

# Book Reviews

**The New Woman's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary American Women.** HONOR MOORE, ed., New York, Vintage Books, 1977, Pp. 537

Anyone curious about contemporary plays written by women or interested in an introduction to the complex but largely unknown history of women dramatists will welcome this anthology, edited by Honor Moore, an American poet and playwright. Moore's idea for this anthology sprang from her surprise at the number of American plays, written by women about "female experience," which were produced, in the early 1970s, in little theatres and out-of-the-way places on the east and west coasts of the United States. The anthology's final format, with an individual preface to each play, and an essay-length historical and critical introduction by the editor, was intended as a counterbalance to the negative critical response aimed at the women's plays and as a corrective to Moore's own ignorance, despite her years at the Yale School of Drama, of any theatrical history which would link the current proliferation of women playwrights to predecessors. In response to her original request for plays, Moore received almost two hundred manuscripts and then chose the ten plays that she

believed best expressed the "spirit of the new women's theatre for excellence, variety and readability." (Editor's Note)

The concerns of the new women's theatre, implicit in the plays themselves, are clearly addressed in the Introduction and in the individual prefaces to the plays: the predominance of plays in which women's parts are demeaning or one-sided; the scarcity of plays in which women writers may express their "whole selves;" the stifling theatrical climate created by, among other phenomena, critics hostile to themes, concerns and forms of the new women's plays; and the persistence of a theatre, as Moore describes it, blindly devoted to "the young male god to whom it was dedicated." (p. xxxvi) But is there really a common "spirit" in these plays, which reclaims the creative vision of women in the theatre? My answer is yes, although it remains to be seen whether critics can generalize from these plays to put forward a theory of contemporary American women's drama, or to establish ties between women playwrights in the United States and their contemporaries in Canada, England and Australia, to name three other English-speaking countries where the work of women playwrights has registered the impact of the women's movement.

Much of the animating spirit of the new women's theatre comes from the substantial, central parts for women.

Julia Augustine, the black heroine of Alice Childress' Wedding Band, and Queen Christina of Sweden, in Ruth Wolff's The Abdication, are towering, monumental figures. Even the fair-skinned Inuit girl of The Ice Wolf, Joanna Kraus' children's play, assumes the heroic proportions of a revenger, performing acts of bravery and contrition which any young actress would find challenging to interpret. There are stereotyped images of women in these plays: the unbelievably bitchy, self-satisfied mother of Ursule Molinaro's Theatre of Cruelty ritual, Breakfast Before Noon; the vapid, moon-struck mannequin in Joanna Russ's parody, Window Dressing; the man-identified widow, Iris, in Corinne Jacker's Bits and Pieces. The stereotypes are there, however, not to unquestioningly promote a dying version of woman but to be critically observed, exposed, attacked and destroyed, to make room for the new women. Although these plays are unapologetically woman-centred, they focus on the figure of woman, not the figure of the New Woman, as a starting point of human experience. These central women are important, then, not only because they offer more meaningful roles for actresses, but because they interpret the arduous, often solitary journey women have had to undertake to achieve a measure of autonomy and dignity.

A focus on specifically woman to woman relationships is also a strong component of the new theatre's spirit. Mothers

and daughters, for example, feature prominently in Molinaro's play and in Honor Moore's elegiac, poetic Mourning Pictures. As sisters, sisters-in-law, friends, co-workers and neighbors, the women make impossible demands on each other, sometimes inflicting mortal wounds, sometimes rendering soul saving services. As these plays present it, the subject of woman to woman relations is open, flexible, and one of the most exciting experiences the new women's theatre offers to audiences.

Female-male relations, often wittily rendered, are more predictable, more circumscribed. In general, these plays treat husbands and lovers, not as all powerful, but limited, as are the women, by the tyranny of the American family, rigid sex stereotyping, racism, and other ills of American society and morality. Fathers, however, or father substitutes, present a far more serious challenge to woman's autonomy and integrity in these plays. The Abdication, for example, deals with Queen Christina's unsuccessful, fatal struggle with her confessor, Cardinal Azzolini, who is, on the one hand, the man she loves, but, on the other hand, a man who embodies the father figure--in this case, the Pope--to whom Christina is bound to submit.

The action in almost all the plays involves women in painful, humiliating, weakening and difficult events and emotions, buoyed not by the inevitability of triumph, but by the convic-

tion that they must take risks, that they must see what is really there. As the plays emphasize, through comedy, parody, poetry, ritual and realism, women cannot afford to fool themselves, cannot find comfort in old traditions, cannot find direction by following old paths, cannot find friends among those who wish to destroy their spirits. The plays, as a group, offer no formula for either discovering or creating a more authentic mode of living than women have previously known. Instead, the plays acknowledge our need of new ways and involve us in the process of discovery, thus creating the emotional immediacy that is fundamental to the spirit of the new women's theatre.

The plays, while standing on their own considerable merits, should be seen as only one part of Moore's effort to awaken a larger public to the fact, as well as the excellence of, the woman playwright. The anthology must be considered also as a venture into feminist scholarship since its Introduction attempts, as the editor acknowledges, to do for women playwrights what Ellen Moers did for women novelists and what Louise Bernikow did for women poets, that is, demonstrate that "women's literature" has a "coherence not previously suspected," (p. xiv) and that a woman's tradition may be discerned. Under scrutiny, Moore's attempt is less successful than either of her predecessors. She never rigorously defines what she means by a "tradition" of women play-

wrights and when she tries to demonstrate a particular manifestation of that tradition, she is often vague. She asserts, for example, that the presence of actresses on the English stage in the Restoration, "enabled" Aphra Behan and other women following to "write for the stage" (p. xviii), but she presents no reasons why this should be so. In another instance, Moore suggests that Lillian Hellman, as a script reader for a theatrical producer in the early 1930s, may have been inspired by manuscripts submitted by such women playwrights as Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell and Zoe Akins but this is a most unlikely way of building a tradition, given the career dates of these essentially "pre-Hellman" playwrights.(1)

In searching for connections between women playwrights and society, Moore offers the general hypothesis that "Women playwrights with important careers, few though they are, appear at times when a prosperous theatre is accompanied by relative freedom for women, especially women of the middle-class."(p. xiv) She does not, however, define "important," and it is likely that she follows traditional historical sources which would overlook the important, that is unique, careers of late nineteenth and early twentieth century English women whose plays emerged from the concerns with women's causes.(2) Similarly, the Settlement House Movement in the United States nurtured substantial

dramatic talent (Alice Gerstenberg) as did the Provincetown Players (Susan Glaspell), but neither of these theatres could be considered prosperous. Furthermore, the freedom for women of which Moore speaks was expressed in the Bohemian liberalism of Greenwich Village and in the alternative lifestyles adopted by American women in the social reform movement; it was not expressed in the middle class context of mainstream American theatre.

Moore's history of women playwrights also has weak points. She provides interesting discussions of Hrosvitha, the tenth century nun who was the only known composer of drama during the Dark Ages; of Isabella Andreini, the genius of the late sixteenth century commedia dell'arte; of Gertrude Stein; and of Martha Graham; but Moore's eclectic history distorts the contributions of English and American women playwrights with whom her tradition is chiefly concerned. In a summary of English women dramatists, there is no mention of Susanna Centlivre, but inclusion of Fanny Burney, whose plays were never produced. Similarly, the Revolutionary Era satires of Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren in America are not mentioned, although the anthologizer introduces Charlotte Barnes, an early nineteenth century American actress whose plays enjoyed remarkable popularity in her own day. In fact, Moore's history depends on "naming" women playwrights, and as such, while containing gaps, raises curiosity and begins to supply an antidote to

the traditional theatre history that has submerged women playwrights. Rewriting drama history so that these women playwrights will surface is still to be done.

Whatever weaknesses appear in Moore's Introduction, we should nevertheless applaud her prodigious ground-clearing. At least she sets up a model which can be debated, modified or, at some points, replaced, when more scholarship has been done. And we should also ask why there has been such a disappointingly small output on the subject of women and drama, especially when compared with the 1970s outpouring of books in the fields of fiction and poetry which re-evaluate women writers, rescue lost works, rewrite the established versions of literary histories, or propose new models for analysis and criticism of women's imagination. Why are there no journals publishing the latest scholarship on women dramatists?(3) No newsletters devoted to current findings on women's drama? No special issues of any theatre journals, or even special parts of any single issue, specifically dedicated to examining aspects of the subject of women and drama? Why so little, or no mention, of women dramatists, in any general or critical study of women writers? Even those scholars most actively and sympathetically engaged in other areas of the study of women and literature look skeptical when confronted by the subject of women playwrights in general and American women playwrights in par-

ticular. They inquire, politely, "Has there really been anyone else besides Lillian Hellman?" Both the plays and the Introduction in Moore's anthology should provide an answer to that question.

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NOTES

1. A number of documented cases of women helping other women in the American theatre would support Moore's belief that a tradition of women's literature may be discerned in the links established to encourage and facilitate the production of women's plays. In the case of Hellman, specifically, there is evidence that as a play reader for Herman Shumlin, she "discovered" Vicki Baum's Grand Hotel.
2. See Jane Marcus, "Transatlantic Sisterhood: Labor and Suffrage Links in the Letters of Elizabeth Robins and Emmeline Pankhurst," Signs 3 (Spring 1978): pp. 745-57; and Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 22-23.
3. Some current plans for studies of women and drama prove the exceptions to this generalization. Rota Lister, editor of The Canadian Drama Review is preparing a special women's issue for Fall 1979; two collections of essays on women and the American theatre are currently being prepared, one to be edited by Helen Krich Chinoy, the second to be co-edited by Rosemary Curb and Phyllis Mael, but publication of either volume is unlikely before 1980. Three papers on Canadian women dramatists, presented at the Inter-American Conference on Women Writers, Ottawa, May 1978, have been reprinted in Atlantis, 4 (Fall 1978).

**Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer.** VICTORIA GLENDINNING,  
London: Weiden and Nicholson, 1978, Pp. 331

Elizabeth Bowen who is the subject of Victoria Glendinning's autobiography is probably not as well known to present-day readers as are some other novelists

of her time such as Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh. However, in the forties and fifties her novels with titles like The House in Paris, The Death of the Heart, The Heat of the Day, or A Time in Rome were best-sellers and Elizabeth Bowen had as much of a following as any of the other major writers of the period. Indeed her novels and short stories were translated into a variety of languages and she was well thought of in literary circles in France, Germany and Italy as well as in the English speaking world. It well may be that her present lack of notoriety is attributable to the tyranny of the cinema since, unlike the novels of a writer like Graham Greene, none of Elizabeth Bowen's novels or stories were ever chosen for cinematic presentation. However this biography should invite many readers to take up the work of a most readable and rewarding writer.

Literary biography is both the most difficult and the most rewarding of writing: it is most difficult because the writer of the biography of a literary person must deal not simply with a single character but with an amazing variety of persona through which and frequently in which that single character lives and is manifested. It is most rewarding, or, one should say, it can be most rewarding, when the presentation achieves the sense of the rounded integration of being which the literary artist was attempting in both life and work. Victoria Glendinning's