Gracie's insistence on pronouncing the h's and hiding the worn-out part of her stocking suggests a desire to be accepted by people from higher classes to increase her chances of getting the job. Her cockney accent, nevertheless, becomes prominent when she is nervous. For example, when Mrs Pembroke gently reprimands her for shouting for her mother, Gracie retorts: "Was I shoutin'? I'm always bein' ticked off by me dad for talkin' too loud."[162] Both Gracie and Bridgit's responses to Mrs. Pembroke's are ironically similar, despite their different social classes. Gracie's interview starts as follows:

> Mrs Pembroke: Well, Gracie, why do you want to come to business?
> Gracie: I want to see life. I don't want only to be at 'ome.
> Mrs Pembroke: I see. And why did you choose dressmaking?
> Gracie: It's either that or bein' a typist! I don't want to sit typewriting all the rest of my life.[163]

Gracie's reference to the possibility of being either a shop girl or a typist shows the limited opportunities available to women of her class, something that the play clearly critiques. Bridgit, a privileged woman, gives an identical response when she is asked the same question: "It is only this, or secretarial work. I don't want to sit at a typewriter all day."[164]

The interviews reveal how Both Gracie and Bridgit seem to think that shop work is glamorous and less laborious than being a secretary. Nevertheless, retail work for women in London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had its challenges. McWilliam discusses the "punishing schedule" of London ship girls in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[165] They were required to work long hours while standing and

[160] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six*, 9.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., 10.
[163] Ibid., 11.
[164] Ibid., 23.
[165] McWilliam, *London's West End,* 296.

receiving one-half to two-thirds of the pay compared to their male co-workers.[166] Katherine Mullin, who has investigated the representations of working girls in British literature of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, notes that the shop girl falls between the highly competent typist and the barmaid who occupies the lowest rung of this spectrum: "Shop work was envisioned as genteel yet fundamentally unskilled, and fraught with hazards: underpay, overwork, the temptation of unchecked consumerism, compromising proximity to a promiscuous public."[167] On the other hand, Mullin describes the job of the typist as being "affiliated, elite, and skilled careers for accomplished, ambitious young women."[168] Mullin's explanation clarifies in many ways why both Gracie and Bridgit prefer the position of shop girl to that of typist: the latter requires training and specific skills, which a girl of Gracie's social status cannot afford, and a girl like Bridgit lacks the patience and motivation to pursue. Mullin and McWilliam's reference to the hardships of the job is echoed in the play. Mrs Pembroke warns both Gracie and Bridgit that being a shop girl is far from glamorous as it involves considerable running, fetching, carrying, a thorough knowledge of the stock and the ability to handle reluctant or rude customers.[169]

There are additional aspects to the interviews that indicate their similarity to a social visit. In its staging of the interviews in what feels more like a drawing room, the play subtly satirises the social expectations placed upon women. It implies that even when women succeed in business, they cannot fully escape the gender assumptions that confine them to a drawing room. For example, during both interviews, the girls' mothers are present, tea is served, the mothers discuss Gracie and Bridgit's fathers, and both Gracie and Bridgit sit casually on the armchairs alongside their mothers.[170] Another notable thing about the interviews is their near-identical nature. Both Mrs Abbot and Lady Avonlaye accompany their daughters and are described in similar terms: Mrs Abbot is "neatly dressed" with "an air of simple dignity," while Lady Avonlaye is "not unlike Mrs Abbot either in her nature or her dress—the latter being, of course, of better quality and cut."[171] Parallels persist in their identical exchanges with Mrs Pembroke and the similarity and repetition of their statements border on the comical. For example, both mothers express a preference for their daughters to marry rather than work and lament the impatience of young people today.[172] By juxtaposing Gracie's interview with Bridgit's, the play suggests that the social gap might be diminishing. Gracie, despite her poor background, is afforded the same job opportunity as Bridgit. Nevertheless, as the play progresses, we learn that things will always be easier for a privileged woman like Bridgit, who is quickly promoted to a model. Clare, Mrs. Pembroke's daughter, even admits to her mother that Bridgit's genteel breeding is an asset to the job and claims that customers would prefer to be served by their "social equals."[173]

Nine Till Six explores how Gracie's attempt to advance socially through befriending Bridget ends up with her committing an act of theft. In doing so, the play demonstrates how class remains an inescapable barrier for someone like Gracie and that this job, despite its initial promise to do so, fails to act as a levelling force. In the play, Gracie befriends Bridgit's

[166] Ibid.
[167] Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.
[168] Ibid.,2.
[169] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six*, 12.
[170] Ibid., 10, 22.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid., 11, 23.
[173] Ibid., 20.

wealthy acquaintances and falls in love with Bridgit's brother, Lord Avonlaye's son and heir. She starts to believe that she can rise above her class because she and Bridgit work from nine to six, wear the same uniform, and receive the same salary. The play uses a minor character named Violet, a fellow apprentice who speaks in a heavy cockney accent and, unlike Gracie, makes no attempt to hide it, as a spokesman for the insurmountable social gap between Gracie and Bridgit. In Act II, Scene II, Violet observes Gracie holding a fancy dress from the closet. The stage directions describe Violet as speaking "brutally" to Gracie, indicating that Violet deliberately intends to hurt Gracie and remind her that even a fancy dress cannot elevate her status: "Who're you, anyhow? […] Think yourself everyone, you do—goin' out with the toffs."[174] Violet's rhetorical question of "[w]ho're you, anyhow?" reminds Gracie that, at the end, she is a nobody to Bridgit and her wealthy friends due to her poverty. Violet's motivation to break Gracie's hopes is a matter of speculation. It could stem from her jealousy that Gracie has a chance to raise herself from the bottom of society while Violet has no hope. Violet brings out the worn-out blue dress Gracie is wearing rather than the fancy dress she is holding in a vicious attempt to shatter her dreams: "Fancy goin' to a theatre in that old blue serge! I wouldn't for shame. Surprised your mother lets you come to business in it—all patched up and darned!"[175] Her reference to Gracie's mother is significant. It reinforces Gracie's ties to poverty by reminding her that her mother, who shares her working-class roots, finds it normal for Gracie to go to work in such a shabby dress. The two dresses are juxtaposed here to create a parallel: the blue dress represents the class constrains that are holding Gracie back, while the fancy dress holds the promise of elevating Gracie's social status and the possibility of marriage to a wealthy man.

Violet's snide comments cause Gracie to regress in her speech and she stops trying to hide her cockney accent. This change is evident in Gracie's subsequent conversation with Bridgit, who tries to convince her that her brother loves Gracie. Gracie bitterly responds: "I'm 'is fancy just now. I can't do wrong. After a bit, how will he feel? When 'e comes to 'is senses, it'll vex 'im, me being so ignorant."[176] I interpret Gracie's deliberate regression to a cockney accent as her way of reminding herself that she will never be able to break through that barrier. It could also be her way of embracing her working-class origins and setting herself apart from Brigit. Nevertheless, Brigit easily breaks through Gracie's defences using the dress as bait: "It's Jim's favourite colour. H'd adore you in that […] Why not borrow it for this afternoon?"[177] Gracie's decision to steal the dress results in her being accused of theft and humiliated in front of the other girls.[178] It is revealed later that Freda, the head of the dressmaking department who shares Gracie's working-class background, also steals from the store and later confesses. The stolen dresses, as I demonstrate, symbolise a promise of crossing social barriers for both Freda and Gracie but, ironically, they achieve the opposite effect. In her discussion of English crime plays during the early twentieth century, Beatrix Hesse explains that the act of stealing dresses in *Nine Till Six* carries a symbolic significance: "In cases in which female thieves are shown to steal articles of clothing, the symbolic significance of the objects stolen is evidently more important than their material value. […]. In *Nine Till Six*, an elegant dress that is stolen represents an entirely different life, that of a

[174] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six*, 58.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid., 59.
[177] Ibid., 60.
[178] Ibid., 68.

married woman, to which all the working girls in the dressmaking department aspire."[179] Hesse's claim supports my argument that dresses in the play act as a means for women to elevate their social status or secure a husband.

The play also sheds light on a point explored by Mullin, who explains how the fate of women who worked in retail in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century London was tightly linked to social expectations of beauty and the quest for marital prospects.[180] Mullin refers to the intense pressure that shop girls faced in maintaining an artificial image of beauty and sophistication to improve their life prospects.[181] According to Mullin, unlike typewriting and telegraphy, work in department stores during late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Britain did not require training or special talents but rather "'softer' skills of emotional literacy, feminine intuition, and good taste."[182] Shop assistants were expected to model specific garments and hats for clients and, therefore, they needed to be attractive, slim and have a pleasant demeanour.[183] Women who worked in London retail stores were even called out for allegedly exploiting their sexual allure and "promotional strategies" to find husbands.[184] When writing about American shop girls in 1910, American author and journalist Charles Hutchins Hapgood accused shop girls of being social climbers who cultivated a certain "manufactured" refinement, despite being mostly from working-class backgrounds, to attract rich husbands.[185] The marriage prospects of shop girls were even the subject of many British newspaper articles and magazines in the early twentieth century. For example, *Weymouth Telegram* published a piece in 1899 entitled "London Shopgirls and Their Chances of Marrying Well."[186] The article refuted the assumption that shop girls did not have good marital prospects, claiming that many shops girls made "splendid" matches, particularly because their experience in the world gave them an advantage: "[…] they get a much wider experience of the world, and are naturally not easily led away to love worthless men as a girl who has never come in contract with people."[187] Another article published in 1903 by *Cumberland & Westmorland Herald* under the title "Shop Girls Marry Well" asserted how "[Customers] who are often fairly well to do, and whose experiences make them interesting and attractive men, sometimes choose their wives from among the very pretty and clever girls who serve behind counters."[188] Rappaport explains how department stores were portrayed in the drama of the period as venues where women meet potential husbands.[189] According to Rappaport, musical comedies of the 1890s and 1900s depict the department store as not only a "luxurious site of all-consuming pleasures, but also as a site of cross-class heterosexual interaction."[190] "In these stores, shop girls encounter aristocrats.

[179] Beatrix Hesse, *The English Crime Play in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 115.
[180] Mullin, *Working Girls*, 99.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid., 100.
[184] Ibid., 104.
[185] Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Street* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1910), 127–129.
[186] "London Shopgirls and Their Chances of Marrying Well," *Weymouth Telegram*, May 2, 1899, 8. The British Newspaper Archive.
[187] Ibid.
[188] "Shop-Girls Marry Well," *Cumberland & Westmorland Herald, December* 19, 1903, 3. The British Newspaper Archive.
[189] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 197.
[190] Ibid.

[…] Selling in this marketplace always buys the working-class girl a wealthy spouse," Rappaport elaborates.[191]

The marriage prospects of London shop girls are a central theme in *Nine Till Six*, particularly when it comes to the model girls in the play who, despite the allure of their job, choose to quit in pursuit of husbands. This choice stresses the prevailing assumption that marriage, rather than a career, is the ultimate goal, and that work in the dressmaking shop is portrayed as a temporary phase until a suitable marriage opportunity comes along. It also highlights the fact that that these women are shown never to consider the possibility of keeping their jobs and marrying simultaneously (this might reflect the impact of marriage bars, which, as I mentioned earlier, were implemented in many sectors in the 1920s and 1930s). In the play, the models are solely responsible for modelling clothing and are not expected to perform any other duties.[192] They possess no skills beyond their physical beauty and "the correct measurements," as Mrs Pembroke puts it.[193] The glamour of the job causes both Gracie and Bridgit to covet this job.[194] When Bridgit shares her dream of becoming a model, Clare "glanc[es] at her with a ruthless eye" to assess her hips, remarking: "That depends on your hips."[195] Nevertheless, glamour is not enough: Judy and Beatrice, two of the models, express frustration at their inability to meet eligible men while at work.[196] In Act II, Scene II, Bridgit encourages the models to quit by offering them lower-paying jobs as cinema programme sellers where they'll have more opportunities to meet potential husbands. Bridgit instils fears in their minds: "[N]ext year you'll be old—withered old hags! […]. you're not skilled at anything. That's why you've got to get a move on while you're young. To put it quite crudely, you two ought to be working where you can be seen by eligible men."[197] Bridgit's speech echoes Mullin's discussion of how shop work in early twentieth-century London department stores was viewed as requiring no skill or formal training beside prettiness and the "softer" abilities Mullin describes.[198] Ironically, Clare warns the girls that they may end up attracting "scoundrels" instead.[199] Implied her is scepticism about whether marriage will bring security or happiness. Clare fears their training as models may instead attract the wrong kind of men who could exploit or deceive them rather than provide stability.[200] Through such a warning, the play highlights the danger of relying on physical charm to navigate a male-dominated society, and shows that the pursuit of marriage, like a career, is fraught with hazards and does not necessarily guarantee fulfilment.

In this regard, *Nine Till Six* conveys a similar message to *The Man Who Pays the Piper*. My analysis of Stern's play has emphasized how Daryll, a thirty-year old financially independent women, does not find happiness in her success. In *Nine Till Six*, the senior staff, namely Miss Roberts (35), Freda (30), and Clare Pembroke (30) are in a similar situation to Daryll: they are in their thirties, financially secure and considered 'spinsters' in that era. The play demonstrates how their attitude toward having a career has shifted. For instance, Clare, who holds high position in her mother's business, does not want the same life for her

[191] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 197.
[192] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six*, 12.
[193] ibid., 11–12.
[194] `ibid., 12, 24.
[195] `ibid., 24.
[196] `ibid., 63.
[197] `ibid., 55.
[198] Mullin, *Working Girls*, 99.
[199] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six,* 64.
[200] ibid.

younger sister, Pam. When Mrs Pembroke expresses her desire for Pam to join the business, Clare vehemently rejects that, implying that she herself does not find her job satisfying anymore: "[S]he'll have the same hours? —nine till six? […] She'll be tied here all day. […] [S]he'll stick to this job year after year and wish she'd something to live for instead of these damned women's clothes! […]. This job takes all you've got—your looks, your temper, your energy."[201] Clare's expresses a deep disillusionment with the idea of work as a source of fulfilment. She is aware of the toll that such work, particularly in fields that rely on appearance and service like retail, takes on women's emotional and physical resources. In Clare's view, there is hope for Pam to escape this empty life because she is still young but Clare feels that it is too late for her. Clare even tells Freda the harsh truth that, as single women in their 30s who work from nine till six, they lead hollow lives: "[I] understand what it means to be your age and not to have had a life. You and I don't live. We just go on day after day. So does Mrs Roberts."[202] This speech emphasises the emptiness women like Clare and Freda feel from being trapped in a cycle of work without the chance to experience another path in life.

This discussion of how the female protagonists in both plays view a career as unfulfilling and see marriage as the better choice led me to consider how these plays are simply products of their age and reflect the default mindset of British society between the wars in which women were commonly expected to choose between marriage and a career, indicating that the two were mutually exclusive. There is an unmistakable sense of desperation that drives the women in both plays: it compels Daryll to marry Rufus, Gracie to steal a dress, the model girls to quit for bachelors, and Clare to protect her sister from an unfulfilling job. What brings these two plays together is the sense of urgency all those career-women protagonists share: they all fear running out of time and missing out on the chance to marry. Both plays convey the socially prevalent view that no matter what women achieve on their own, they all end up wanting the same thing: marriage. In my view, *The Man Who Pays the Piper* and *Nine Till Six* suggest that the mindset of women had not evolved much during that time period. They still longed for a 'happily ever after' with a husband and children. The true intention behind Stern and the Stuarts' choice to depict their women protagonists as such is, or course, open for interpretation. As career women themselves, Stern and Aimée Stuart might have drawn from personal experience to contemplate what women really wanted and needed to be happy. Aimée Stuart herself was an excellent example of a woman who balanced both a happy marriage and a great career (although there is no evidence that she ever had children). The playwrights might have been sceptical about the possibility that women can successfully pursue both. Even in the Stuarts' other play, *Sixteen* (1934), the female protagonist, a widowed mother of two, promptly decides to quit her job (also in dressmaking!) to marry a rich man who promises to provide for her and her daughters.[203] Ultimately, it is safe to say that these plays do not contain a revolutionary message about liberating women from marriage.

[201] Stuart and Stuart, *Nine Till Six,* 21.
[202] Ibid.*,* 78.
[203] Aimée and Philip Stuart, *Sixteen* (London: Samuel French, 1934).

Chapter Four
Creative Women from History: Gordon Daviot and Clemence Dane

In this chapter, I address an issue that has received little attention in scholarship on interwar British theatre: the degree to which on-stage representations of women as thinkers, writers, and artists in their own right remain rare during this period. I focus on two plays that centre their plots on real women characterized by their creativity: Gordon Daviot's *The Laughing Woman* (1934), centred on the forgotten writer Sophie Brzeska and Clemence Dane's *Wild Decembers* (1933), focused on the Brontë sisters. Both are historical plays with a twist, which question the lingering barriers to women's creativity and freedom of thought. I show how both plays work hard to demonstrate to their contemporaneous readers and audiences that women are creative and talented, sometimes even more talented than men in their fields. Nevertheless, I argue that the plays reveal that women often could not fully express their creativity because they were constrained by a society that did not support creativity in women. These constraints manifested in various ways: talented women faced persistent pressure to prioritize domestic responsibilities and their roles as wives and mothers over their creative ambitions; they were told that their talent was merely a channel for enhancing men's creativity which required them to nurture and support men's endeavours; and they continued to encounter gender prejudice in the publishing and literary fields as their writings were often dismissed as 'feminine,' which promote many to write under male aliases or gender-neutral pseudonyms.[1]

The first play I discuss here is *The Laughing Woman*, which is inspired by the life of French artist and sculptor Henri Gaudier and his co-dependent relationship with Polish writer Sophie Brzeska, who was lesser known and significantly older than him. The play focuses mainly on the complex relationship between René and Frik, characters modelled on Gaudier and Brzeska. In the play, Frik is depicted as a gifted woman who, instead of fulfilling her potential, focuses on domestic chores. The play highlights how Frik's talent is tragically underappreciated and fades away as a result. More troublingly, Frik is complicit: she does nothing to resist society's hostility or René's pressures. While the play is set in 1912 and represents European characters, it was produced on the London stage for British audiences. In many ways, the plot mirrors the hostile environment probably faced by talented British women, who were often denied opportunities to develop their creativity and instead pressured to prioritize their roles as homemakers and supporters of men's success.[2] The expectation that women's ambitions, whether to work or be creative, were secondary to

[1] These matters have been detailed at length in the following scholarship: Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Catherine Judd, "Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England," in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Deidre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989); Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[2] See Deidre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989); Clemence Dane, *The Women's Side* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927); Elizabeth Robins, *Ancilla's Share* (London: Hutchinson, 1924); Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (New York: Longmans, 1935); Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1935); Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

their domestic roles, is a key theme in my corpus, which I have already explored in Chapter Three and deepen in this chapter. In *The Laughing Woman*, this theme is vividly demonstrated as Frik is shown happily washing René's laundry while he rises to fame as a talented painter and sculptor. In this regard, I interpret the play as a warning to creative women: if they neglect their talent and succumb to social pressures, and accept traditional roles as wives and mothers, they risk the same fate as Frik. This warning is clear in the play's prologue and epilogue, which depict Frik as an old and forgotten woman. She sits in an art gallery, staring at René's masterpiece: a sculpture of her that brought him fame while allowing her to fade into obscurity.

While *The Laughing Woman* takes many liberties in its adaptation of Gaudier and Brzeska's relationship, *Wild Decembers* remains more faithful to the biography of the Brontë sisters, with several scenes based on Elizabeth Gaskell's 1857 biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë.* The play follows the lives of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë from the beginning of their careers as novelists, through their growing reputation and esteem, to Charlotte's death from illness after witnessing the loss of her beloved siblings. In contrast to Brzeska (rendered as Frik by Daviot), who never realizes her potential, the Brontës achieve phenomenal success, albeit initially under male pen names. At first glance, *Wild Decembers* might seem like a straightforward historical play with no connection to the time period in which it was staged (it could simply be an attempt by Dane to commercially capitalize on famous literary figures). However, such a view oversimplifies the play. I argue that Dane uses the Brontë story, particularly their hesitancy to publish under their real names and the publishers' reaction to the revelation that the talented Currer brothers were, in fact, women, to comment on the persistent biases and challenges that continued to limit women's creative aspirations into the 1920s and 1930s. I must point out that while considerable scholarship exists documenting how women writers grappled with assumptions that their work was inherently 'feminine' in the Victorian period, comparatively little scholarship exists on the struggles of creative women in the 1920s and 1930s.[3] What *The Laughing Woman* and *Wild Decembers* also have in common is that both feature tragic figures who were largely forgotten for a long time; both explicitly highlight the unfortunate circumstances of these writers: Brzeska never realizes her potential, while Anne is dismissed by publishers who are more focused on Charlotte. I contend that, although neither playwright appear to have been politically conscious, *The Laughing Woman* and *Wild Decembers* attempt to question what constitutes the literary canon and who determines its shape. The plays engage with debates that appeared first in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* but in a less confrontational manner and within a different public sphere—that of the theatre.

I use term *genius* frequently in this chapter, and it is necessary to explain how it was used in this historical context, as it carried different connotations than it does today. Genius was a widely used term in 1920s and 1930s Britain, encompassing numerous meanings. Eugenicists of the period like the sexologist Havelock Ellis were particularly interested in studying the hereditary aspects of genius. Ellis himself relied on Galton's 1869 book

[3] This matter has been particularly documented in relation to Victorian women novelists. See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Catherine Judd, "Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England," in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1935).

Hereditary Genius in his analysis of British genius.[4] Galton, the founder of the Eugenics Society in Britain, was hailed by Ellis as presenting the most illustrious psychiatric and psychological study of genius.[5] In his 1926 statistical study of British genius, Ellis defined genius as including "British men and women who have shown the highest degree of intellectual ability."[6] He included, in his list of British geniuses, individuals "[who] have made any remarkable contribution to civilization or to have displayed any very transcendent degree of native ability."[7] His reference to "native ability" implies that geniuses, according to Ellis, were born with the aptitude. Furthermore, he observed in his discourse on heredity genius that certain parents possess "an unusual amount of intellectual ability" without attaining "eminence."[8] This indicates that although many individuals were endowed with innate abilities, not all, in Ellis's view, attained the "eminence" that enabled them to make significant contributions to society. Osias Schwarz, a social philosopher, distinguished in 1916 between talent and genius in terms of mental processes: "From a maximum of observations the talented man draws a minimum of conclusions, whereas the genius draws a maximum of conclusions from a minimum of observations."[9] For him, a genius mind is distinct from the average mind, or what he refers to as the "philistine": "The genius grafts his own thoughts and feelings upon those which are transplanted into his mind, and thus gives birth to improved, new intellectual plants. He invents means and ways of increasing the amount of truth, beauty, love, social happiness; of enriching and ennobling human life."[10] The philosopher Arthur Lynch argued in 1919 that genius alone was insufficient because it required additional components such as passion, determination, inspiration, and practise: "Genius itself is not altogether of intellect; genius is the outpouring into chance channels of an intense life of activity, the opening of the windows of the mind to inspiration; but that requires preparation in the training of toil, it demands determination to win the goal. Not the intellect alone, but the fervour of the heart."[11] Ellis stressed heredity and innate ability, Shwartz differentiated genius from talent by mental processes, while Lynch emphasized that genius needs emotional fervour, hard work and dedication to reach its full potential. From these different perspectives, it becomes clear that views on genius during that time period included broader cultural understanding of genius, including a mix of biological determinism, intellectual creativity, and emotional intensity.

Since this chapter focuses on creative women, it is important to note that the issue of women's creativity was a significant topic of interest for other London-based women writers during the 1920s and 1930s like Woolf, Elizabeth Robins, Holtby and Dane. And it is impossible to engage in a conversation about women and 'genius' without referring to Woolf. In her seminal essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf questioned the non-recognition of women's creativity throughout history and argued that their absence in the literary canon is tied to their historical subservience and a lack of educational and economic opportunities.[12] To further illustrate her point, Woolf referred to the possibility of "mute" and unknown women authors who might have been part of the literary canon, had it not

[4] Havelock Ellis, *A Study of British Genius* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), vi.
[5] Ibid.
[6] ibid., 7.
[7] ibid., 2.
[8] ibid, 86.
[9] Osias Schwarz, *General Types of Superior Men* (Boston: Badger, 1916), 11.
[10] Ibid., 14.
[11] Arthur Lynch, *Moments of Genius* (London: Philip Allan, 1919), 2.
[12] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1935), 170.

been for their subjugation by their families and societies: "I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to."[13] Her argument pivots on a crucial figure: Judith Shakespeare, an imagined sibling of Shakespeare, who was as "extraordinarily gifted" as her brother, but lacked the education and opportunities he received.[14] Judith was denied the opportunity to study the classics like her brother, being told instead to fix stockings and "mend the stew," and was eventually betrothed to someone she disliked, prompting her to flee to London to pursue her dreams as her brother had done.[15] She was, in Woolf's words, a genius: "Her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women, and the study of their ways."[16] However, theatre managers and actors in London made fun of her, and a theatre manager took advantage of her and impregnated her, her pregnancy leading to her tragic suicide.[17] Her lost genius and the fact that she died young and never wrote a word were tragic facts, Woolf explained, but at the same time she asserted that Judith lives on in every woman: "She lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed."[18] Judith, Woolf maintained, will return if every talented woman is given five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own.[19]

The essay foregrounds Woolf's deep concern for the historical absence of female geniuses (a term she used repeatedly). She was not the only writer in London's literary scene to grapple with this question. Robins and Dane also questioned the barriers that had historically hindered the flourishing of women's artistic talent (the details of which I will discuss further on). It is notable that when these writers discussed women and genius, their treatment of this question revealed a peculiar obsession with Shakespeare. This is evident in Woolf's choice to create a sister for Shakespeare rather than a sister for Charles Dickens, for example. This shows that she saw Shakespeare as the standard for male genius. In another instance, Woolf attempted to analyse Shakespeare's state of mind while writing his masterpieces like *Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, concluding that Shakespeare's mind was unrivalled: "If ever a human being got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare. If ever a mind was incandescent, unimpeded, […] it was Shakespeare's mind."[20] Dane also lamented the absence of a female Shakespeare: "There never has been a woman Shakespeare. […] When will she come?"[21] Robins expressed in her feminist manifesto *Ancilla's Share* (1924) a similar misgiving to Dane's: "If, then, women are not essentially inferior to men in intellectual genius, why has the mind of her sex never yet flowered in terms of a Homer, a Shakespeare, a Leonardo, a Beethoven, an Edison?"[22] Robins, who attributed 'greatness' to those authors, acknowledged the existence of what she called their "feminine counterparts," naming Christina Rossetti, Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot,

[13] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 74.
[14] Ibid., 71.
[15] Ibid., 72.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 72–73.
[18] Ibid., 171.
[19] Ibid., 152.
[20] Ibid., 77–87.
[21] Dane, *The Woman's Side*, 163–164.
[22] Elizabeth Robins, *Ancilla's Share* (London: Hutchinson: 1924), 101.

and Florence Nightingale."[23] Like Robins, Dane acknowledged the existence of few women "geniuses" of art, showing particular admiration for Jane Austen, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and the Brontës.[24]

In my view, this fixation on Shakespeare, Austen, and the Brontës indicates the growth of an awareness within feminist thinking that the gendering of the literary canon was in itself a feminist cause. Owing to their high level of recognition and fame, the Brontës and Austen became emblematic names of female empowerment. At the same time, this fixation on iconic names reveals how underdeveloped and unimaginative the coordinates of the debates were at the time. Elaine Showalter points to the prevalence of such limited views in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century studies of British women novelists: "In practice, the concept of greatness for women novelists often turns out to mean four or five writers—Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf—and even theoretical studies of 'the woman novelist' turn out to be endless recyclings and recombinations of insights about 'indispensable Jane and George.'"[25] Showalter shows how such a trend unfortunately overlooked minor women novelists: "Criticism of women novelists, while focusing on these happy few, has ignored those who are not 'great,' and left them out of anthologies, histories, text-books, and theories."[26] Nevertheless, Woolf referenced a number of obscure women writers who, in her opinion, might have had the potential for creativity if given the opportunity; she mentioned, for example, picking up a novel entitled *Life's Adventure,* which she said was written by a minor novelist named Mary Carmichael, whom she referred to as "this unknown girl."[27] Ironically, Woolf did not seem to be aware that Mary Carmichael is a pseudonym Marie Stopes used.[28] Woolf, who admitted to "enjoy[ing] some quality in her style," insisted that, while Carmichael was not a genius like "her predecessors," namely Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Jane Austen, and George Eliot, Carmichael had "a sensibility that was wide, eager, and free" and that she wrote "as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself."[29] Woolf concluded that if Carmichael was given five hundred pounds and her own room, she would reach her full potential.[30]

It is likely that writers like Woolf and Dane often thought about women and genius because they were aware that the perception of women writers as intellectually 'inferior' to their male counterparts still prevailed. The intellectual abilities of women, and their supposedly 'minimal' contributions to the literary canon, were topics of discussion among some British men writers and thinkers, many of whom dismissed women's potential for genius. Prominent among them was the prolific novelist Arnold Bennett.[31] Bennett argued in 1920 that "intellectually and creatively man is the superior of woman, and that in the region of creative intellect there are things which men almost habitually do but which women have

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[23] Robins, *Ancilla's Share*, 101.
[24] Dane, *The Woman's Side*, 165.
[25] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 7.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 120, 141.
[28] Christina Alt, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 114.
[29] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 138–140.
[30] Ibid., 142.
[31] Arnold Bennett might be seen as a supporter of women, given that he was the editor of the magazine *Woman*, wrote a weekly column under the pen name "Barbara," and even adopted the name "Marjorie" to respond to correspondents. Kenneth Young, *Arnold Bennett* (Essex: Longman, 1975), 9.

not done and give practically no sign of ever being able to do."[32] Bennett used the example of women poets whom he claimed were historically extremely rare and "second-rate" in comparison to men poets.[33] Except for Emily Brontë, he asserted, no women novelist had produced a novel of equal greatness to those written by men.[34] He disputed the claim Woolf and many of her feminist contemporaries made that lack of education and freedom had historically hindered women's ability to produce a work or art or literature.[35] According to Bennett, throughout history and up until his time, women had had ample opportunities to flourish.[36] Bennett concluded that "no amount of education and liberty of action will sensibly alter that […]. It is a question of an overwhelming and constitutional difference."[37] In light of this sexist view, I find it ironic that Bennett described himself a few sentences later as "a feminist to the point of passionateness."[38] Bennett's unfavorable views must have been known to Woolf before publishing *A Room of One's Own*. In her diary, she wrote: "I now find myself […] making up a paper upon Women, as a counterblast to Mr Bennett's adverse views reported in the papers."[39] Bennett's condescending views might have inspired her to explore the issue further in *A Room of One's Own*.[40] Ellis, in his discussion of British genius, expressed views similar to those of Bennett, claiming that "a slightly lower standard of ability, it would appear, prevails among the women than among the men."[41] As I have shown so far, women writers were creating and producing works in an environment where their efforts were viewed by other creative writers (namely men) as inherently less capable, regardless of their talent.

Despite how invested women writers were in the question of women's creativity, the representation of this topics was a marginal issue on the West End stage. Moreover, their depiction of creative women tends to focus on the past, not on their contemporaries. For example, Dane's only plays that depict creative women, *Wild Decembers* and *Will Shakespeare*, are historical plays. The latter imagines that Shakespeare's fictional lover helps him write scenes for *Romeo and Juliet*, which, according to the play, contributed to his success.[42] Gale makes the same observation, explaining how historical plays produced by both men and woman playwrights for the West End theatres depict either creative women from history like the Brontës, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Florence Nightingale, the actress and dancer Emma Hamilton, or famous historical figures like Elizabeth I, Mary Stuart,

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[32] Arnold Bennett, *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex Discord* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920), 112.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid. Bennett was not addressing Woolf by name here, but he and Woolf had a tense relationship as authors. After Bennett dismissed Woolf's characters in *Jacob's Room* as unrealistic, Woolf published *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, in which she criticized Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H. G. Wells for creating flat characters that lack depth. Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), 10–13.
[36] Bennett, *Our Women,* 113.
[37] Ibid.*,* 115.
[38] Ibid.*,* 116.
[39] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, vol. 2 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 69.
[40] Virginia Woolf, "The Intellectual Status of Women," in *Killing the Angel in the House: Seven Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 19.
[41] Ellis, *A Study of British Genius*, 9. What is unsettling about his study is that Ellis categorised British geniuses according to ethnicity, region and social class. According to his statistics, most British geniuses were of English and Irish descent, and geniuses, he claimed, were most prevalent in the upper classes (25, 67).
[42] Clemence Dane, *Will Shakespeare* (London: Heinemann), 55–56.

Elizabeth of Austria, and the pirate Mary Read.[43] Some of these plays deal with lesser-known historical moments. Gale mentions several examples, including Elsie Shuffler's *Parnell* (1936), which depicts how Kitty O' Shea, the wife of the newly elected member of parliament Willie O'Shea, falls in love with Parnell, the leader of the Irish party in the mid nineteenth century, and Helen Jerome's *Charlotte Corday*, which dramatizes Corday's assassination of Jean-Paul Marat during the French Revolution.[44] When writing about the present, playwrights like Dane, Stern, and Stopes portray ordinary middle-class women, such as career women like Daryll in *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, or flappers like Sydney in *A Bill of Divorcement*. Neither Daryll nor Sydney, nor any modern women in the plays I discuss throughout the thesis, is depicted as creative. It is as if there was an imaginative blockage at work. This can be interpreted in several ways: historical distance might have provided a safer lens through which to explore the struggles faced by creative women, which made the subject matter less politically or socially risky. In addition, depicting women from history might have been easier. Figures like the Brontës had already 'proven' their literary worth. On the other hand, British women writers who lived during the 1920s and 1930s were navigating uncharted territory in which gender expectations in the literary world were constantly changing.

In the following, I begin by addressing the impressive life and career of Gordon Daviot. Like the other playwrights in my study, Daviot is largely forgotten, despite having been a popular playwright and novelist in her time. The only comprehensive biography of her, written by Jennifer Henderson, was published in 2015.[45] An older, but very brief biography by Sandra Roy, published in 1980, focuses solely on Daviot's crime novels.[46] Beyond that, there are only scattered blurbs and brief mentions of her in anthologies or studies of American and British mystery novelists.[47] The fact that Henderson's and Roy's biographies of her are titled *Josephine Tey*, not Gordon Daviot or her real name, Elizabeth MacKintosh, strongly indicates that Tey (the alias she used to publish her crime fiction) is her most recognizable identity. As a playwright, whenever Daviot is occasionally mentioned in twentieth-century scholarship on British theatre, she is dismissed as inferior. For example, in Niloufer Harben's study of the modern English history play, Daviot is described as a "minor" and "lesser" playwright compared to Shaw and Edward Bond, whom he identifies as "major" and "powerful."[48] Through my close reading and contextualization of *The Laughing Woman*, I will challenge this claim by showing Daviot's impact during her lifetime and how she deserves recognition as an influential figure in British interwar theatre.

Gordon Daviot: A Biographical Overview

Gordon Daviot or Elizabeth MacKintosh (1896-1952) was a Scottish novelist and playwright who was born and spent most of her life in Inverness in Scotland.[49] Under the pen name

[43] Gale, *West End Women*, 140.
[44] Ibid., 139–148.
[45] Henderson, *Josephine Tey*.
[46] Sandra Roy, *Josephine Tey* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).
[47] The ones that come to mind are Nancy Ellen Talburn's *10 Women of Mystery* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1981) and Moira Davison Reynold's *Women Authors of Detective Series: Twenty-One American and British Writers, 1900–2000* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001).
[48] Niloufer Harben, *Twentieth-Century English History Play: From Shaw to Bond* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1988), 6–7.
[49] Henderson, *Josephine Tey*, 258.

Josephine Tey, Daviot published several detective novels, one of which, *The Daughter of Time* (1951), was chosen in 1990 by the Crime Writers Association as the "greatest mystery novel of all time."[50] According to Henderson, Daviot holds a high status today as one of the Golden Age crime writers, alongside Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers.[51] Henderson notes that Daviot's detective novels received the majority of the little scholarly attention she was given and thus were never out of print.[52] Her plays, on the other hand, have been completely forgotten and are all out of print today.[53] As a playwright, she had a number of West End successes and exclusively published her plays under the pseudonym Gordon Daviot.[54] She rose to fame with her series of historical plays, including *Richard of Bordeaux* (1932), *The Laughing Woman* (1934), and *Queen of Scots* (1934).[55] The first portrays the valiant attempts made by Richard II to maintain peace in England.[56] It was a huge hit and launched the stage and film actor Sir John Gielgud, who played the role of Richard II, to stardom and cemented him as one of the greatest actors of his day.[57] Many of her novels were adapted for television and radio, including Alfred Hitchcock's 1937 Hollywood film *Young and Innocent*, which was based on her detective novel *A Shilling for Candles* (1936).[58] Daviot was extremely private and was seen as a recluse. Gielgud, in his 1939 theatre memoir, described Daviot's "innate shyness" and how much she hatred staying in London for too long, preferring to travel back and forth between London and Inverness.[59]

Daviot was fascinated by history and used it as a framework for most of her works, including mystery novels like *The Daughter of Time*, in which she departs from the formulaic detective plot.[60] *The Daughter of Time* depicts how inspector Alan Grant, a recurring character in her novels, attempts to investigate the alleged crimes of Richard III while recovering on his hospital bed.[61] According to Talburt, Daviot's preoccupation with history originated from her desire to transform historical figures into ordinary people, a process Talburt terms "de-mythologizing."[62] Harben characterizes her method of researching history as "critical" and "searching," with the objective of defending certain historical individuals whom she felt have been unjustly treated.[63] He gives the example of her play *Dickon* (1953), in which she presents a more sympathetic view of Richard III (who was also the center of the mystery in *The Daughter of Time*), as opposed to Shakespeare's portrayal of him as a villain.[64] Daviot was also interested in art and considered enrolling in art school in Scotland.[65] However, she realized that her artistic talent was not of the same caliber as her

[50] Ibid., 1.
[51] Ibid., 2.
[52] Ibid., 346.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 2.
[55] Ibid., 46, 163.
[56] Short, *Sixty Years*, 328–329.
[57] Henderson, *Josephine Tey*, 2.
[58] Ibid., 192.
[59] Gielgud, *Early Stages*, 227–29.
[60] Roy, *Josephine Tey*, 141.
[61] Henderson, *Josephine Tey*, 143–144.
[62] Nancy Ellen Talburn, "Josephine Tey," in *10 Women of Mystery*, ed. Earl F. Bargainnier (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1981), 46.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Henderson, *Josephine Tey,* 46.

writing and decided instead to study and eventually teach Physical Education.[66] Her interest in art history can be seen in her second play, *The Laughing Woman*, which premiered just two months before *Queen of Scots*.[67] Beside these two plays and *Richard of Bordeaux* (which are well-crafted plays), none of her other plays have ever received any success during her lifetime or acclaim after her death. It is ironic that Daviot, who wanted to be remembered as a playwright, is utterly forgotten as Gordon Daviot and best remembered as Josephine Tey, author of several mysteries.[68] In the next part, I will examine *The Laughing Woman*. It explores a timeless issue, which is the struggle women face in balancing their creative aspirations with responsibilities in the home.

Genius and Nurture in *The Laughing Woman* (1934)

The Laughing Woman was first performed at the New Theatre in London in April 1934.[69] The play was performed for only a few weeks and was moderately successful but was not as big a hit as Daviot's *Richard of Bordeaux*, which ran for twelve months.[70] The play was praised in the press. For example, a 1934 article in *Illustrated London News* lauded how Daviot crafted "a play of distinction, free from sham theatricality, a play that draws life from the players by their sensitive performances."[71] *The Stage* compared it to Daviot's more critically acclaimed play, *Richard of Bordeaux*, describing *The Laughing Woman* as "a far finer one."[72] *The Laughing Woman* takes place two years before the outbreak of World War I in Europe. Although Gaudier and Brzeska appear obscure now, Cameron notes that interest in them was kindled in the early 1930s by the publication of two English-language biographies of Gaudier by Harold Ede and Horace Brodzky.[73] These biographies explore the nature of the relationship between the 19-year-old Gaudier and the 39-year-old Brzeska through their letters and Brzeska's unpublished diary.[74] An earlier biography penned by Ezra Pound (who was, apparently, a close friend of Gaudier's) in 1916 features artwork, correspondence, and photographs of Gaudier and some of his sculptures, but does not tackle his relationship with Brzeska.[75] Since Daviot had an interest in art history, she likely knew of those biographies or might have had access to them in 1934.[76]

A question that arises is whether *The Laughing Woman* strictly follows Gaudier and Brzeska's life or takes liberties with it. Daviot changed Gaudier and Brzeska's names into

[66] Ibid., 1, 46.
[67] Roy, *Josephine Tey*, 22; Henderson, *Josephine Tey,* 46.
[68] Rebecca Cameron, "British Women Dramatists and the Feminist Movement, 1914–1939" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1998), 46.
[69] Ibid., 45.
[70] Ibid.
[71] "Miracle, Magic and Metamorphosis," *Illustrated London News*, April 28, 1934, 644, British Newspaper Archive.
[72] "The Laughing Woman," *The Stage*, April 12, 1934, 10, British Newspaper Archive.
[73] The two biographies Cameron mentions are Harold Ede's *Savage Messiah: Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1931) and Horace Brodzky's *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska 1891–1915* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).
[74] Cameron, "British Women Dramatists," 46–47.
[75] Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir by Ezra Pound* (London: John Lane, 1916).
[76] Henderson, *Josephine Tey*, 160. Henderson refers to how Gaudier and Brzeska's story captured the imagination of British filmmaker Ken Russell, who produced a 1972 film based on Harold Ede's biography of Gaudier, *Savage Messiah*, with the same title.

René Latour and Ingrid Rydman (or Frik) and renders Frik as Swedish instead of Polish.[77] *The Laughing Woman* also omits Gaudier's historic name change: he changed his name to Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, adding Brzeska's last name to his own when they lived together (Brzeska also did the same), although they never married.[78] The text of the play even includes a brief statement declaring that the drama is merely "suggested" by the real relationship between Gaudier and Brzeska, insisting that the characters should not be considered "portraits" because the play is "entirely imaginary."[79] This statement, along with the fact that she introduced new events and characters, raises the question of whether this piece strictly belongs to the historical drama genre. Daviot was certainly not the only playwright to craft a play centred around real historical figures during this period. According to Gale, *The Laughing Woman* is an example of a succession of historical plays that gained widespread acclaim between the 1910s and the 1930s and were penned by playwrights of both genders.[80] She terms this kind of play "[t]he history or chronicle play" and defines it as "a dramatized chronological record of historical events, where history is used as a framework around which a plot can be structured."[81] Gale refers to how some theatre critics of the interwar theatre were concerned that certain playwrights "overburdened" the text with historical details.[82] She cites the example of Gwen John's *Gloriana* (1925), in which John was accused of leaving no fact behind in her depiction of the life of Queen Elizabeth I.[83] On the other hand, other playwrights were accused of taking "great authorial liberties" with historical facts, such as Morna Stuart in her 1939 play, *Traitor's Gate*.[84] Harben offers a different perspective: historical plays can indeed offer a "more purely imaginative" approach, he asserts.[85] He rejects "strict historical accuracy," claiming that it would strip the "scope, power and flexibility of the form," but also cautions that an excessive amount of liberty will distort the truth.[86] His definition of the historical play is more specific than Gale's and resonates with my case studies: "[A playwright must] show a deep and serious interest in the past, free as he [sic] is to think critically and independently about it. The writer's power of intuition enables him [sic] to penetrate beneath the surface of documented fact to explore the possibilities of human character and situation within the context of actual experience."[87]

The Laughing Woman is set in a run-down studio apartment in London. When we are introduced to René in Act I, he lives alone as a failed artist in a "cheap apartment house," which is in a dismal state.[88] It is described as "neglected and untidy," with the furniture consisting of "old-fashioned and maimed rejects from the rest of the house." Similarly, the stage directions describe René as "half-starved looking […], untidy, unwashed, and very

[77] According to Henderson, one of the intriguing changes Daviot made was to change Frik's nationality from Polish to Swedish. Henderson explains that Daviot met many Swedish teachers who worked with her when she was a PE teacher in Inverness and was therefore more familiar with the way Swedes speak English, leading her to conclude it is simpler to portray a Swede than a Pole. Henderson, *Josephine Tey*, 74.
[78] Harold Ede, *Savage Messiah: Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1931), 44.
[79] Gordon Daviot, *The Laughing Women* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 7.
[80] Gale, *West End Women*, 139, 142, 150, 151.
[81] Ibid., 139.
[82] Ibid., 140.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Harben, *English History Play*, 2.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 25.

frayed," while Frik, in contrast, appears neat and "carefully groomed."[89] When Frik becomes part of René's life, everything, including the studio setting, begins to improve gradually until René gains recognition and the studio exhibits "evidence of prosperity" in Act III.[90] Moreover, the first act shows René to be artistically blocked. For example, when he shows Frik his early drawings, Frik is not impressed, describing them as "woolly," which prompts René to rip them to shreds, admitting that they are bad because they are "an imitation."[91] After merely four weeks of meeting Frik, René realizes he desperately needs her to assist him in becoming famous and producing original work, indicating that he sees her as a potential source of inspiration. His only good sketches are of Frik herself, laughing, which, as we know from the prologue, serve as the prototype for his famous bust entitled *The Laughing Woman*, displayed in an art gallery after René's death. In the prologue, the statue is described in the gallery guidebook as "one of René Latour's most satisfying works."[92] As far as I am aware and based on my examination of Gaudier's sculptures and drawings, *The Laughing Woman* statue is Daviot's invention.

The play explores Frik's transformation from a thriving woman with promising talent to a woman who quickly abandons her creative pursuits. Act II shows an important scene in which René and Frik quarrel over Frik's inability to write. In this scene, René appears to be totally oblivious to his self-centred nature and the burden he places on Frik with his needs. He continues to press Frik to write and gets upset when he discovers that she does not.[93] Some of the letters Ede cites in his biography of Gaudier show that Gaudier also urged Brzeska to write.[94] This may have served as an inspiration for this scene in the play. For example, in a letter addressed to Brzeska in November 1912, Gaudier writes: "I implore my Zosik to work hard and regularly, at least five hours a day. You must remember that each month you lose a week by your illness, and we are such poor devils that we must keep ourselves very much in hand and not waste our time but produce."[95] In the play, René confronts Frik about her book, demanding to know what she has written so far. Frik, who is described in the stage directions as "looking for an excuse," tries to dodge his questions and accuses him of bullying her.[96] This causes René to remind her of their agreement to "work together. Grow famous together."[97] Feeling judged and pressured, Frik tries to come up with excuses: "How can I work here? It is so cold that my brain grows numb."[98] Although she attributes it to the cold, Frik's metaphor of her brain being numb signifies that her brain, the source of her creativity, is obstructed. When René suggests she stay in bed and write, she bursts out: "And all day there is noise, noise, noise. The garage man bangs and clatters and runs engines and sings and shouts orders, and children play and scream, and men play instruments."[99] The sounds she evokes – "noise," "bangs," "clatters," "sings," and "shouts" – symbolize the obstacles and interruptions that prevent her from writing. René, however, can focus on his work in peace.

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[89] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 14.
[90] Ibid., 84.
[91] Ibid., 18.
[92] Ibid., 12.
[93] Ibid., 52–53.
[94] Ede, *Savage Messiah,* 184.
[95] Qtd. in Ede, *Savage Messiah,* 184.
[96] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 53.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

The real Brzeska was highly sensitive to environmental noise and disruptions as well. Brodzky relates, in his biography of Gaudier, that Brzeska complained about noise preventing her from writing. She moved into a cottage in the country after Gaudier passed away, hoping to write her book in solitude, but she was unable to: "She was writing her big book and she imagined that all the neighbors' noises were especially directed against her, to annoy her and prevent her from working."[100] By alluding to these facts, Daviot's play reinforces its central theme: women's creative process is often interrupted, sometimes with tragic consequences.

The "voices" that interrupt Frik, referenced in the play, bring to mind Woolf's critique of the "voices" that interrupt women authors in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf does not specify what these voices are clearly, who they belong to, or what they say. She refers to them as the voices of "that purely patriarchal society."[101] Nevertheless, it is evident that she was referring to social pressure and male figures of authority.[102] In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf praised the perseverance of Austen and Emily Brontë in particular, who, in Woolf's estimation, were the only authors throughout history who resisted these patriarchal voices:

> Only Jane Austen did it, and Emily Brontë. […] Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that. They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them.[103]

Woolf admitted that the process of writing a "work of genius" is extremely difficult even for men writers because "[d]ogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down."[104] Nevertheless, she highlighted the added challenge for women: while writers like John Keats, Thomas Carlyle, and Gustave Flaubert struggled with poverty, the world treated them with only "notorious indifference."[105] In contrast, Woolf contends, women were met with hostility: "The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility."[106] For women, Woolf concludes, the noise is louder and "infinitely more formidable."[107] In her argument about women writers not having the luxury of "a room of [their] own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room" to work, Woolf was echoed by Holtby.[108] Holtby, coincidently, also used Carlyle and compared him to Gaskell to illustrate the constant noise and interruption to which women authors were subjected due to their caregiving responsibilities: "While Carlyle was shutting himself up in his sound-proof room, and sacrificing his wife to his dyspeptic or creative agonies, Mrs. Gaskell was writing her novels at the end of a dining room table, among a constant whirl of children, servants, draughts and callers."[109] Holtby stressed the hardship women authors' endured to liberate

[100] Brodzky, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska*, 155.
[101] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 112.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 78–79.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., 79.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization*, 104.

themselves from the strain of their domestic duties: “Unless a woman is highly egotistical or highly fortunate, her struggle to obtain freedom from domestic preoccupation exhausts a major part of her energy before it ever finds its way near her work.”[110]

The above discussion highlights the tragic reality that, historically (and even during the time when Holtby, Woolf, and Dane were writing), women were expected to create in environments that perpetuated the belief that motherhood and domestic duties should be their ultimate goal. During the 1920s and 1930s in Britain, this notion was strongly reinforced by writers such as Bennett, Ellis, Schwarz, G. Stanley Hall, and Anthony Ludovici. Those writers were known for supporting the idea that women were inherently maternal creatures. They saw women as being better suited to managing households and raising children, and viewed women as less capable of creativity due to their ‘inferior’ mental abilities. I have discussed at the beginning of the chapter Bennett’s and Ellis’s unfavorable views of women's creative potential. Their views were supported by other men of their generation, who went so far as to blame women's ‘diminished’ creative powers on their maternal instincts and reproductive organs. For example, Schwarz claimed that woman’s “maternal altruism is her only redeeming and ennobling mental feature.”[111] This misogynistic view of women’s mental capacity can certainly be found in the writings of some eugenicists of the period. famous among them is Ludovici, a well-known British eugenicist philosopher who wrote in his 1923 book, *Woman: A Vindication* (which, despite the title, is extremely slanderous to women), that a woman is “overshadowed” by her reproductive instincts which makes her only able to create an “inferior display.”[112] Ludovici claimed a woman can only create art under two conditions: “Woman only inclines to art, therefore, when (a) her reproductive instinct is prepared to stand aside, because it is not as strong as it might be, owing to some flaw in her ancestry or in the tone or correlation of her bodily parts; or (b) she wishes to wield an extra weapon in attracting the other sex.”[113] Although he did not exactly undermine the intellectual abilities of women, the American psychologist and eugenicist G. Stanley Hall expressed concerns about the correlation between women's creative pursuits and a lower birth rate (this certainly aligns with the eugenic movement's obsession with women's reproductive ability and demonstrates the political dimension of this issue). Hall argued in 1909: “From the available data it seems, however, that the more scholastic the education of women, the fewer children and the harder, more dangerous, and more dreaded is parturition, and the less the ability to nurse children. Not intelligence, but education by present man-made ways, is inversely as fecundity.”[114] Hall even suggested an education for girls that is “more favo[u]rable to motherhood.”[115] Ellis echoed this sentiment. He argued that women who marry young were disadvantaged by the demands of motherhood and reproduction which prevented them from fulfilling their intellectual goals, insinuating that women could not achieve both: “The women who marry at the period of greatest general and sexual activity, between 25 and 30, tend either to have their intellectual activities stifled, or else to be seriously handicapped in attaining eminence.”[116]

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[110] Ibid.
[111] Schwarz, *General Types,* 412.
[112] Anthony Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London: Constable & Co, 1929), 446.
[113] Ibid., 349.
[114] G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene* (London: Appleton, 1909), 280.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ellis, *A Study of British Genius*, 141.

Prominent feminists such as Woolf, Robins, and Cecily Hamilton actively opposed entrenched social beliefs about women's biological and mental 'inferiority.' They spoke out against how these notions historically confined women to play the roles of 'assistants' or 'muses' to male artists and writers. Anne Boyd touches upon this issue, arguing that from ancient Greece to nineteenth-century Europe, genius was regarded as a distinctly male attribute, while women's role was considered passive.[117] She explains that "[t]he nature of creative genius was understood as analogous to male sexuality, which was powerful, explosive, procreative. Female sexuality and, hence, female nature were seen as receptive and nurturing."[118] According to Boyd, women were seen as incapable of independent creativity because they were expected to be "acted upon or, perhaps, serve as the muse who inspired the male creator. A woman's role was that of an intermediary, an assistant to the godlike male creator.[119] Hamilton and Robins, like Woolf, referred to how women throughout history were compelled to stand on the sidelines and assist men wanting to achieve greatness. For instance, in *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), Hamilton discussed how women's preoccupation with survival and their dependence on the "male" for support hindered their creativity: "It is the systematic concentration of woman's energies upon the acquirement of the particular qualities which are to procure her a means of livelihood by procuring her the favour of man that has deprived her, steadily and systematically, of the power of creation and artistic achievement."[120] On the other hand, Robins, in *Ancilla's Share*, expressed her dissatisfaction with the social expectations that stifled creative women: "What gifted women's life has not been sucked dry by influences which have nothing to do with her productiveness except to abort them all—all except the physical child?"[121] Robin's references to reproduction are significant reminders of how women were historically viewed in terms of their biological abilities. The term "abort" is a metaphor for the termination of women's creative potential and the contributions they might have made to society if they were allowed. Robins also argued that genius in women needed two elements: training and opportunity, and if one or both were absent, genius "dies."[122] According to Robins, women have possessed genius throughout history, but due to the absence of one or both of these factors, they have "poured this gift into the hands of men."[123] To illustrate, she provided the examples of the contributions Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, and Mary Lambs made to the great works of literature produced by their brothers and husbands.[124]

Pouring her gift into the hands of a man is exactly what Frik does in *The Laughing Woman*. She succumbs to social pressure and finds it easier to nurture René's talent than to pursue her creative aspirations. René seems to be aware of this fact as well. In Act I, Scene II, he and Hazel Graham, an upper-middle-class young woman who consents to model for René, who wants to create a bust of her, discuss Frik and her unwritten book. Frik's untapped potential is symbolised by her 'invisible' book, which is merely a subject of speculation. When Hazel asks about Frik's progress with it, René responds dismissively: "Oh, she will never do anything […] she will never be persuaded to give up house-cleaning and

[117] Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 129.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London: Chapman and Hall: 1912), 149.
[121] Robins, *Ancilla's Share*, 105.
[122] Ibid., 102.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 104.

attend to her talent.[125] This statement reveals René's firm belief that what prevents Frik from writing is her domestic impulses, not him. His confident assertion that Frik will never write anything (he repeats the word 'never') reflects the stereotype that women cannot resist the urge to succumb to their instinct to nurture. The truth is that Frik is overwhelmed by the immense amount of nurturing he requires. She receives no care in return.

A novelist named Laura, however, notices the strain Frik is under. Laura wonders how Frik manages to work despite her devotion to René: "What is still more remarkable is how you [Frik] manage to stay so devoted. Genius is notoriously difficult, and two in one family—!"[126] Frik's story arc indicates that talent is never innate but requires cultivation. As Robins explained in *Ancilla's Share*, men historically had the social advantage of mothers, wives, and sisters who supported and nurtured their creativity, while gifted women had rarely received the same level of encouragement for their creative endeavours.[127] Ironically, René's sarcastic statements about Frik being incapable of anything besides housework become accurate. For instance, Act I shows Frik as initially hesitant to relocate to England with René, until a pair of stained socks shifts her entire perspective: "She picks up, in her automatic tidiness, two socks which are lying, separately, on the floor. She runs her hands, again automatically, through the first before folding them together. Her hand goes straight through the hole which is the heel. The other is even worse."[128] Frik does not appear to have had a sense of responsibility towards René before seeing the socks. The act of picking up and tenderly touching the socks is a pivotal moment for Frik. Seeing this pair of socks is enough to awaken in her an instinctive maternal need to take care of René.

Hazel is another silenced woman in *The Laughing Woman.* Like Frik, she abandons her ambitions to care for her widowed father. She introduces herself as someone who "does a little scribbling," and when René shows interest and asks if she writes, she quickly dismisses her own talent: "Not very seriously," causing René to lose interest in "dabblers" like her.[129] Being a woman who is talented but faced with responsibilities that are traditionally ascribed to women, Hazel abandons her literary ambitions and adopts the role of homemaker because her widowed father requires a hostess for his dinner parties and someone to manage his household. In their discussion of the play, Cameron and Gale emphasize the element of choice, arguing that Hazel (unlike Frik) had no option but to depend on her father for financial support, which prevents her from writing.[130] In contrast, Frik, who had her own income and independence, willingly chose to give up all that for René.[131] Both women (whether by choice or circumstance) ultimately give up on their creative aspirations to support the men around them.

The Laughing Woman demonstrates that the only way for Frik to achieve happiness is to submit to René's superior talent. In Act III, Frik informs René that she is going to sell her property in Sweden. She downplays her position as a partner and entirely concedes to René as the more creative one: "I invest it in you. You can do those great things that I can never do."[132] She even confesses that, while she can write "ten thousand books," it is René who

[125] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 46.
[126] Ibid., 64.
[127] Robins, *Ancilla's Share*, 104.
[128] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 24.
[129] Ibid., 33.
[130] Gale, *West End Women*, 150; Cameron, "British Women Dramatists," 54.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 84.

can generate "beauty and happiness" with his work.[133] The following scene, which depicts René being approached by art dealers, portrays Frik as the happiest she has been since the beginning of the play in her caring role. The stage directions describes her as "looking[ing] happy and at peace" running about the kitchens while René negotiates the prices of his much-coveted drawings and small sculptures.[134] In its portrayal of Frik as flourishing only when she accepts her role as a mother and nurturer rather than a creator, the play echoes Boyd's discussion of the prevailing historical perception of women as nurturers and assistants.

The biographies of Gaudier show that the maternal aspect of the relationship was not Daviot's creation. Indeed, Gaudier's biographies were interested in Gaudier's unconventional relationship with Brzeska. They examined their letters and Brzeska's diary. For Brodzky, the relationship was not sexual: "Sophie was nearly twenty years his senior and looked upon this sculptor as her boy. There was no sex interest whatsoever. She had said that if they were sexually intimate, her would tire of her. […] She said she wanted him to keep himself for some other younger girl."[135] Ede describes the relationship as more nuanced: although Brzeska did not permit Gaudier "the passionate kisses of a lover," she did allow him to "caress her mouth or her forehead with his lips."[136] Their letters feature numerous passages where Gaudier expressed his deep affection for Brzeska: "I love her with a purely ideal love, it is a flow of sensation which you must feel, since words are too coarse a medium to convey it."[137] Brodzky, an artist who knew both Gaudier and Brzeska and witnessed many of their "terrifying fights," recounts how embarrassed he was when they reconciled passionately: "Henri would embrace his 'dear Zosienka,' gently pat her cheeks, and shower kisses upon her" and whisper to her endearing words until she forgave him.[138] Brzeska reportedly encouraged Gaudier to visit prostitutes but paradoxically felt relief when Gaudier expressed how "disgusted" he was after sleeping with a prostitute.[139] These facts are crucial to understanding Daviot's rendering of the dynamics between her characters. *The Laughing Woman* attempts to capture their unconventional arrangement faithfully. Daviot also incorporates references to how their platonic but odd devotion to each other generated vicious gossip (a fact documented in Ede's biography).[140] The unconventional bond between Gaudier and Brzeska is something that Daviot's play attempts to replicate, creating another woman in a nurturing role, providing support to her male companions while giving up on her own dreams.

There are questions around the degree to which the character of Frik accurately captures the real Brzeska as depicted in biographies of Gaudier; it seems that Daviot used certain biographical facts to exaggerate the extent to which Frik sacrifices her own ambitions to help René succeed. Cameron has compared Ede's and Brodzky's representations of Brzeska, and argues that while Ede portrays her as "difficult" and a "psychological and social burden to Gaudier," Brodzky's depiction is more sympathetic.[141] He presents her as a "help

[133] Ibid., 83–84.
[134] Ibid., 90.
[135] Horace Brodzky, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 146.
[136] Ede, *Savage Messiah*, 41.
[137] Qtd. in Ede, *Savage Messiah,* 21.
[138] Brodzky, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska,* 143–144.
[139] Ede, *Savage Messiah*, 48.
[140] Ibid., 41.
[141] Cameron, "British Women Dramatists," 48.

mate and surrogate mother."[142] Cameron concludes that Daviot's protagonist combines aspects of both representations.[143] For my part, I note that Daviot adheres to the basic facts mentioned, including Brzeska's age, her knowledge of languages, their first meeting in Paris, and their movement to England.[144] Nevertheless, Daviot never references Brzeska's struggle with mental illness. However, Ede paints her as a troubled women who suffered from severe depression and "meditations of suicide."[145] Brodzky is more generous: he describes her as a "sweet and charming person […] despite her background of misery and depression."[146] In the play, Frik is portrayed as a more emotionally stable woman who experiences her own anxieties but lacks the depressive tendencies the real Brzeska suffered from.

In terms of financial status, the play remains true to the facts related in the biographies. When René and Frik first arrive in England, both are depicted as extremely poor. René is unemployed, and Frik uses her savings to provide for them.[147] Ede mentions financial struggles as well, referencing an incident where Brzeska was so desperate that she was reduced to begging: "While Henri was out Miss Brzeska made a doll, took a shawl, which she wrapped round herself and 'her baby', and went to the street corner to beg. She collected sixpence in pennies, and with it she bought some bread, margarine, and tea."[148] While the play does not refer to this incident, it shows Frik having to walk for miles to find the cheapest groceries.[149] Cameron notes that *The Laughing Woman* exaggerates the lengths to which Frik is willing to go to ensure René's success by introducing an episode that never occurred in real life: Brzeska never sold her property for Gaudier.[150] The anecdote about Frik selling property in Sweden, then, was one of the new elements Daviot introduced in the midst of other facts taken from the biographies. This strategy allowed her to create a more intricate depiction that better serves the play's central theme of women's creativity.

Notably, both Ede and Brodzky dismissed Brzeska's literary legacy. This is hardly surprising, as Brzeska herself has been neglected until very recently. In both biographies, there is little appreciation for Brzeska's own work and her literary achievements remained overshadowed by her role as Gaudier's companion.[151] Ede simply mentions how Brzeska expressed her desire to become a writer to Gaudier in Paris and read some of her short stories to him.[152] He also refers to the fact that she was writing a book.[153] Brodzky, who dedicated a very small section to Brzeska, briefly refers to her artistic side: "Sophie Brzeska, like Henri Gaudier, was an artist, but her medium was prose."[154] Brodzky also claims that Brzeska read him a few of her poems.[155] Although he admits that he cannot remember these poems, he nevertheless characterises them as mostly talking about "the philosophy of life and brutality of mankind."[156] Moreover, he asserts that Brzeska told him that Ezra Pound

[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ede, *Savage Messiah*, 3, 44.
[145] Ibid., 3.
[146] Brodzky, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska*, 139.
[147] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 25–30.
[148] Ede, *Savage Messiah*, 47.
[149] Daviot, *The Laughing Woman*, 50.
[150] Cameron, "British Women Dramatists,"49.
[151] Ede, *Savage Messiah*, 19.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid., 41.
[154] Brodzky, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska*, 141.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid., 144.

read her poems and declared them as just "good," which displeased her.[157] Brzeska's plans to write a book were known to Brodzky as well: "She was continually working on her book," he states, which he describes as an autobiography based on her diaries.[158] Neither Ede nor Brodzky mention whether Brzeska ever completed her book. It is ironic that her diary (which she had hoped to publish as a book) was primarily used by Gaudier's biographers to gain insight into Gaudier's thoughts and work. Beyond the Gaudier biographies, references to Brzeska can be found in biographies of Pound, particularly in relation to his friendship with Gaudier.[159] W. B. Yeats is thought to have been one of the few people who read her diary, according to Timothy Materer.[160] Yeats was allegedly impressed by the diary and had wondered "if [Sophie] was not after all a great novelist."[161] According to Amy Licence, who chronicles the lives of Brzeska and two other obscure twentieth-century "Bohemian" women writers, Brzeska's autobiographical novel, which she dubbed *Matka*, meaning mother, was neglected in university archives for eighty years until it was discovered and made available in 2008.[162] The title suggests that Brzeska, too, viewed herself as Gaudier's mother until the very end. Aside from her novel, which was published alongside some of her letters and postcards under the title *Matka and other Writings*, none of the poetry referenced by Brodzky was ever published.[163]

The Laughing Woman treats Frik's forgotten contribution with compassion in its Prologue, which takes place in an art gallery. The Prologue shows two versions of Frik: it shows on a pedestal "the head of a woman carved in a pale stone. The woman is smiling, her chin titled upward, as if at any moment that secret amusement might break into laughter."[164] This representation puts Frik on a pedestal in the art world (both physically and metaphorically) in recognition of her talent. We also see Frik as "an elderly woman [who] is sitting, quite motionless […]. Her clothes are poor, shapeless."[165] This lonely, unknown woman mirrors Brzeska's obscure status and sad reality after Gaudier's death. In this scene, René is forever remembered as a famous and talented artist, in a large part due to Frik's

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[157] Ibid.

[158] Ibid., 146.

[159] J. J. Wilhelm's *Ezra Pound in London and Paris: 1908–1925* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 1990) comes to mind here. Wilhelm narrates the first time Pound met Gaudier and Brzeska. According to Wilhelm, Pound and Brzeska failed to get along, as Brzeska was jealous of any friend of Gaudier. Wilhelm claims that Brzeska revealed to Pound her desire to become a novelist and requested his help in promoting her work (127).

[160] Timothy Materer, "Ezra Pound and Gaudier-Brzeska: Sophie's Diary," *Journal of Modern Literature* 6, no. 2 (1977): 316.

[161] Qtd. in Materer, "Ezra Pound and Gaudier-Brzeska," 316.

[162] Amy Licence, *Bohemian Lives: Three Extraordinary Women: Ida Nettleship, Sophie Brzeska, and Fernande Olivier* (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2017), chap. 1, Kindle. The efforts to recover the works of Brzeska began in 2005, when a transaction took place at the Mercury Gallery in London. Private collector Gillian Raffles acquired 50 manuscripts of Brzeska's writings and decided to publish the previously unpublished fragments in 2008 as a collector's edition titled *Mother and Other Writings*. The manuscripts, originally written in English and French, were translated into Polish by Jakub Jedliński in 2014. Zofia Brzeska-Gaudier, *Matka i inne zapiski* [*Mother and Other Writings*] (Warsaw: Fundacja Culture Shock, 2014), 7. I could not find any other attempt to revive her works; however, her biography is documented in Amy Licence's *Bohemian Lives: Three Extraordinary Women: Ida Nettleship, Sophie Brzeska, and Fernande Olivier* (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2017).

[163] Zofia Brzeska-Gaudier, *Matka i inne zapiski* [*Mother and Other Writings*] (Warsaw: Fundacja Culture Shock, 2014).

[164] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 11.

[165] Ibid.

care. On the other hand, Frik remains forever under his shadow: her book is never unwritten and her talent is unrecognized.

Genius and Fame in *Wild Decembers* (1933)

Daviot, who appears to have been preoccupied by the same problems that concerned more prominent feminist contemporaries, was neither an essayist nor a journalist, as far as can be said. Therefore, we can more easily comprehend the nature of her reflection on women's talent if we situate her in relation to a playwright like Dane. This is because Dane, who was, unlike Daviot, a prominent essayist, shared similar views on women and believed creativity to be an important issue. Moreover, both playwrights shared an interest in using the historical play in a way that allowed them to change historical facts at their convenience while remaining within a recognisable framework. While Daviot did that in her portrayals of historical figures like Richard II and Mary, Queen of Scots or artistic figures like Henri Gaudier, Dane was more interested in literary icons, as shown in her portraits of Shakespeare in *Will Shakespeare* (1921) and the Brontë sisters in *Wild Decembers* (1933). In her literary criticism and book reviews, as well as her plays, the question of women's creativity is something that Dane was fascinated with. As mentioned earlier, she shared Woolf's and Robins' frustration at having "no woman Shakespeare," no "universal woman to match this universal man."[166] Dane, however, disagreed with the common feminist notion that women were "deprived of education and opportunity" which prevented them from producing works of the same caliber as Shakespeare.[167] She explained that women excelled in every aspect of life except the creative arts and was adamant that genius would find a way, citing how Homer and Milton were blind and Beethoven was deaf.[168] Her disagreement with her fellow feminists can be seen in her rejection of the "mute and inglorious Milton" theory in *The Women's Side*, which opposes Woolf's own theory of a "mute and inglorious Jane Austen" in *A Room of One's Own*.[169] Dane attempted to explain women's absence from the literary canon by coming up with her own concept of "the feminine of genius," through which she proposed that genius in women existed but "work[ed] with different tools, express[ed] itself in a totally different medium."[170] For Dane, a woman participates in the creation of male genius by being "the other artist—the creature who drives him to create."[171] What Dane defined as "the feminine of genius" is "the unique quality, the supreme something, out of which, when it meets and marries genius in a man, the work of art is born."[172]

Dane's views in *The Women's Side* contrasted with those of Woolf and Robins, and unintentionally supported the notion that women were incapable of independent creative genius and were instead the helpers rather than the creators. Although she praised, as mentioned earlier, novelists like the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen, she relegated them to "the second rank of genius" or what she called the "demi-gods" on par with Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and Hogarth, rather than the rank of those whom she called "the gods" such as

[166] Ibid., 162–163.
[167] Ibid., 165.
[168] Ibid., 167.
[169] Ibid.; Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 74.
[170] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 168.
[171] Ibid., 170.
[172] Ibid., 171.

Homer, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Dante.[173] Although the evidence I provide here demonstrates that Dane ranked women novelists lower than some men figures she viewed as "the gods," it is crucial to understand that opinions like these can be interpreted in a variety of ways and may not fully reflect the complexity of a person's beliefs. Dane's categorization might have been impacted by the prejudices and social mores prevalent at the time and does not necessarily mean that she did not believe women possess genius. Dane's concept of female genius, in which women's main role is to inspire male genius, is best articulated in her second play *Will Shakespeare*, which claims that a woman named Mary Fitton is the dark lady of Shakespeare's sonnets and the inspiration behind Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*.[174] *Wild Decembers* is the only play of Dane's which ascribes true intellectual independence to women and presents women as creatively equal to men; it deeply contradicts her argument about 'the feminine of genius' in *The Women's Side*.

Wild Decembers (1933) was Dane's literary attempt to capitalize on the obsession with the Brontës, which accompanied the opening of the Brontë Museum at the Haworth Parsonage in 1928—an event that incited a plethora of scholarly and fictional works to be written about the Brontë family.[175] In fact, Dane even courteously sent a copy of *Wild Decembers* to be kept at the Parsonage Museum.[176] Theatre critic J. C. Trewin asserts that, during the interwar period, "no dramatist seemed to be happy unless he had a Brontë play in the bag."[177] *Wild Decembers* was titled after a line in Emily Brontë's poem "Remembrance."[178] It was produced at the Apollo Theatre in May 1933 and ran for 50 performances.[179] The play, while not as popular as *A Bill of Divorcement*, was admired by some theatre critics. The renowned theatre critic Desmond MacCarthy, who attended the performance of *Wild Decembers*, lamented the "thin crowd" at the play compared to the large audience that attended Alfred Sangster's highly successful play, *The Brontës* (1933), which was running at the same time.[180] He felt that *Wild Decembers* was "incredible" and "show[ed] an imaginative grasp of character," whereas Sangster's play was "vulgar" and "more farce than tragedy."[181] According to McDonald, Dane used two sources to write her play: Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853), and Elizabeth Gaskell's biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).[182] For the sake of authenticity, Dane even copies entire scenes directly from Gaskell's biography of Charlotte.

The choice to set *Wild Decembers* in Haworth Parsonage, the historical home of the Brontë family, indicate Dane's keenness to establish a sense of historical accuracy. The parlour, which is the setting of most of the events, is described in detail, and the text evokes the church tower, the window seats, the hearth, the rug, and the table set for tea.[183] The

[173] Ibid., 164–165.
[174] Dane, *Will Shakespeare*, 55–56.
[175] Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel,* 176–177.
[176] Amber K. Regis, "Charlotte Brontë on Stage: 1930s Biodrama and the Archive/ Museum Performed," in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, ed. Deborah Wynne and Amber Regis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 116.
[177] Trewin, *Dramatists of Today*, 130.
[178] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 91.
[179] Gale, *West End Women*, 151.
[180] Desmond MacCarthy, "Wild Decembers," *The New Statesman and Nation*, June 10, 1933, 761. British Newspaper Archive.
[181] Ibid.
[182] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 91.
[183] Clemence Dane, *Wild Decembers* (London: Heinemann, 1961), 205.

play primarily centres on Charlotte Brontë, as evidenced by its dedication of multiple scenes in Act I to her experiences as a teacher in Brussels and her romantic involvement with the Belgian headmaster. What is especially important, however, is how the play delves into the early stages of the Brontë sisters' writing careers and the emergence of their artistic abilities. In Act II, Scene II, Charlotte and Anne accidently read a poem by Emily, and they are blown away, with Charlotte declaring: "Genius! That word. […] Here are great thoughts spoken—here are great words written. I think they are undying words."[184] And when she learns that Anne has also been writing *Agnes Grey* in secret, she is awestruck: "We have been gathering straw, making bricks, building. What has brought this about?"[185] Charlotte uses a metaphor here to describe the process of creative thought, with the collection of straws symbolizing the early stage of gathering raw ideas and inspirations. Bricks, which are normally the foundations of construction work, requires skill and effort to make. This metaphor refers to the act of refining and honing the raw ideas. The final stage of building refers to the work involved in transforming the creative vision into a concrete product. Through this extended metaphor, the play reflects on creativity as a process. It implies that it is not a sudden burst of genius, but a laborious and meticulous process. This scene, as well as most scenes in the play, is not an invention of Dane's, but comes from Gaskell in her 1857 biography of Charlotte. Gaskell, who was a close friend of the Brontës, quotes a letter by Charlotte in which the latter describes her reaction to discovering Emily's poems by accident:

> One day in the autumn of 1845, I accidentally lighted on a MS volume of verse, in my sister Emily's hand-writing. Of course, I was not surprised, knowing that she could and did write verse. I looked it over, and something more than surprise seized me—a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, nor at all like the poetry women generally write.[186]

Wild Decembers alludes to a historically prevalent practices among British women writers: the use of male pen names or aliases. I argue that the persistence of this practice into the 1920s and 1930s in Britain, as highlighted in the play, demonstrates how creative women—from the time of the Brontës to the period in which Dane was writing—continued to face gendered expectations and prejudices in the publishing world. These biases often compelled them to conceal their gender through gender-neutral initials or male pseudonyms in order to be taken seriously as authors. This trend, according to Showalter, started around the 1840s.[187] Showalter notes how such a phenomenon marked a "historical shift" that can be explained by women writers taking writing professionally as a career.[188] In Act II of *Wild Decembers*, Charlotte suggests publishing their poems anonymously: "Put her poems, and yours and mine together, and why shouldn't we publish them? Poems by three sisters—Nobody need know—we can find some name."[189] Gaskell cited Charlotte's justification for using male pseudonyms as a means of protecting herself and her sisters from gender bias:

> Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort

[184] Ibid., 250.
[185] Ibid., 253.
[186] Qtd. in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Edinburg: John Grant, 1924), 264.
[187] Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 13.
[188] Ibid., 19.
[189] Dane, *Wild Decembers*, 253.

> of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names, positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine,'—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice.[190]

Woolf addresses the use of gender-neutral pseudonyms in *A Room of One's Own*, expressing surprise that such a practice endured well into the nineteenth century: "Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus, they did homage to the convention […] that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them."[191] In Showalter's view, the practice of employing male pseudonyms among Victorian women novelists was a strategy to protect themselves: "Women devised a number of strategies to deal with male hostility, jealousy, and resistance within the family. […] women simply published in secret. The height and the trademark of feminine role-playing was the male pseudonym."[192] Showalter speculates on the reasons why women writers concealed their gender: "The male pseudonym [was] primarily a way of obtaining serious treatment from critics, the pseudonym also protected women from the righteous indignation of their own relatives."[193] According to Showalter, this tradition "died out" at the end of the nineteenth century.[194] However, she acknowledges its continuity among some British women writers of the early twentieth century and cites G. B. Stern and V. Sackville-West, who were, she claims, simply "fond of" keeping the tradition.[195]

The fact that British women dramatists of Dane's generation produced plays under male or gender-neutral pseudonyms is more than just a way of keeping the tradition of their predecessors. While Dane herself did not specifically use a male or gender-neutral pseudonym, she did utilise an alias borrowed from the St. Clement Danes' church in London.[196] An example of a women playwright who used a male alias to conceal her gender is Elizabeth MacKintosh (Gordon Daviot). Daviot used both a male and female pseudonyms: she named herself Daviot after a place near Inverness, Scotland, where she and her family used to go on vacation.[197] Her other pseudonym is Josephine Tey, which was her great grandmother's name and the name she is known for today.[198] Other examples include F. Tennyson Jesse, G. B. Stern (Gladys Bronwyn Stern), C. L. Anthony (Dodi Smith), and the list goes on. I would go so far as to suggest that G. B. Stern sounds quite similar to G. B. Shaw. I think it is possible that Stern wanted her pen name to sound like Shaw's, or perhaps she wanted her books to be displayed next to his. Her motives will never be known, as these are merely speculations. But it was known for sure that Daviot in particular did her best to hide behind her pseudonym. Henderson relates an incident in which Daviot was contacted by her American publisher, who wanted to affix her photo and a brief biography to the back of one

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[190] Qtd. in Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 265.
[191] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 76.
[192] Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 57–58.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., 58–59.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Cameron, "British Women Dramatists," 27.
[197] Adrian Room, *Dictionary of Pseudonyms* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 131, 472.
[198] Moira Davison Reynolds, *Women Authors of Detective Series: Twenty-One American and British Writers, 1900–2000* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001), 45.

of her books, as was common in the American market at the time.[199] Daviot was reluctant to reveal her real name and gender to the publisher and had to travel to London to explain her position.[200] The publisher was reportedly shocked to discover that Gordon Daviot was a woman.[201] This practice was more popular in journalism during the period between the wars. Clay refers to how political feminist journalists of *Time and Tide*, a prominent interwar feminist magazine, occasionally preferred to write anonymously to prevent having their gender overshadow their political views on war and peace, particularly if these views were controversial.[202] Clay cites the case of Holtby, who contributed numerous unsigned notes, reviews, dramatic criticism pieces, and political articles to the magazine under the pseudonyms Corbin H. Wood, GREC, and occasionally her initials, W. H.[203] These various anecdotes convey how women had to adopt a wide range of strategies to navigate a complex social and literary scene (these are strategies that continue even today).[204]

The majority of scholarship discussing the use of male or gender-neutral aliases has focused on women writers of the nineteenth century.[205] The research surrounding the use of male pseudonyms by British women writers during the early twentieth century is non-existent. Nevertheless, the information that I have uncovered shows that the practice of using male pen names persisted in the 1920s and 1930s in Britain for a number of reasons. First, women authors of the period might have felt that publishers and readers continued to hold the presumption that women are only qualified to write romance or sensational novels. Although focusing on Charlotte Brontë, Catherine Judd notes that Brontë did not fear being a woman would prevent her from finding a publisher; rather, she was concerned that her writing might be perceived as "typically feminine."[206] Using a masculine pen name might have allowed interwar women writers to experiment with various genres to gain professional recognition in the literary world, although some already established authors like Agatha Christie used pseudonyms to experiment with a new genre away from the genre they are famous for.[207] Second, it may have afforded them privacy and the opportunity to

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[199] Henderson, *Josephine Tey*, 118.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Ibid.

[202] Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 5.

[203] Ibid., 174.

[204] One great example of this is when Bloomsbury recommended to J. K. Rowling, the creator of the Harry Potter series, that instead of publishing her first book under her given name, Joan, she publishes it under gender-neutral initials to appeal to boys. Lindsey Fraser, *J. K. Rowling: The Mystery of Fiction* (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishers, 2011), 58.

[205] Beyond Showalter, the issue of Victorian women novelists and male pen names has been explored in several notable studies, including Alexis Easley's *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830–1870* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and Catherine A. Judd's essay, 'Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England,' in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, edited by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[206] Catherine Judd, "Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England," in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 255.

[207] Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (Glasgow: Collins, 1984), 167. Christie is an example of an interwar British woman author who gained fame and recognition under her real name in the detective fiction genre but have chosen to adopt a different pseudonym to experiment in a new genre without her famous name influencing readers' expectations. According to Morgan, Christi departed from her typical detective fiction formula in *Giant's Bread* (1930), which she published under the pen name Mary Westmacott.

separate their personal life from their private life. Showalter explains that Victorian women novelists feared that if they published under their real names, the public might mistake their novels for autobiographies.[208] According to Judd, the male pseudonym provided a "a strong shield of privacy."[209] In my view, this explains why women writers continued to find comfort in the anonymity of a pen name. Thirdly, the reasons might have been purely commercial; using a pseudonym may have increased their acceptability in a male-dominated publishing world, potentially broadening their market.[210] It, however, could have been simply a desire to preserve a tradition set by their predecessors, as Showalter claims.

Wild Decembers depicts a confrontation between Charlotte, Anne and their publishers. Act II, Scene IV illuminates the stark contrast between the anonymity that many Victorian women writers endured and the recognition that men writers received, and it also underscores the gendered disparity that women writers encountered in obtaining recognition. In this scene, directly taken from Gaskell's biography, Charlotte and Anne visit their publishers for the first time in London to dispel the rumors that Ellis, Acton and Currer Bell are one author, which is a true incident.[211] Gaskell writes:

> Neither Mr Smith nor Mr Williams knew that they were coming, they were entirely unknown to the publishers of "Jane Byre," who were not, in fact, aware whether the "Bells" were men or women, but had always written to them as to men. On reaching Mr Smith's, Charlotte put his own letter into his hands, the same letter which had excited so much disturbance at Haworth Parsonage only twenty-four hours before "Where did you get this ?" said he, —as if he could not believe that the two young ladies dressed in black, of slight figures and diminutive stature, looking pleased yet agitated, could be the embodied Currer and Acton Bell, for whom curiosity had been hunting so eagerly in vain.[212]

The details Gaskell mentions, down to the thunderstorm on that day, are accounted for.[213] The stage directions also make note of the black dresses Gaskell mentioned the sisters were wearing.[214] *Wild Decembers* even mimics Mr. Smith's exact query upon seeing his letter with

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[208] Elaine Showalter, "Women Writers and the Double Standards," in *Woman in a Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: New American Library, 1971), 556.
[209] Judd, "Male Pseudonyms," 255.
[210] It is important to point out that men also used pseudonyms and gender-neutral pen names. For example, Ezra Pound wrote in *New Age* magazine under two pseudonyms: William Atheling, or B. H. Susan Jones, "Dance, Modernism, and the Female Critic in *The New Age*, *Rhythm*, and *The Outlook*," in *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1890s–1920s*, ed. Faith Binckes and Carey Snyder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 114–115. My focus here, however, is on the ways in which women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries expected their gender to influence readers and critics' interpretations of their works.
[211] According to Juliet Barker, when Thomas Newby, one of the Brontë sisters' publishers, sold the first chapter of Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to an American publisher, he assured him that it, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey* were all written by Currer Bell (Charlotte). This allegedly caused confusion for their other publishers, Smith, Elder, and Co., who wrote to Charlotte to inquire about this matter. This infuriated Charlotte, who then decided to travel to London with Anne to clear the confusion. Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 557.
[212] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 328.
[213] Dane, *Wild Decembers*, 269; Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 327.
[214] Ibid., 268.

Charlotte: “Where did you get this?”[215] But the inclusion of William Thackeray in this scene is completely fictional. Thackeray is revered in this scene, as Mr. Smith is depicted as “bowing out a much-honoured guest” in the stage directions.[216] The way Thackeray is treated is in striking contrast to the “patronising” treatment that Charlotte and Anne initially receive from a young clerk who repeatedly attempts to dismiss them.[217] When Thackeray asks Smith: “Who are those little ladies?” he shows just how dismissive he is towards Charlotte and Anne as well.[218] The publisher's office's display of “a portrait of Thackeray” emphasises his visibility, in stark contrast to the Brontë sisters' lack of recognition.[219] The scene evokes Woolf's assertion that “[a]nonymity runs in [women writers’] blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them.”[220] The anonymous Brontës are juxtaposed with Thackeray and his portrait, which introduces an ironic element to the situation. Thackeray, a gifted male author, is honoured with a picture, while the Brontës, who are equally gifted but female, are overlooked. As such, the very image of Thackeray in this scene embodies the struggles gifted women writers have historically faced to receive the acclaim that they were due.

Another pivotal scene revolves around Mr. Williams' shocked reaction to the revelation of the Bells' true identities. This scene serves two purposes: it underscores Mr. Williams' belief that it is inconceivable for a woman to have authored such exceptional work. Simultaneously, the moment effectively sheds light on how Anne is overshadowed by Charlotte. The scene proceeds as follows:

> Mr. Smith: Williams, I want to introduce you to Miss Brontë and her sister. (*They smile at him.)*
> Charlotte (*with one of her flashes*): We have corresponded, I think, Mr. Williams.
> Mr. Williams, *polite but unimpressed, turns for help to his partner.*
> Mr. Smith (*enjoying himself*): The author of *Jane Eyre*, Williams.
> Mr. Williams: The author of— (*staggered*) —you don’t say so. The author of *Jane Eyre*?
> Mr. Smith (*himself a little thrilled, and utterly forgetting Anne*): The author of *Jane Eyre*.[221]

Given the Brontës' status as one of the foremost novelists in English literature during that period, Mr. Williams' “unimpressed” response must have appeared ironic to its audiences. Moreover, the humorous shift in his reaction from dismissiveness to stumbling over his words upon discovering Charlotte's identity creates dramatic tension and effectively draws the audience’s attention to the issue of gender disparity in the publishing industry. Mr. Smith's repetition of “the author of *Jane Eyre*” highlights the novel's status as the most popular Brontë work during their lifetime. Miriam Burstein confirms this, as she characterizes nineteenth-century interest in the Brontës as predominantly “Charlotte-

[215] Ibid., 271.
[216] Ibid., 270.
[217] Ibid., 268.
[218] Ibid., 270.
[219] Ibid., 267.
[220] Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 76.
[221] Dane, *Wild Decembers*, 272.

centric."[222] References to *Jane Eyre*'s popularity are made throughout; notably, in Act II, Emily asserts that while *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights* are "selling very well," it is *Jane Eyre* that is "the talk of London."[223]

What is worthy of interest in this scene is also how Anne and her work are completely dismissed: this is historically accurate, as Anne was considered for decades the forgotten Brontë sister.[224] Anne's legacy and body of work were indeed neglected from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, to the extent that even the Brontë Society disregarded her contributions in favour of Charlotte and Emily.[225] Anne's life and work began to receive critical interest in Britain in the late 1920s, with the publication of Will T. Hale's 1929 biography: *Anne Brontë: Her Life and Writings*.[226] The hundredth anniversary publication of *Jane Eyre, Agnes Grey*, and *Wuthering Heights* sparked further interest in Anne in 1947.[227] In her 1959 biography of Anne, Winifred Gérin made the first attempt to recover Anne's status as a great novelist.[228] Nonetheless, it was feminist critics of the second half of the twentieth century who finally re-established Anne's significance, hailing her forgotten masterpiece, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as a "proto-feminist work."[229] *Wild Decembers* anticipated this renewed interest.

Another aspect that reflects how *Wild Decembers* closely responded to the changing attitudes towards the Brontës in 1920s and 1930s literary circles in Britain is its treatment of the authorship of *Wuthering Heights*. The play proposes an intriguing theory that Branwell rather than Emily is the original author of the novel. The play's interest in the controversy surrounding *Wuthering Heights*' authorship aligns closely with the fascination that the novel garnered in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rosengarten explains how the period between the wars saw an increased interest in Emily and her works, as well as a decrease in Charlotte's popularity.[230] Watson made the same point in a 1949 reflection on the critical reception of *Wuthering Heights*, pointing out that by 1920 the work has been subject to "more rational, sensible criticism," in contrast to the minimal criticism it had received in the previous seventy years.[231] Lord David Cecil, Rosengarten asserts, was one of the key critics who inspired a critical re-evaluation of Emily's literary achievements during the interwar period in Britain.[232] Writing in 1934, Cecil acknowledged how undervalued

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[222] Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, "Mid-Nineteenth-Century Critical Responses to the Brontës," in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 175.
[223] Dane, *Wild Decembers*, 261.
[224] According to Juliet Barker's comprehensive biography of the Brontës, Charlotte decided not to republish Anne's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* after Anne's death because she considered it "a mistake" and the subject matter to be inappropriate. Barker, *The Brontës*, 666. According to Nick Holland's biography of Anne, Charlotte's refusal to allow the republication of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* after Anne's death, despite the fact that it was a bestseller during Anne's lifetime, caused the book to be forgotten by the public, and by the time it was republished ten years later, it had already been forgotten, causing Anne to be "relegated to her sister's [Charlotte] shadow for over a century." Nick Holland, *In Search of Anne Brontë* (Stroud: The History Press, 2017), 261–262.
[225] Judith Pike, "Agnus Grey," in *A Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler and Deborah Denenholz Morse (Malden: John Wiley, 2016), 153.
[226] Ibid., 155.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Holland, *In Search of Anne Brontë*, 262.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Herbert Rosengarten, "Brontë Scholarship and Criticism, 1920–1970," in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 184.
[231] Melvin R. Watson, "'Wuthering Heights' and the Critics," *The Trollopian* 3, no. 4 (March 1949): 256.
[232] Rosengarten, "Brontë Scholarship," 184.

Emily was: “Emily Brontë has never been generally appreciated as she deserved.”[233] Cecil, who presented a detailed and in-depth textual analysis of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, praised *Wuthering Heights* for distinguishing itself from all the popular Victorian novels of the day in its grasp of the complexities of human emotions, which he believed surpassed *Jane Eyre*: “Her characters have extremely intense emotions, the most intense in English fiction. […] Beside them, even Mr. Rochester’s passions seem tame and tea-party affairs.”[234] Another important study from the period was C. P. Sanger's essay, *The Structure of Wuthering Heights* (1926), which was one of the pioneering structural studies of *Wuthering Heights*.[235] *Wuthering Heights*' interwar reception was characterised by other approaches as well, such as comparing the work's protagonist Heathcliff to Shakespeare's tragic heroes, and conducting an autobiographical interpretation based on Freud's psychological methods, which became a popular trend in literary studies during the 1920s and 1930s in Britain.[236] What these different trends in the reception of the Brontës also shows is that Dane was responding to a whole intellectual climate around the Brontës.

Dane’s ‘rewriting’ of the history of *Wuthering Heights* in *Wild Decembers* is not her invention. It is based on a rumor that was debunked first by Gaskell but resurfaced again in the 1920s. Gaskell cites a letter written by a Mr. Grundy who made this intriguing claim: “The Mr. Grundy [letter] already referred to gave out that Branwell declared to him that he wrote a great portion of *Wuthering Heights* himself, but the letters to Mr. Williams declare that Branwell never knew that his sister had done anything in literature. We can, therefore, easily dismiss this claim.”[237] Nevertheless, the debate continued: in 1867, Branwell's close friend William Deardon claimed that Branwell read him parts of *Wuthering Heights* in 1842.[238] According to Patsy Stoneman, this “myth” was rekindled during the interwar period in Britain by a number of works that re-examined the relationship between Emily and Branwell, such as Alice Law’s 1923 biography of Branwell.[239] I find the evidence Law provided circumstantial.[240] She, however, was not the only person who supported this theory: Stoneman explains how a “flood of writing” during the interwar period made reference to this theory, citing plays like Dane’s *Wild Decembers* and Dan Totheroh’s *Moor Born* (1934), and novels like E. T. Cook’s *They Lived* (1935), and Kathryn MacFarlane’s *Divide the Desolation* (1936).[241]

Both *Wild Decembers* and Law's biography of Branwell claim that *Wuthering Heights* was allegedly inspired by Branwell's tragic love affair with the married Mrs Robinson, the mother of the children he tutored, which resulted in his discharge from his work, an incident

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[233] David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), 147.
[234] Ibid., 155–156.
[235] C. P. Sanger, *The Structure of Wuthering Heights* (London: L. & V. Woolf, 1926).
[236] Watson, “‘Wuthering Heights,’” 256.
[237] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 169.
[238] Patsy Stoneman, “The Brontë Myth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 230.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Law offered many reasons to back up her allegation, including Emily's adamant refusal to claim authorship of *Wuthering Heights*, which implied, according to Law, that she was “concealing another person's authorship.” Furthermore, Law stated that during the summer of 1845, when *Wuthering Heights* was supposed to be produced, Emily was busy writing fantasy stories about 'the Gondialand' with Anne. She further examined Emily's happy and joyful tone in her letters at the time, claiming that someone who was so joyful and fun could not have possibly composed something so “dark, hopeless, and tragic.” (115, 118, 120, 121). Anne Law, *Patrick Branwell Brontë* (London: A. M. Philpot, 1923).
[241] Stoneman, “The Brontë Myth, 230.

that was reported first by Gaskell.[242] Law, like Dane, argued that the work is based on Branwell's suffering: "Anyone possessed of unprejudiced judgment must see that the book is the work of one who has actually gone through the 'hell' which was slowly consuming Heathcliff; of one who, as Branwell Brontë wrote to Leyland, was writing the book to while away his torments."[243] Law, who dismissed Emily's ability to write something "so marvellous in its strength, and in the dissection of the most morbid passions of diseased minds," allowed for the possibly that she might have assisted Branwell with the parts that required a feminine touch: "in respect to the part dealing with the upbringing of the younger Catharine, I willingly concede that Emily Brontë may have helped considerably. But the whole conception of the story is, from start to finish, a man's."[244] Similarly, *Wild Decembers* acknowledges Emily's help in finishing the novel. in Act II, Scene II, Branwell, ravaged by illness, alcoholism and heartbreak, reveals to Emily that he has been writing a novel based on his life. Branwell, in a moment of desperation, begs Emily to take his manuscript and finish it for him:

> Branwell: Will you write it with me, Emily?
>
> Emily: Yes.
>
> Branwell: Take it over? I've roughed out nearly a quarter, and stray scenes and notes. There's about three months' more work in me, I reckon. After that–
>
> Emily: Give me those three months![245]

The phrase "roughed out" indicates that Branwell has produced the initial creative work, which is influenced by his real-life experience, but it is in an unpolished state. The fact that he has "stray scenes and notes" suggests that his creative work is fragmented and disorganised, signifying that Branwell is laying the groundwork for Emily to take over. This incident involving Emily completing the novel from Branwell and subsequently becoming famous for it aligns closely with Dane's concept of "the feminine of genius," in which she claimed that when a woman's genius "meets and marries genius in a man, the work of art is born."[246] McDonald, in her analysis of *Wild Decembers*, remarks on this alteration, calling it "a betrayal of Emily's creativity" and attributing it to the "paradoxical nature of inter-war feminism."[247] According to McDonald, this false incident aligns with Dane's own conviction of genius as being mainly masculine.[248] Dane's decision to turn this rumour into a reality reveals an ambivalent perspective on women and their capacity to be as intellectually competent as men, and might even hint at her internalized misogyny.

It is fitting to end my final chapter with Dane, and with this question around her belief in and possible ambivalence towards women's emancipation. Such ambivalence lies at the heart of the other plays I have examined. Additionally, Dane's and Daviot's specific choices to depict Frik (who compromises her talent) and the Brontës (who were hesitant

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[242] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 262.
[243] Law, *Patrick Branwell Brontë*, 177.
[244] Ibid., 156–157.
[245] Dane, *Wild Decembers*, 257.
[246] Dane, *The Women's Side*, 171.
[247] McDonald, *Forgotten Feminist Writer*, 92.
[248] Ibid.

about their identities as ‘women writers’) reveal a great deal about their own lives. Both writers lived in an intellectual and literary environment that promoted the idea that women could be creative, but not as creative or productive as their male counterparts. We know that Daviot isolated herself and did not mix with London’s literary world. She used a male alias, possibly to protect herself and avoid being labelled as a woman who writes from a woman's perspective and with a woman's sensibilities. Dane, on the other hand, was a well-known celebrity with prominent acquaintances and friends like Coward and Basil Dean who recognized and supported her talent. Strangely, however, she expressed doubt about women’s creativity. It is possible that Dane and Daviot were using historical characters to express their struggles as creative women in a male-dominated theatre climate. I find this tragic, and I am certain that all the women writers I discussed in my thesis (and many others I did not have the time and space to include) shared similar feelings about their creativity. Nevertheless, in small ways, I have shown that these playwrights and their female protagonists fought against society, men, government institutions, and others to prove themselves worthy, and in the process paved the way for future women to express themselves freely. In my opinion, women like Dane, Stern, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stuart, and Daviot walked so that women like Shelagh Delaney, Sarah Daniels, Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems could run.

Conclusion

I ended my last chapter with emphasis on how the tentative efforts of Dane and her contemporaries paved the way for future women playwrights who would later express their feminism more confidently. I returned to Pam Gems and Sarah Daniels because, initially, I had planned on working on women dramatists from the 1970s to the 1990s before I stumbled upon Gale's article about a forgotten women's theatre in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.[1] This brief article prompted me to further explore what turned out to be an overlooked area of British theatre that has been overshadowed by the suffrage theatre that preceded it and the more explicitly feminist theatre that emerged in the 1960s. And so, this PhD project began. Approaching this uncharted field was daunting at the beginning. The foundational work of Gale, McDonald and Cameron provided a significant starting point and naturally, I began with Dane, whose work had already been studied by Gale, McDonald and Cameron. Nevertheless, this did not make the task easier. These plays were forgotten. Therefore, much of my efforts has been devoted to excavating new and overlooked primary texts and facts, whether by both known and unknown feminists and women authors of the time, well-known contemporaries like Shaw and Coward, or even obscure newspaper and magazine articles. I was amazed by the wealth of material I uncovered and the unexpected connections I found, and I was able to construct a whole world around those playwrights. I discovered that these women were influential and well-connected, which makes their disappearance after their death baffling. This made me realize how important it is to recognize their legacy and allowed me to see them in a new light. They may not have made it to the canon, but they have so much to offer in terms of the historical and political insight they bring to a wide range of people including myself.

One of the first things I read about the dramas written by British women for London theatres between the wars was that they were considered conservative and lacking in feminist ideals.[2] This claim piqued my interest and provoked me to challenge it by examining both the plays that had received some attention like *A Bill of Divorcement*, and obscure ones that had been entirely overlooked like *Nine Till Six*, *The Laughing Woman, Wild Decembers* and *The Man Who Pays the Piper*. What I discovered profoundly resonated with me in more than one way. As a woman who is also Saudi, I identified with the struggles, anxieties, and fears that the women protagonists experienced. Their concerns felt both deeply specific to British women of the period and universally relevant. For example, while researching divorce laws for Chapter One in 2021, I learned that the Saudi Arabian government had introduced new divorce and custody laws favorable to women. I could not help but draw parallels between these legal changes and the struggles of the women protagonists in *A Bill of Divorcement*. Similarly, while reading about the birth control movement of the 1920s for Chapter Two, I was stunned when the historic Roe V. Wade (the landmark ruling in which abortion was made legal in the United States in 1973) was overturned in 2022. Issues like motherhood and work, which I discuss in Chapter Three, also affected me personally as a woman and a mother. After giving birth, I stayed home for a year to care for my child. During that time, I did not receive my salary and missed several chances for promotion, while my

[1] See Maggie B. Gale, "Women Playwright of the 1920s and 1930s," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modem British Women Playwrights,* ed. by Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2] Gale, *West End Women*, 1-3.

husband continued to work and received a significant promotion. This experience showed me that many women still face the same challenges when trying to balance motherhood and career. Diving into the subject of creativity and genius in Chapter Four also spoke to me on a personal level. I have always enjoyed writing novels and stories, but what stopped me from seriously thinking about publishing was the fear that people might recognize me and learn personal things about my life, especially since I once thought of writing a story that reflects parts of my real experiences. I therefore considered using an alias or pseudonym so I could write freely without anyone knowing it was me. The use of aliases by women is a practice I discuss in detail in Chapter Four. The issues these plays discuss remain deeply relevant to what is happening to women and women's rights today. Thus, dismissing these plays as non-feminist oversimplifies what feminism is. Feminism can take many forms: it can demand radical change, or it can simply reflect the concerns and limitations women face and hope for better change, which is what the plays are simply doing. The fact that these playwrights are women is also part of what makes their plays valuable. They understood these issues firsthand and gave us a glimpse into the experience of British middle-class women in the 1920s and 1930s. I hope my investigation encourages further interest among feminist scholars in the budding feminism embedded in these plays.

In light of this, It is important to return to the research questions that guided this thesis. I have established that the women protagonists in these plays do not reach full emancipation, and in many cases do not even seem to want it, which reflects on the ambivalence of their authors toward the question of freedom. These protagonists remain shaped by the social and cultural expectations of their time, which limited their choices. The six playwrights that I examine here—Dane, Tennyson Jesse, Stopes, Stern, Stuart, and Daviot—engaged with major debates around marriage, divorce, birth control, work, and creativity, but they did so from the point of view of their class. Their plays reflect a version of feminism that challenged some restrictions on women's lives but stopped short of imagining radical change or representing women outside their white-middle-class world. In short, what these plays show is that interwar middlebrow theatre was a space in which feminist ideas were explored and tested, but within the limits set by the culture of the 1920s and 1930s.

At this stage, I want to reflect on how the chapters are connected by key ideas and themes that show the shared concerns of women dramatists writing for the commercial theatres in interwar Britain. The most prominent theme that runs through the chapters is eugenics, which appears in most of the plays I discuss, either directly or indirectly. I explore eugenics in detail in Chapter Two, but in my discussion of Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* in Chapter One, I explain how the play explicitly refers to it when Sydney decides not to marry for fear of passing on her father's madness to her children, particularly after learning that madness runs in the family. In this sense, the play is referring to the eugenic obsession with genetic purity and the desire to eliminate what they considered 'defective' qualities for future generations. In Chapter Three, both *The Man Who Pays the Piper* and *Nine Till Six* deal with working women and their struggle between the need for independence and the desire to marry. These plays show how British women during and after the war had to fight against society's expectation that their role was confined to being wives and mothers. Eugenicists also focused on the role of women, since one of their main concerns was motherhood and the belief that it is women's duty to give birth to healthy 'white' children to improve 'the race,' a point I elaborate on in my analysis of Stopes' *Vectia*. Another idea connected closely to eugenics is genius, and whether it is inherited or shaped by environment, which I examine in Chapter Four. In my analysis of Daviot's *The Laughing*

Woman and Dane's *Wild Decembers*, I discuss genius and creativity and cite some eugenicists such as Havelock Ellis and Anthony Ludovici, who were deeply invested in the idea of genius as part of their larger obsession with producing the so-called perfect 'race.' These examples show how eugenics cuts across all four chapters, whether the plays deal with marriage, motherhood, work, or creativity. The recurring of this theme highlights how deeply embedded eugenics thought was in interwar culture and how women dramatists were keen on engaging with its language and anxieties.

Another theme that connects the plays is the representation of class. In all the plays I discuss in this thesis, there is little to no representation of the working class and their struggles with poverty. I made that clear when I explained how each play follows the tradition of the middle-class drawing-room play. In Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement*, the entire play focuses on a middle-class problem, divorce reforms. The characters and setting are all middle class, and the only working-class presence is Bassett, a maid with only a few lines. In *The Pelican*, divorce is again treated as an upper-and middle-class issues, with the working class represented only by Wanda's maid, Anna. Unlike Bassett, Anna is treated more like a member of the family by Wanda and her son, but she remains a minor character who does not affect the events of the play. In Stopes' *Vectia*, the working class is completely absent. In *Our Ostriches*, however, I consider the depiction of Mrs. Flinker and her children as one of the rare examples of working-class suffering on the stage. The play mainly deals with the lack of access to birth control, a problem that especially affected poor mothers during the interwar period in Britain, which I discussed in detail in Chapter Two. But, as I have shown, Stopes' apparent sympathetic representation of the working class is driven by her eugenic interest in reducing their birth rate.

Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper* is also a very middle-class play. It focuses on how the war affected the affluent middle class rather than the poor. The working class appear only as servants and maids in the background, similar to *A Bill of Divorcement*. They exist to serve more privileged women like Daryll and Margaret but are never shown as people with their own problems. Another play that I consider a strong representation of working-class women is *Nine Till Six*, which shows the struggles of poor women working in retail and highlights the contrast between wealthy women like Bridgit and the shop girls who come from difficult circumstances. Daviot's *The Laughing Woman* is somewhat different from the usual drawing-room play. It begins with René in poverty which is shown through his shabby apartment and unkempt appearance, and with Frik, an educated middle-class woman who is forced into poverty alongside him. The play depicts well the hunger and struggle until René gradually gains recognition. Yet, René's poverty is treated as an individual story of a man destined for eventual success, and it does not reflect the broader struggles of the working class as a whole. Finally, Dane's *Wild Decembers*, which focuses on the Brontë sisters and their rise to fame as renowned novelists, returns to the pattern of *A Bill of Divorcement*, in which maids and servants appear only in the background to pour tea or announce visitors. All these plays show that class is always present but rarely explored. The working class is pushed to the margins while the main focus remains on middle-class women and their concerns.

The settings and locations of the plays also reveal much about their scopes and limitations in terms of class. With the exception of *Wild Decembers* (which begins in Haworth and briefly moves abroad to Belgium), the plays are anchored in London and set in affluent or recognizable middle-class neighbourhoods such as Upper Grosvenor Street, Knightsbridge, Regent Street, Queen Anne Street, Holland Park, and the West End. The

locations of these plays range from living rooms, flats, shops, and galleries, which are strongly connected to middle-class life. Even when the setting shifts to spaces outside the home, such as the shop floor in *Nine Till Six*, the Birth-Rate Commission Chamber in *Our Ostriches*, or the fashionable dining rooms Frik and René are invited to in *The Laughing Woman*, the focus remains on the lives of the middle and upper classes. Some of these so-called public spaces replicate the atmosphere of a drawing room, such as Mrs Pembroke's office in *Nine Till Six* and the affluent park in *Our Ostriches*. There are rare moment when the plays step outside the middle-class frame, as in the Flinkers' slum apartment in *Our Ostriches* or René's cheap Paris flat in *The Laughing Woman*. But these moments are brief or (in the case of *The Laughing Woman*) framed as individual struggles rather than a sustained and true representation of working-class life.

In terms of characterization, an important recurrent idea that connects these chapter is how men are negatively portrayed in all the plays. At the end of Chapter One, I noted briefly how the men in *A Bill of Divorcement* and *The Pelican* act selfishly and stand as obstacles to women's freedom, but my main focus was on divorce and how men prevent women from exercising their legal rights. Since the influence of men on women's life extends beyond divorce, I want to elaborate on it here. I have already mentioned how the rector and Hilary in *A Bill of Divorcement* and Marcus and his son in *The Pelican* try to oppress Margaret and Wanda, so I will not repeat those points. In Stopes' plays, the men do not appear in a better light. In *Vectia*, William is portrayed as sexually important and selfish. He deceives Vectia by taking advantage of her ignorance about sex for three years. And when he is exposed at the end, he shamelessly tries to manipulate her feelings and asks her to sacrifice her wish for a child and live platonically with him. In *Our Ostriches*, the men are either buffoons, like Lord Simplex, or absentees, like Mr Flinker, the husband of the poor mother Mrs Flinker. Lord Simplex is portrayed in the worst way. He is arrogant and dismisses Evadne's concern for Mrs Flinker and instead obsesses over the working class's 'lack of hygiene.' Until the very end, he refuses to understand her, which leads her to break off their engagement. The members of the Birth-Rate Commission are equally mocked in the play as they stubbornly refuse to hear Evadne's pleas. Even when faced with Mrs Flinker's pain, they turn a blind eye, particularly Brother Peter, the religious figure the Flinkers rely on. Instead of being sympathetic, he is enraged by the very mention of birth control. Even Dr Hodges, who seems more sympathetic by supporting Evadne at the commission and advocating contraception and even sterilisation, is shown as helpless when he refuses to give Mrs Flinker practical information about birth control.

In Stern's *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, the male family members are all incompetent; they rely entirely on Daryll for financial support. Her father, who appears only in the Prologue, acts like an angry Victorian father by scolding Daryll for returning home late.[3] Rufus, who first appears supportive of Daryll as the family matriarch, reveals his true nature after their marriage. He refuses to let her travel to Paris to save her failing dressmaking business after she has given up her career to marry him. In the Stuart's *Nine Till Six*, men are absent all together, though some shop girls refer to their 'good-for-nothing' boyfriends.[4] Moreover, Mrs Pembroke reveals that her only son is "invalid" as a result of the First World War and is kept in a medical facility, while her daughters, Clare and Pam, are shown to be more competent.[5] In Daviot's *The Laughing Woman*, the male lead René is

[3] Stern, *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, 8–9.
[4] Aimee and Philp Stuart, *Nine Till Six*, 33–34.
[5] Ibid., 14.

depicted as self-centred. He exploits Frik, stifles her creativity, and imposes his needs on her while ignoring her struggles to nurture him and his career. Finally, in Dane's *Wild Decembers*, Branwell Brontë is portrayed as a drunkard who brings misery to his family, while the father of the family, Patrick Brontë, is depicted as selfish for opposing Charlotte's marriage to his curate because he wants her to remain at home and care for him in his old age.[6] In short, none of these men are supportive of women's independence or freedom. They all try, in one way or another, to stifle women's lives and ambitions.

As these examples show, the plays I examine in this thesis depict men in an unfavourable light, and it remains open to speculation why this is consistent across all of them. Based on my analysis of the texts and the social circumstances British women faced in the interwar years, I suggest that the plays portray men as incompetent, manipulative, selfish, or absent in order to mirror the lived realities and daily frustrations of middle-class women in the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, men held positions of power and legal authority over women, and these plays use male characters to dramatize the constrains women faced. For example, Rufus becomes the obstacle in Daryll returning to her business in *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, and William denies Vectia her right to motherhood in *Vectia*. In this sense, men like William and Rufus personify patriarchy, and the dramas set women against them to make the struggle for independence visible. Positioning male characters as weak or destructive also opens space to critique patriarchal norms in a way that West End audiences would recognize without dismissing the plays as too radical. There may also be a possible dramatic reason for weakening male roles. This strategy allows women protagonists to take centre stage and voice the main debates. For instance, Evadne is *Our Ostriches* shines in her defence of birth control compared to the narrow-minded men around her like Lord Simplex and Brother Peter, while Sydney in *A Bill of Divorcement* heroically saves her mother Margaret from a doomed marriage. Her sacrifice stands in contrast to the helplessness of Margaret's fiancé or the oppression of Hilary and the rector.

Looking across these plays, a strong connections emerges in how the female protagonists are characterized. In spite of their different circumstances, they refuse to be passive. They prefer to confront the restrictions placed on women by marriage, family, and society. They respond with acts of resistance, sacrifice or ambition. Many of them choose independence over dependence on men: Sydney in *A Bill of Divorcement* breaks off her engagement and decides to become a working woman, Wanda in *The Pelican* leaves her marriage to become independent, Vectia in *Vectia* leaves an unfulfilling union, and Evadne in *Our Ostriches* walks away from her wealthy fiancé for a cause she believes in. Several female protagonists are shown as supporters and providers for others. And in doing so, they are stepping into roles traditionally preserved for men. Daryll in *The Man Who Pays the Piper* supports her family financially, Sydney declares she will support her father and aunt, and Frik in *The Laughing Woman* gives up on her ambitions to sustain René's career. Others bravely embody the struggle of working-or lower-middle-class women, as in *Nine Till Six* in which the shop girls struggle to survive on meagre wages while negotiating work and marriage, and Mrs Flinker who shows resilience and strength despite all the disadvantages of her situation.

Overall, these patterns highlight the richness of women's roles in these dramas, which makes the lack of scholarship on the twentieth-century drawing-room play all the more surprising, given how significant the drawing-room play is to the history of modern

[6] Dane, *Wild Decembers*, 288, 289.

drama. In my textual analysis, I focused on how these plays centre their plots in the drawing room. I showed how each play meticulously details the drawing room, which indicates the playwrights' commitment to depicting a 'realistic' image of middle-class life. I find this attempt to appear like a slice of life ironic, considering how contrived and ornate the plots are. What I find truly missing in studies of British modern drama is an investigation of how British women playwrights, particularly in the early twentieth century, depicted women in the drawing room. While there are some studies on, for example, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and its use of domestic space, these studies remain very limited.[7] My thesis fills this gap in its exploration of how middlebrow women dramatists envisioned the lives of middle-class women within the home as well as the settings and props they viewed as essential to the drawing-room space and how efficiently they brought this vision on the stage. Of course, the characters and themes in the drawing-room play are very similar to the middlebrow domestic novel, a connection I discussed in detail in the introductory chapter and Chapter One.

I have to re-emphasize how these drawing-room plays are driven primarily by plot. Plots in these plays are not just a means of advancing the story. They are skillfully employed as devices that expose the gap between the apparent new freedoms the women protagonists enjoyed and the enduring structural and social constraints. On the surface, these heroines appear to have choices. They can marry, divorce, and pursue careers. Yet, through plot turns like broken engagements, remarriages, and abandoned careers, the plays lead to endings that are disappointingly conventional. These twists reveal the tragic reality that this supposed freedom is an illusion. The plays subtly question, through traditional endings, the structures that push women towards dependent roles. In this way, plot is revealed not to be neutral. It emerges as a political tool that highlights how the freedoms women gained in law or policy did not necessarily translate into genuine lived emancipation.

I would like to reflect on the cultural challenges I faced while working on this thesis. I have mentioned earlier how these plays resonated with me as a Saudi and a woman. Despite this, I had to overcome many cultural and historical boundaries to be able to engage with British plays from the 1920s and 1930s. As someone who came from a different language and cultural background, I felt like an outsider, which meant I had to learn how to step outside my familiar cultural framework so that I could understand the specific contexts that impacted these narratives and know what was radical, what was conventional, and what was controversial at that time. For example, I had to create a distance when working on things entirely unfamiliar to me as a Saudi, like class and eugenics in British culture between the wars, which was extremely complex to navigate. I also had to be careful when using words like 'race' or when discussing Stopes' disparaging views of the working class. In other cases, I had to study unfamiliar cultural references, such as how divorce was discussed in the British press, how theatre audiences during the interwar period responded to controversial themes like female creativity, contraception, or unfair workplace conditions for women, or how women's work and responsibility were defined in a society so different than my own. Part of the effort was also the added strangeness of dealing with texts written almost a century ago. These plays are now reaching their centenary, and meanings change with time and cultural references that were once familiar are now half-forgotten. Despite these challenges, this

[7] See Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Nicholas Grene, *Home on the Stage: Domestic Spaces in Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

task ended up being rewarding for me. I discovered new ways of thinking about how freedom is lived and imagined.

Finally, I want to end the thesis by mentioning future possibilities for research. Further study could explore how the drawing-room play between the wars intersected with other cultural forms like film or radio drama depicting women's domestic life. Another possibility would be a comparative study between British and international women's drama during the 1920s and 1930s to examine how they shared common feminist concerns across different cultures and languages. Future research could investigate in depth how middlebrow women playwrights influenced or were influenced by contemporary fiction and journalism, particularly the growing popularity of women's magazines and advice columns. Another area worth exploring is to focus on how female playwrights active during the interwar years navigated the changing theatre industry after the Second World War. It could trace continuities and departures in women's writing for the stage from the interwar period into the 1940s and 1950s. There are many possibilities, but the most significant in my opinion would be an archival exploration, particularly into unproduced plays and unpublished manuscripts. This idea first occurred to me when I initially planned to work on *Penelope Forgives* (1930) by Elizabeth Robins, a play dealing with divorce and poverty. However, I discovered that it was never published and is only available at the Lord Chamberlain's archives in London, and so I ultimately decided to work on *The Pelican* instead. My sense that many unknown women playwrights and plays might be hidden in archives was reinforced when I read a Guardian article published in July 2023, entitled "Lost Plays of Gertrude Robins, Bernard Shaw Rival, to be Revived a Century On."[8] This article describes how the scholar and professor of literature Andrew Maunder, while searching through the British Library's archives for plays produced between the early twentieth century and the First World War, accidently happened upon an utterly forgotten Edwardian playwright called Gertrude Robins. This discovery, the article claims, is a turning point in Robins' fortune because, up until this point, she had been completely forgotten for almost a century.[9] According to the article, Maunder, who was apparently impressed with the plays' excellent craftsmanship and modern sensibility, intended to have them produced in London the following month.[10] Discovering Robins is not simply an act of historical curiosity; it is an important scholarly effort to recover the hidden voices of women. Likewise, working on these forgotten playwrights was not just an academic project for me. It has been a journey of rediscovery in itself. It showed me how easily important voices can be silenced or overlooked. There is still so much left to uncover, and I hope my work and the work of other scholars will continue to contribute to this evolving conversation, so that these women, and many others like them, are no longer lost to history.

[8] Dalya Alberge, "Lost Plays of Gertrude Robins, Bernard Shaw Rival, to Be Revived a Century On," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/jul/23/lost-plays-of-gertrude-robins-bernard-shaw-rival-to-be-revived-a-century-on.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

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