

## **Passion, Penury and Psychosis: Representations of the Spinster by Interwar Dramatists**

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The first wave of feminism in the United Kingdom, along with the changes wrought on British society by the First World War, led to a number of laws, which seemingly offered women better opportunities in life. These started in 1918 with the Qualification of Women Act, giving the vote to some women over 30; in 1919 the Sex Disqualification Removal Act opened up the professions; Oxford University degrees were conferred on women a year later; and the 1928 Equal Franchise Act finally gave them the same voting rights as men. Inevitably, though, these breakthroughs led to a concomitant unease in many quarters. We can see this in the literary and theatrical representations of women of the period, which polarized around three problematic figures: the mother, the flapper, and the spinster. Here I will look at how the last of these – someone who is past her marriageable date - acted as a repository during the interwar period for society's fears and anxieties about the place of the older woman.

Ruth Adam has referred to the decade after the Great War as 'the age of the spinster', although we can see this cultural moment continuing long into the 1930s and beyond (1975: 59). On top of the social and legal changes wrought by first wave feminism, and the influence of high profile women like Christabel Pankhurst, who declared 'spinsterhood... a political decision, a deliberate choice made in response to the conditions of sex-slavery', came the repercussions of the First World War (Jeffreys, 1985: 91). Katherine Holden tells us, 'Unprecedented casualties amongst soldiers led to a belief in a "lost generation" of men', and therefore to a generation of women 'who would never be able to marry' (2007: 11). This shift in the visibility of women, politically, socially, and physically, as well as developments in psychological

thought about female sexuality, impacted upon representations of the spinster.

Generally, in the 1920s, spinsters were viewed as a disruptive and sexually disturbing influence on every part of society; the beliefs were that they were sexually available to married men, therefore undermining the marital union, fighting over the men who were not already married, or exhibiting other forms of 'sexually deviant' behaviour, such as lesbianism. Equally, because many had entered the workplace, willingly or not, they were blamed for male unemployment, or, where they lived with relatives, considered a drain on family resources.

This concern over a woman's potential as a subversive force in society, was, in many respects, similar to that afforded the disorderly 'New Woman' in the 1890s, who was 'Unchaperoned, emancipated, and free' (Gardner, 1992, p. 4). However, whereas the New Woman could be seen as attractive in her youth and independence, the depiction of the spinster was invariably much more negative. She was seen as an 'Old Maid', 'Maiden Aunt', 'surplus woman', or 'pussy', and her age, repression, or eccentricity, was stressed, as with the prim and proper Miss Fairfield in Clemence Dane's *Bill of Divorcement* (1921). This character stands in stark contrast to the attractive Vida Levering, in Elizabeth Robins's earlier suffrage drama, *Votes for Women* (1907), whose autonomy, intellectual abilities, and political awareness, are never in doubt. By the 1930s, with the global economic crisis precipitating the Depression, the reality was less than comic. Winifred Holtby and others endeavoured to present the spinster in a more positive light; *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1934), for example, pointed out that it was possible to gain fulfilment through work and friendships. But even those sympathetic to the spinster's position, like Laura Hutton, still saw them in terms of a dilemma, as instanced by the title of her book, *The Single Woman and Her Emotional Problems* (1935). Thus, as Maggie Gale suggests,

the proliferation of representations of the older unmarried woman on the interwar stage reflected ‘a problematised social phenomenon’, with the image of the introverted, unfulfilled or even insane spinster further disseminated through the numerous film versions of books and plays (1996:192).

Apprehension over the ‘surplus’ woman – that is the woman who has no man to marry and who is therefore ‘surplus’ to society’s needs - had already surfaced during the 1840s because of increased male emigration (Vicinus, 1985). But it became acute during the 1920s when it was obvious that there was a dramatic imbalance between the number of men and women in the United Kingdom. The loss of so many young men during the First World War, along with the rise in unemployment for returning soldiers, and a steady demographic shift towards female births and longevity since the nineteenth century, inopportunately coincided with women over 30 securing the vote. This led to unmarried women often being viewed as a ‘menace to the country’s economy and its social and political order’, by newspapers such as *The Daily Mail*, ‘particularly when it was touted that the franchise should be extended to women under 30’: this would have put female voters in the majority (Melman, 1988: 20).

Virginia Nicholson sets out the stark marital statistics for the surplus woman: ‘Between 1914 and 1918 over 700,000 British men were killed: one in eight of those who set out to fight, and 9 per cent of Britain’s males under forty-five’ (2007:13-14). Apart from this, many men were also mentally affected by war, or physically disfigured, and symbolically, the existence of the ‘surplus’ woman acted as a reminder to the population of the ravages of war. The problem seemed to have come to a head with the 1921 Census, when it was learned that there were 1,720,802 more women than men in Britain. It is hard to say with certainty that these figures had a

specific impact upon the way in which unmarried women were viewed in the United Kingdom, but it is noticeable that there was a rise in critical writing about, and popular representations of, the spinster during the interwar years (Nicholson, 2007: 13-14).

Maggie Gale argues that the playwrights of the interwar period ‘appear to have categorised single women into types, the least “thought out” being the spinster. In plays of the period [she] was often, although not always, virginal, naïve or judgemental, thus becoming a comic figure or ideological device’ (1996: 174). On stage, there were any number of caricatures of the spinster: the tweed-wearing Miss Mutchison in *Her Shop* (1929) by Aimée and Philip Stuart, for example, or the family irritant, Sylvia, in Noel Coward’s *This Happy Breed* (1939). One of the crudest distortions came in Rodney Ackland’s adaptation of Hugh Walpole’s novel, *The Old Ladies* (1935). This involves three elderly women in varying stages of eccentricity, renting rooms in a large Georgian house. Each shows some aspect of the stereotypical ‘older woman’. The widowed May Amorest leads an empty life, filled only by the dream that her long-lost son will return. Of the two spinsters, the pathologically timid May Beringer unsuccessfully looks for a job to stave off penury and Agatha Payne, with suggested mystical powers, becomes increasingly unhinged. The play ends tragically, when Agatha terrifies May to death, because of an irrational desire to own one of May’s prized possessions. The inference is that being without a man leads to a lonely and impecunious old age, triggering these various manifestations of fantasy, neurosis and psychosis.

It can be argued that other interwar dramatists, particularly female ones, engage more thoughtfully with the ‘surplus’ woman. Dodie Smith is perhaps better known nowadays as the writer of *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1956), as

well as the popular coming-of-age novel, *I Capture the Castle* (1949). However, she was also a major dramatist of the 1930s. Her first play, *Autumn Crocus* (1931) shows two female teachers on holiday in the Tyrol, Fanny, wearing spectacles and drab colours, and Edith dressed in tweeds. Affected by the light and space of the Austrian countryside, which contrast with her 'ugly and dark' furnished rooms back home, and her love for Steiner, the married inn-keeper, Fanny begins to blossom like one of the 'Herbstzeitlose, the timeless flower', or the 'autumn crocus' (Smith, 1939a, p. 80, p. 89). Yet Edith insists that this relationship has to end; neither of them has any money, with Fanny being only the 'daughter of a poor clergyman', who would lose her job if she goes 'running about the mountains with a common innkeeper' (Smith, 1939:107, 104). The play ends with Fanny realising that there is apparently nothing left for her, but to grow old.

Finding that she was getting scores of letters from female members of the audience, who empathised with Fanny's situation, Dodie Smith went on to write an article, which identified this contemporary phenomenon:

Their letters have convinced me that there exists scattered throughout this country a vast and mysterious legion of loveless women, a new type of surplus woman has arisen during the last decade. She and her sisters are filling the ranks of the legion of the loveless as they have never been filled before. Britain is creating an army of women, between the ages of thirty and fifty, whose hearts have never grown up, and probably never will grow up (Smith, 1931b: n.p.).

Another related dramatic trend at this time was that of the young female character who gives up her opportunity for marriage as a form of self-sacrifice. In Clemence Dane's first play, *A Bill of Divorcement*, Sydney turns down her own chance to marry in order to look after her shell-shocked father, after her mother divorces him to wed someone else. This theme also appeared in W. S. Maugham's ferocious anti-war play, *For Services Rendered* (1931), which criticised the way that survivors of the First World War had been treated. As Eva's fiancé has been killed in the war, and there is no-one left to marry, her only option is to care for her blinded brother. He rails against the 'incompetent fools who ruled the nations' and led them into a war that had nothing to do with 'honour and patriotism and glory' (Maugham, 1999: 67-68). Whilst the main focus of the play is on society's callous reaction to returning soldiers, it ends with Eva undergoing a breakdown on stage as she sings the National Anthem in a cracked voice. Like Fanny, she can see the grim trajectory of her future.

If a middle class woman could not expect to get married, either because she was one of the redundant females or because of family commitments, then she would most probably have to go out to work. Paradoxically, if she was able to support herself financially in this way, she was castigated for 'taking jobs away' from the men who were supposedly entitled to them; firstly, returning soldiers, and then men on the Breadline during the Depression, struggling to feed their families. Yet the Great War afforded many middle class women their first opportunity to work, and therefore earn their own money. The afore-mentioned legislation, passed in the 1920s and 1930s, also helped to improve women's chances of financial independence, even if, as Martin Pugh notes, 'by 1930 feminist politics had been decisively marginalised.' (1992:124). In her article, Dodie Smith goes on to describe the changes for unmarried women:

‘Before the War, the spinster was “the girl who stayed at home.” But nowadays, you will find her behind a shop counter or a school-desk, or rattling the keys of a typewriter’ (1931, n.p.). Virginia Nicholson argues that the relative commonness in the interwar years of the working woman was due, not only to the impact of the war, but also the suffrage movement: ‘A cohort of stay-at-home wives and mothers could never have achieved for women what this generation of spinsters did in meeting the challenge of grief and loss. For them, being denied marriage was a liberation and a launching pad’ (2006: 234-35).

On the British stage, though, work was not always seen in such a glamorous light. Employment mainly consisted of monotonous drudgery in shops, offices, and schools. The idea of a wasted life crops up several times in the depiction of teaching, a job particularly associated with the older woman. The characteristics available to her, once again, are those of repression, frustration, or mental instability; alternatively, she was derided for being unworldly - ironic in itself as a woman was not allowed to continue with her job if she got married. As we have seen, Fanny in *Autumn Crocus* glimpses another kind of existence away from the rigours of her job as a teacher, only for this to be closed off to her. The experimental use of structure in J. B. Priestley’s *Time and the Conways* (1937) reinforces the theme of the loss of dreams, with the beginning and end of the play set in 1919, whilst Act II is set twenty years into the future. At the beginning, Kay is youthful and full of the promise of life, but the middle part of the play shows her as ‘hard, efficient, well-groomed’, with no chance of getting married. Again, as the stage directions tell us, the youthful Socialist sympathizer, Madge changes into a woman who ‘*has short, greyish hair, wears glasses, and is neatly but severely dressed. She speaks with a dry precision, but underneath her assured school-mistress manner is a suggestion of the neurotic*

woman' (Priestley, 1948: 154, 156). It is of note that, much as Priestley could write thought-provoking and complex plays, he found it difficult to steer clear, in this instance, of the female stereotype. In contrast, Emyln Williams evades this in *The Corn is Green* (1938). Miss Moffat is more comfortable with her job as a teacher, perhaps because she has 'never talked to a man for more than five minutes without wanting to box his ears' (1938:13). Much is made of the ways in which a woman can gain fulfilment in life without marriage, and Miss Moffat (played by Bette Davis in the 1945 film directed by Irving Rapper) is portrayed as educated, ambitious, and attractive. The key difference, though, is that Miss Moffat has money, and is therefore in control of her future. Inheriting a house from her uncle in the Welsh countryside, she commandeers a local woman to help open a school for the poor because 'You live alone, you have just enough money, you're not badly educated, and time lies heavy on your hands.' When Miss Ronberry protests that she's waiting for the right man, the ever-practical Miss Moffat bats aside this fantasy: 'If you're a spinster well on in her thirties, he's lost his way and isn't coming. Why don't you face the fact and enjoy yourself, the same as I do?' (1938:13).

Nevertheless, whilst Miss Moffat is able to find fulfilling work due to her convenient inheritance, the declining economic fortunes of Great Britain as it slid into the Depression years meant that many of those women who did not marry, either out of choice or circumstance, found themselves living a hand-to-mouth existence, or what was sometimes euphemistically called 'genteel poverty'. There were several plays that more generally addressed these financial constraints on the middle classes, such as Ronald Mackenzie's *The Maitlands* (1934), in which the eponymous family have been forced to move to a drab town on the coast, without the trappings of life that they once had. Other playwrights showed more directly how lack of money



affected the older unmarried woman. *Busman's Honeymoon* is interesting in this respect. Dorothy L. Sayers first wrote it as a play in 1936, before adapting it the following year into the eleventh and last novel featuring her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. Most critical comment about *Busman's Holiday* has related to the ingenious method of murder it features, or the way in which Wimsey negotiates the beginning of his marriage to Harriet Vane. However, the plot actually revolves around Miss Agnes Twitherton, who had been a background figure in a number of Wimsey books. Living near to Wimsey's country house, Talboys, she is the seemingly stereotypical spinster, with her inconsequential chatter and over-concern with etiquette. In *Busman's Holiday*, Agnes is hopeful of inheriting money from her uncle, the miserly Noakes, who has been found dead, with his brains dashed out. She comes under suspicion of his murder, but in fact the killer is the gardener, Frank Crutchley, who has become engaged to Miss Twitherton in order to get his hands on the money. As it turns out, Noakes was bankrupt, and Crutchley's plan unravels. At one stroke, all of the spinster's plans for the future are dashed: she is neither going to get married, nor is she going to become rich. Miss Twitherton's realization of this is touching in its pathos:

I'm afraid it looks dreadful to be thinking about money just now – but – I did think I'd have a little for my old age – and times are so hard – and – and – there's always the rent – ...I had counted on it – rather specially – (*She is on the verge of tears, and everybody is getting uncomfortable*) (1937: 361-62).

What is particularly interesting about this scene is the way in which other characters are made to react, as if they would rather not be aware of the reality of Miss

Twitterton's position, something that the gloss of 'genteel poverty' (a condition almost invariably peculiar to women), also covers up.

This problem was also raised by another female playwright of the time, Esther McCracken, whose thematic interests in several plays yoked together working class unemployment, poor housing, and the impoverished spinster. In *White Elephants* (1940), rewritten as *Living Room* (1943), the fortunes of two unmarried sisters, Vicky and Deborah Benton, have drastically declined, as they have aged. The four properties inherited from their father cannot be sold or they will lose their sole income from the rents, and a financial crisis occurs when the houses they depend on are due to be demolished in a slum clearance scheme. McCracken portrays the sisters in a sympathetic way, as they struggle with the contradictions of their upbringing. As middle class women, they are untrained for any professional occupation, leaving them in a perilous situation once the family funds have dried up. Deborah explains why the older impecunious women of the middle classes have been rendered invisible by society:

Because our poverty isn't picturesque, because it doesn't hit you in the eye, and we don't shout about it from the house-tops, it's ignored. You prefer to think it doesn't exist. But it does, it does. All over the country there are people like us, keeping up appearances on very little. And because they can be guaranteed not to make a song about it, the little they have is taken away from them (1944: 38).

Like Miss Twitterton, McCracken's spinsters force the audience to confront an unpalatable truth about older middle-class women, and their constrained

circumstances. Plays like this, as well as novels such as Winifred Holtby's *Poor Caroline* (1931), which centres on the figure of an unmarried woman who is poor, lonely and despairing, did much to raise social awareness. By the Second World War, the spinster was a much less criticised figure than before, and various campaigns, such as that led by Florence White for pension rights for older women, helped to improve the situation.

Apart from the economic and social problems supposedly posed by spinsters, there were also fears at this time about how they could affect the physical, psychological, and moral well-being of the country. The idea of the spinster's virginity and barrenness suffered through being contrasted with a woman's 'natural' role, that of being a mother. Whilst there were increasing opportunities for women to work, especially after the 1914-1918 war, this was perceived as a social aberrance, since a woman's place was perceived of as being in the home. The poor physical health of the population, highlighted during the Boer War and the First World War, the growing debate about eugenics, as well as the declining birthrate, led to an increased social approval and concern for mothering during the 1920s. Thus, the production of healthy babies became part of a drive for 'national efficiency' through the maintenance of the family 'as an economic and social unit' (Giles, 1995: 23). In this light, it is significant that the full title of the agency Marie Stopes opened in 1921 was the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress. Moreover, in producing the next, healthy, generation to replace the one lost during the war, a married woman's role was also to act as a willing and happy sexual partner to her husband, and the celebration of harmonious marital relations appeared in many works at the time, including Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage* (1926), which went through several reprints, as did Stopes' *Married Love* (1918). Whilst

opportunities for individual women were being opened up by changes to the law, it was also possible for the Labour Party, in 1923, to echo generalized views about womanhood 'that had been held during the Victorian period, stating that "The home is a *sacred institution* and can only be kept sacred by the devotion, happiness and love of the Mother. *Motherhood is the pivot of our National Life* "' (Pugh, 1992:115)

This emphasis co-existed alongside the claims to younger woman's rights to sexual freedom, epitomised in the figure of the 'flapper' who appeared as a literary and theatrical type throughout the 1920s. She was, Billie Melman tells us, 'sexless but libidinous; infantile but precocious; self-sufficient but demographically, economically and socially superfluous; an emblem of modern times yet, at the same time, an incarnation of the eternal Eve' (1988:1). Margaret Kennedy's acclaimed novel *The Constant Nymph* (1924) contains a good example of this figure. Filmed several times and adapted by Kennedy as a play two years after publication, it centres on the sexual awakening of the adolescent Tessa, who tragically falls in love with a much older man. As Maggie Gale says, 'Kennedy clearly proposes two different kinds of relationship, one which bears all the hallmarks of middle-class respectability, the other based on free love and artistic bohemianism' (2000a:123). This articulated a more generalized feeling that the First World War had triggered a social break with the past, and that the younger generation could no longer believe in the mores, sexual or otherwise, of their elders who had brought about and prolonged the tragedy of war.

In contrast, the sexual life – or lack of it – of the older unmarried woman harked back to an earlier period, and theatrical portrayals were 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. Richard Llewellyn's *Poison Pen* (1939) was one of the last

significant plays of the period to utilize the figure of the psychologically warped, unmarried woman. In it, venomous letters are sent to members of a village, detailing their supposed moral transgressions. Almost immediately, the consensus is that these malevolent actions must be the work of a woman who has a ‘mental disease... caused by inhibitions and repressions’ (1938: 27). After chaos has been unleashed upon the community, leading to suicide and murder, the instigator is revealed as the vicar’s sister. Played by Flora Robson in the original stage production, Phryne Rainrider (renamed Mary Rider for the 1940 film, also with Robson) is depicted as sexually and socially frustrated. Her original name ironically references the Ancient Greek courtesan who supposedly adjusted her prices according to how emotionally attached she felt, as well as being Greek for ‘toad’: a clear case of the way in which female sexuality was seen as ‘polluted’ and unacceptable. Phryne envies yet despises the behaviour of others. She rails against ‘The dirtiest little slut in the village [who] can have more than I’ve ever had!’ (1938: 59), thus expressing the way in which her self-sacrifice (for her brother, for the Church, for the village), has been at the expense of her social and sexual freedom.

Other plays showed the spinster as more pathetic in her attempts at attracting a man. Mr. Jones upsets Miss Ronberry in *The Corn is Green* with his mocking: ‘Worldly things, that is your trouble. “Please Mistar Jones, my life is as empty as a rotten nutshell, so get me a husband before it is too late, double quick!” ’(1938: 4). In Sayers’s *Busman’s Holiday*, Miss Twitterton is depressingly desperate to marry Crutchley, but finding she has no money, he turns instead to humiliation: ‘A man that’s starting in life wants a wife, see? A nice little bit to come ‘ome to – something he can cuddle – not a skinny old hen with a brood of Buff Orpingtons’ (1937: 385). Remarking on her habit of taking up the silver at night to protect it from burglars, he

cruelly jests about her lack of sexual knowledge, remarking, ‘Like to take me up to bed like the silver teapot – and a silver teapot ‘ud be about as much use to you, I reckon.’ She starts crying and ‘*Grasps frantically at him*’, whereupon he throws her on the floor and storms off (1937: 386). Rather than playing this for comedy, Sayers has the heroine Harriet Vane respond compassionately, and the spinster’s situation gains added pathos from being played out against the sexual banter between Wimsey and Vane, who actually are on their titular honeymoon.

Dodie Smith had already touched on the issue of sexual frustration in *Autumn Crocus*. Fanny wants to sleep with the inn-keeper, but reminded of English rules of morality and the sordid possibility that she might have an illegitimate baby, she resists what is represented as her only chance of passion. The spinster’s interest in sex is also shown in this play through the character of Miss Mayne, another sister of a vicar. Interestingly, Smith plays with the stereotype of the prim spinster, saying that ‘there is nothing definitely old-maidish about her...yet one is instantly sure that she is not married’ (1939a: 7). As with Fanny, her comments tell of an inhibited life in England that has to take into account what others will say, but the atmosphere of the hotel and its surroundings also work their magic. Getting lost on a mountain one evening, she returns late and dishevelled, having cut the sleeves out of her dress because she was too hot. Instead of having supper, she drinks brandy, shocking her brother who has never seen her like this. She does not ‘feel quite normal’ and begins to express interest in the close relationship between two other guests at the hotel, with this vicarious way of life becoming for Miss Mayne a means of accepting the restrictions imposed on her by society (1939a: 59).

Smith takes this further in her play, *Touch Wood* (1934) by exploring how the First World War had affected one woman’s views on love and sex. Elizabeth, again

played on stage by Flora Robson who specialised in these roles, is a woman of thirty eight who is cynical and disillusioned about sexual relationships. When it is thought that she must have lost someone she loved during the war, Elizabeth surprisingly replies, 'No. Someone I cared for tremendously came back' (1939b: 298). Whilst she is described flippantly by one of the men at the end of the play as an 'old maid' and 'the eternal spinster...The best of them are slightly pathological', her frank discussions earlier in the play with the youthful Mab stage how much older women have been affected by the war (1939b: 363). Angrily denying virginal status because 'Virginity's not a very generous state when life's as uncertain as it was then', she adds that 'sex is just a rotten swindle and the only really happy people are those who keep it in a separate compartment of their lives, or get over it altogether ...Sex is an illness just like measles and, unfortunately, far more recurrent' (1939b: 345). This cynical view of male/female relations is contrasted sharply with the naïve and romantic views of girls like Mab, here, and Tessa in *The Constant Nymph*.

Whilst Smith tried to explore this division between an older and younger generation of women, other commentators at the time continued to condemn the 'dangers' of female sexuality outside of the marital union, whether that was in the form of masturbation, celibacy, promiscuity, or lesbianism. In contradistinction to the idealized role of the mother, the older unmarried woman was seen as a destroyer of children's innocence. The implication was, therefore, that the spinster was potentially a threat to the 'health of the nation'. Sapphism had come to greater attention through the very public trial of Radclyffe Hall for her novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). However, it was already a subject for debate throughout the 1920s, when it was referred to as a perversion, one in which a woman's 'natural' femininity had become 'inverted'. That this was a source of contemporary disquiet can be seen in the crop of

books and plays that linked the idea of the sex-starved old maid to the spinsterish school mistress. Predating Hall, we have Clemence Dane's novel, *Regiment of Women* (1917), which portrayed a teacher attempting to seduce the young girls in her charge. This theme was taken up in the 1930s, by writers such as Christa Winsloe who adapted her book *Madchen in Uniform* (1931), with its depiction of a blossoming relationship between a fourteen year old girl and her teacher, for stage and screen. The emphasis on love between women rather than sexual relationships was wantonly misconstrued. Whilst it was passed for stage production by the British censor, the Lord Chamberlain's office, the critic Allardyce Nicoll wrote of Manuela, one of the schoolgirls, being 'in the grip of a potentially unnatural passion', a view echoed in most newspaper reviews (Deeney, 2000: 74). This fear of the unmarried older woman as a sexual threat was also developed in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, first staged in London in 1934. The play shows a pupil defaming the close friendship between two female proprietors of a school, resulting in the women losing the school. Ironically, anxiety surrounding the perceived dangers of lesbianism led to Hollywood's Hays Code white-washing the first film version *These Three* (1936), by shifting the focus from suggestions of lesbianism to a heterosexual love triangle. While both Winsloe and Hellman's plays had attempted to sympathetically depict older women struggling against the hidebound social conventions which threatened to destroy their careers as teachers, like so many plays about spinsters they also emphasised the despair apparently lurking just underneath the surface of these lives.

Even before the First World War had ended, the process of 'memorialising and remembrance that seeks to validate the sacrifices of the Great War' was set under way, but this stood in stark contrast to what Claire Tylee identifies as two of the main



narratives about the war's impact on British life: 'The Somme Myth' and 'The Lost Generation Myth', both of which dealt with the tragic loss of English manhood (1990: 255). However, the cultural impact of the war affected women very differently, as they found themselves caught between the social and sexual conventions that lingered on from the Edwardian period and their new role as enfranchised women. Nicoletta Gullace claims that

the Great War provided a context in which long-standing feminist claims seemed increasingly persuasive to the press, to legislators, and to the general public. Women's war work, the sacrifices of mothers and wives, and the patriotic performance of well-known suffragists all validated feminists' long-standing arguments about the national and imperial value of female citizenship (2002:6).

Yet if the First World War brought legislative advances for women, particularly in the arenas of work and education, it also brought to the surface anxiety about female agency, especially where patriarchal control had been loosened. Sheila Jeffreys has noted that the first wave of feminism meant 'spinsterhood was now capable of being a form of resistance for women because social and economic changes had made it more likely that women could survive without marriage' (1995: 205). Significantly, though, the majority of male and female interwar dramatists did not dwell on the positive aspects for women of remaining single. Instead, there was a new emphasis on the inherent social, sexual, and psychological problems for women in not getting married, which, it was suggested, would automatically become more severe as a woman grew older. This was rooted in the way the presence of so many unmarried women had originally rendered the losses caused by war more visible; as the country later slid into

economic depression female workers were a further reminder of the inability of men to provide for their families. Because of this, interwar drama expressed a deeper seismic shift in terms of gender roles, producing a tension between representing unmarried women as overly 'feminine' - chattering, fussing, neurotic – or as having extreme 'masculine' attributes in which their characters are libidinous, controlling or violent. This arises from a clash between an older perception of gender as a fixed constant which was unable to be changed, and a new nexus of historically-specific social and cultural discourses about how women's roles had altered. In other words, the 1920s and 1930s became the moment when the advances made by First Wave Feminism collided with the social and political aftermath of the First World War. Because of this, ideas of womanhood were put under extreme pressure, resulting in confusion about how exactly both sexes should behave.

G. B. Stern's *The Man who Pays the Piper* (1931) shows this predicament. Here we have a woman, Daryll, who has taken on the role of the head of the household since her father and elder brother have been killed in the First World War. She deliberately recoils from the passive behaviour of her mother, and dominates those around her, but Stern is at pains to show that she is 'not masculine', which, in the play, is equated with being 'unsexed' (1931: 41). Maggie Gale astutely notes that 'Stern's sense that the First World War created a "freak" generation of women connects with the notion of both a "lost generation" and at the same time a new generation. The image of a generation of men lost through war is combined with the image of a new generation of women for whom work and career became either a necessity or simply a burning desire' (2000b: 28).

By the time the Second World War broke out in 1939, large numbers of women had realized that marriage and motherhood were not necessarily the only outcomes for their sex. It was expected that young and older women would do their part in war work, whether in the services or on the Home Front, and much overt governmental propaganda, as well as the more covert forms in magazines, films, and theatre, presented the working woman as the norm. The interwar figure of the older, unmarried woman, whether sexually ambivalent, financially troubled, or psychologically disturbed, began to look more and more anachronistic, irrelevant to a post-war world. The stereotype of the spinster still persisted on the stage, but her presence no longer signalled a site of contestation about shifting gender roles, the dangers posed by feminism, or the losses incurred by the previous war.

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