

Introduction

During the opening years of the twentieth century, women's designated place in the theater was in the audience. Dorothy Chansky, in *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, cites sources which estimate that women comprised 70 to 80 percent of playgoers at the time, and matinees were instituted to reach these viewers. As she also notes, many commentators lamented the feminization of the theater. Critic Clayton Hamilton, for example, considered all audiences "uncivilized and uncultivated" but reserved special disdain for women because they "are by nature inattentive."

More astute observers, however, blamed dramatists and producers—rather than spectators—for the sorry state of the American theater. Susan Glaspell, one of the founders of the Provincetown Players, complained: "Those were the days when Broadway flourished almost unchallenged. Plays, like magazine stories, were patterned. . . . They didn't ask much of *you*, those plays." In her autobiography, Glaspell's colleague Neith Boyce lamented that "books and plays" as well as social conversation at the turn of the twentieth century suffered from "an indirectness, a polite evasion of what it was all about." With a few exceptions, notably Rachel Crothers's early dramas, most works by the era's small group of successful female playwrights shared this cultural timidity.

Both the American stage and women's place on it would soon undergo a fundamental change with the advent of the "Little Theater Movement." Political radicalism and artistic innovation went hand in hand: when silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey, called a strike in 1913, New York artists and intellectuals joined with them to stage a fund-raising pageant. Both the Moscow Art Theatre and Dublin's Abbey Theatre toured this country early in the century, helping spawn the hundreds of troupes that quickly sprang up across the United States. Chansky places these theaters "among many national reform

projects, as Americans in all parts of the country sought political and social changes in the years from roughly 1890 into the 1920s.”

Provincetown Players historian Robert K. Sarlós adds that “the impact of outstanding women was perhaps greater” than that of men in creating the “cultural awakening” of which this theatrical revolution was a part. Mabel Dodge hosted a salon at which intellectuals, revolutionaries, poets, painters, and self-styled prophets discussed such controversial topics as “sex antagonism.” Activists and artists like Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, Isadora Duncan, and Gertrude Stein challenged traditional notions about society and the arts, including women’s roles in both. Feminism was in the air as women fought for civil liberties that included equality in marriage and the right to vote.

The most important of the Little Theaters that emerged just before America entered World War I was the Provincetown Players, which began as an informal group of friends on Cape Cod in the summer of 1915. The vast majority of Little Theaters produced dramas by (nearly always male) modern European and British playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and George Bernard Shaw. But the Provincetown Players—which would dub its New York City venues “The Playwrights Theatre”—was dedicated to supporting work by American dramatists and involving them in the productions. The first of the group’s “Resolutions” was “to encourage the writing of American plays of real artistic, literary and dramatic—as opposed to Broadway—merit.” During its seven-year run the group produced nearly one hundred plays by some fifty dramatists; it broke its commitment to native drama only twice, to perform Arthur Schnitzler’s *Last Masks* and to include Gustav Wied’s *Autumn Fires* in a semi-official “spring season” in 1921. Sarlós justly argues that “from the perspective of drama alone, it was the single most fruitful American theatre prior to the Second World War: it introduced more native playwrights, had a greater impact on audiences and critics, and a longer life than any similar group.”



By the second decade of the twentieth century, Provincetown, Massachusetts, was a favorite summer haunt of the “bohemian” set—painters, sculptors, poets, and others seeking to lead unconventional lives. Situated at the tip of Cape Cod, the area boasted a beautiful seacoast, dunes, and relatively low rents. A few years later America’s artists and intellectuals would flock to Paris, but World War I kept most of them on this side of the Atlantic. Greenwich Village was their winter home and, often, Provincetown was their summer retreat.

The group that became the Provincetown Players was scarcely composed of social outcasts: most were middle class and many were college educated.

The Players came from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds—including the Irish American O’Neill and several Jewish members—but all were white. Still, they saw themselves as radicals who opposed the status quo of their conservative hometowns and dedicated themselves to supporting artistic innovation, questioning the capitalist system, reevaluating relations between women and men, and challenging traditional sexual mores.

The birth of the Provincetown Players was not particularly auspicious, although in retrospect the first performance has taken on the aura of theatrical legend. In July of 1915, a collection of friends came together to stage *Constancy*, Neith Boyce’s comedy about a love affair between two members of their “set,” and *Suppressed Desires*, a Freudian spoof by George Cram (Jig) Cook and Susan Glaspell that had been turned down as too “special” by the already established Washington Square Players in New York. *Constancy* (which, according to some scholars, was also a Washington Square “reject”) was performed on the balcony of a house rented by Boyce and her husband, Hutchins Hapgood; the audience sat in the living room. For *Suppressed Desires* the spectators turned their chairs around to face the center of the room. The bill was repeated for a larger audience in September in an old fish house on a nearby wharf, which would also serve as a theater the following year.

In the fall of 1916, after a second summer of performances, the Provincetown Players organization was formally born. The group carved a theater—with reputedly the most uncomfortable auditorium benches in New York—out of a rented brownstone at 139 Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village. A few years later they relocated to larger quarters at 133 Macdougall Street, a building that had previously served as a stable. George Cram Cook was a prime mover in the founding of the Provincetown Players, and he remained the president of the organization until he and his wife, Susan Glaspell, left for Greece in 1922. With their departure, the Players came to an end—even though a tenuously related company calling itself the Provincetown Playhouse continued on for seven more years. Unquestionably, the most significant dramatist the group introduced to the world was Eugene O’Neill, who had fifteen works performed by the Provincetown Players and would eventually become the only American playwright to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. But the prominence of O’Neill and Cook should not be allowed to overshadow either the important theatrical accomplishments of the women writers of the Provincetown Players or the fact that, working in a wide range of capacities, women were in many ways the backbone of the group.

Thirteen of the twenty-nine individuals listed in the original Provincetown Players incorporation papers were female. In her pioneering book *The Women of Provincetown, 1915–1922*, Cheryl Black identifies “more than 120 women [who] were associated with” the group during its seven-year life. Most of these were feminists committed to social change as well as artistic experimentation; in fact, they saw the two as mutually supportive. Mary Heaton

Vorse, a fiction writer, labor activist, and feminist journalist, represented the Woman Suffrage Party of New York City at an international women's peace conference in the Netherlands in 1915. She owned the Provincetown wharf on which the first summer seasons of plays were performed, and she continued to be an active member of the Players for many years.

Novelist, critic, and editor Edna Kenton was one of the founders of Heterodoxy, an influential feminist discussion group that began holding meetings in 1912 and included such other Players as Susan Glaspell, Eleanor Fitzgerald, Ida Rauh, and Helen Westley. Heterodoxy—which lasted until 1940—was composed of activists who met regularly to consider issues ranging from birth control, suffrage, and education reform to the arts, especially theater. Historian Dee Garrison believes that the organization's luncheon discussions “brought together the largest group of intellectually exciting American women ever gathered in one room.” Kenton served on the Provincetown Executive Committee from early 1917 until the Players disbanded in 1922; among her jobs was reading and selecting plays for performance. In a 1914 article in the journal *The Delineator*, Kenton tackled the ever-present challenge of defining *feminism*, characterizing it as “any woman's spiritual and intellectual attitude toward herself and toward life. It is her conscious attempt to realize Personality; to make her own decisions instead of having them made for her; to sink the old humbled or rebelling slave in the new creature who is mistress of herself.”

Ida Rauh was a feminist and socialist who held a law degree, worked for the Women's Trade Union League, and supported birth control. Rauh not only performed more than two dozen roles in Provincetown plays but also directed several productions and was for a time one of the chief administrators of the organization. A slightly later addition was Nina Moise, who worked with the group in 1917 and 1918. According to Sarlós, “Moise could not singlehandedly turn the performances professional even had she wished, yet her expert control made an impression on the Players, and they were never the same thereafter.” The role of the modern director was still emerging in the commercial theater, and the director's position was further complicated at the Provincetown Players because of the group's original plan to have authors stage their own works. Although staging credit cannot always be established, Black's estimate that nearly half of the Provincetown productions were directed by women seems accurate. This is an astonishing percentage considering the underrepresentation of women as directors on the commercial stage—then and now—and Moise was largely responsible. During her year and a half with the Players, Moise directed or codirected at least nineteen plays, including several by Glaspell and O'Neill, and eventually became the first of the company's producing directors—at the munificent salary of fifteen dollars a week.

M. Eleanor Fitzgerald came on board in October of 1918 and served as the group's secretary-treasurer for many years, although keeping the books seems an unlikely job for an anarchist friend of Emma Goldman's. Provincetown historians Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau record that Fitzgerald did fund-raising and bookkeeping, answered phones, sold tickets, and generally undertook jobs no one else would or could do. Marguerite Zorach—who, according to biographer Marilyn Friedman Hoffman, “was the best known woman artist of her generation in America” at the time—designed sets for the group. Women also did most of the costume design although costumers, including Jig Cook's mother, Ellen, rarely received credit. And last but certainly not least, Christine Ell ran the restaurant that served as the group's main gathering and eating spot.

Interestingly, women also served as the original historians of the Provincetown Players. Edna Kenton wrote a revealing chronicle that was finally published some eighty years after she composed it, and Susan Glaspell's *The Road to the Temple*, although primarily a biography of husband George Cram Cook, is a valuable record of the group's personal relationships and professional accomplishments. Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau misleadingly yoked the Provincetown Players with the later group bearing a similar name, but their 1931 book, *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre*, kept the memory of the Players alive long after the company had disbanded.



Cheryl Black observes that “although many little theaters were founded and directed by women, they produced very few women dramatists.” The Provincetown Players was a notable exception. More than one-third of the works performed by the Players were written or coauthored by women, a percentage that few theaters can match even a century later. Many of the women whose plays appeared on the Provincetown stage—including Susan Glaspell, Neith Boyce, Louise Bryant, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Djuna Barnes—were active members who directed, acted, painted sets, and served on essential committees. Others, like Mary Carolyn Davies, Rita Creighton Smith, Edna Ferber, and Bosworth Crocker, had little or no connection with the Players besides having their works performed by the group.

The Provincetown Players' bylaws specifically stated that the group would “not necessarily limit their choice of plays to those written by active members.” That gave a great deal of power to the people who decided what would appear on each bill. During the early years, submitted scripts were read aloud and the entire membership voted on which to present. Edna Kenton reports, however, that this practice was ended before the 1916–17 season because “the group had already rebelled against the boredom by staying away.” A play

selection committee was appointed, and Kenton claims that “Susan Glaspell and I were the only members of the group who really read every play that came to us during those six years.” Some works were rejected because they required huge casts or elaborate scenery that could not be accommodated on the tiny Provincetown stages, but otherwise Glaspell, Kenton, and their colleagues were free to select dramas that interested them. Apparently they had a large number from which to choose, even if most had little or no theatrical merit. Kenton wrote a 1922 note to a journalist begging her not to reprint “the ‘Provincetown Players Want New Plays’ story! It was good press stuff, but we are being littered again at the close of the year with movie scenarios and the written out yearnings of the inarticulate would be dramatist!” With Glaspell and Kenton as the prime script readers, it is not surprising that comedies and dramas about women’s restlessness in oppressive marriages, the absurdity of the double standard, and the plight of “spinsters” in a society that values women for their youthful beauty found a sympathetic home on Macdougal Street. Further, female playwrights were surely attracted to the Provincetown by the presence of strong actresses to portray their protagonists and by the chance to have their work directed by women who shared their feminist concerns.

The most important woman dramatist in the group was Glaspell herself, who saw eleven of her plays on the Provincetown boards. She remains the best known of the Players sisterhood, but Glaspell had plenty of female company: Neith Boyce and Rita Wellman each had four works performed; Djuna Barnes and Edna St. Vincent Millay contributed three apiece; and plays by Edna Ferber, Alice Rostetter, Evelyn Scott, Mary Carolyn Davies, Florence Kiper Frank, Louise Bryant, Grace Potter, Mary Foster Barber, Bosworth Crocker, Rita Creighton Smith, and Alice Woods filled out the bills.

The vast majority of works performed by the Provincetown Players were one-acters. These were easier for novice dramatists to compose and simpler to rehearse and stage since most required small casts and minimal sets. Among writers represented in this volume, only Susan Glaspell contributed full-length dramas to the group. My decision to focus on short plays unfortunately excludes the work of Evelyn Scott, whose *Love* was performed by the Players early in 1921. Scott’s drama, like O’Neill’s later *Desire Under the Elms*, is a modern rendering of the Hippolytus story in which a woman and her stepson are attracted to each other. Scott (born Elsie Dunn) was a prolific author in several genres whose writing, according to biographer D. A. Callard, won a dubious compliment from William Faulkner: “pretty good, for a woman.”

I have included in this anthology one example from each of the women who had a short play presented by the Provincetown Players. The dozen works were chosen for their individual quality and because as a whole they showcase the range and depth of female writers’ contributions to the group. A thirteenth play, Rita Wellman’s *The Horrors of War* (1915), appears in the appendix. Although this is without doubt an early version of *Barbarians*, staged by the

Players in 1917, I have placed *The Horrors of War* in an appendix because it is impossible to know precisely how this script, copyrighted under the pseudonym Rita Leo, might differ from *Barbarians*, which is apparently lost. While I cannot be positive that the other texts included in this anthology exactly match the words spoken on the Provincetown boards, questions raised in this case by the change of title and nom de plume run deeper.

Some one-act works from the Players repertoire have apparently not survived, including Grace Potter's *About Six* and Alice Woods's *The Devil's Glow*. Black cites Potter as "a suffragist and psychoanalyst who had studied with Jung and Rank." Little is known of *About Six* except the description of the set—"A Disorderly Flat in New York." In a 1963 interview, Provincetowner James Light told Robert Sarlós that Potter's play was a "snappy, witty domestic comedy," but his memory is suspect. According to a 1918 article by Edna Kenton in *The Boston Transcript*, *About Six* was "another play of New York's underworld, written with realism and understanding." Novelist and magazine writer Alice Woods (Ullman) was a friend of Eugene O'Neill and his second wife, Agnes Boulton. Biographers Barbara and Arthur Gelb report that O'Neill encouraged her to adapt one of her stories into a short play titled *The Devil's Glow*, but that script too has disappeared. More puzzling is the case of Florence Kiper Frank's *Gee-Rusalem*, which the Players performed in 1918 on a bill with Millay's *The Princess Marries the Page* and O'Neill's *Where the Cross Is Made*. The surviving script of this comedy, in the Library of Congress, satirizes the single "new woman," Freudian psychology, and the eugenics movement—and Zionism, assimilationism, anti-Semitism, and communism as well. However, this script is three acts in length and includes several characters not listed in the Provincetown playbill. Almost certainly the *Gee-Rusalem* presented by the Players was a much shorter version, the text of which has apparently been lost.



An acquaintance of such feminist activists as Henrietta Rodman, Crystal Eastman, and Emma Goldman, Neith Boyce was a successful fiction writer when she helped found the Provincetown Players, which produced three of her plays in addition to one she coauthored with her husband, Hutchins Hapgood. A year after Boyce's *Constancy* became the first work staged by the collection of friends that would evolve into the Players, her *Winter's Night* (1916) premiered. Following a paradigm popular in literature throughout the ages, *Winter's Night* is a triangle play about two men in love with the same woman, Rachel Westcott. As in Eugene O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*, which may well have been influenced by *Winter's Night*, the men are brothers. Boyce, however, adds a new twist to an old story: The problem is not that two siblings are in love with one woman, or that the woman chose the wrong suitor, but rather

that she married at all. Instead of dreaming of Prince Charming, Rachel yearns for the life of an artisan in a bustling city.

Where *Winter's Night* is a realistic tragedy about rural marriage, Louise Bryant's *The Game* (1916) is a heavily symbolic morality play. Taken together, these two early Provincetown offerings mark the wide stylistic range of women's writings on their stage. A journalist first and foremost, Bryant spent only half a year with the group before leaving for Russia; her books and articles about the revolution there comprise her most enduring legacy. The success of *The Game* has been largely attributed to the striking abstract scene and costume designs of Marguerite and William Zorach, but the text holds its own as a fantasy about two despairing artists—a poet and a dancer—who find hope in each other. And while *The Game* may represent the opposite stylistic pole from *Winter's Night*, it is scarcely a romantic story of young love—a story, in fact, rarely found on the Provincetown stage. In Bryant's emblematic world, shadowed by the specter of war, the characters' fates are determined by a roll of the dice, and love can be selfish as well as fleeting.

Another abstract work, Mary Carolyn Davies's parable *The Slave with Two Faces* was performed in late January 1918. The Players staged only this work by Davies, a poet and fiction writer with limited ties to the group. Like *The Game*, *Slave* emphasizes the role of chance in our lives, portrays existence as a constant battle between the forces of life and death, and stresses the importance of individual integrity. On another level, *Slave* is an allegory about the dangers of conventional feminine roles, a central theme in many Provincetown plays by women. Threatened by the menacing figure of Life, the First Girl survives because she refuses to be intimidated into giving up her pride and independence. As the Second Girl learns to her horror, merely the *appearance* of subservience to a “master” is deadly.

On a lighter note, roughly half the works included in this volume are comedies. *The Rib-Person*, *Woman's Honor*, *The Widow's Veil*, *The Baby Carriage*, *Aria da Capo*, *Kurzy of the Sea*, and *The Horrors of War* are witty disproof of the cliché that women (especially feminists) lack a sense of humor. A talented writer of drama, fiction, and biography, Rita Wellman saw four of her works performed by the Players, including *Funiculi-Funicula*, a contemporary melodrama about self-absorbed parents; *Barbarians*, a sardonic spoof of warfare and soldiers (see *The Horrors of War* in the appendix); and *The String of the Samisen*, a tragedy based on a samurai legend. Wellman's “farce satire” *The Rib-Person* (1918) lampoons Zelma, who rejects the conventions of marriage and motherhood while remaining happily dependent on men—a “new woman” in some ways, perhaps, although certainly no feminist. But in the characters of Doris, an accomplished if stereotypically gruff foreign correspondent, and the comically earnest Lucile, Wellman offers us a glimpse of some of the positive alternatives to marriage from which women could choose, alternatives that became more numerous with the advent of World War I.

Rita Wellman was the first of the Provincetown writers to reach Broadway when *The Gentile Wife* opened in December of 1918. It was Susan Glaspell, however, who would win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Alison's House*, written several years after the Players' demise. With her husband George Cram Cook, Glaspell was one of the group's founders; in addition to her roles as a script reader and writer, she proved to be among their most gifted and popular actresses. The eleven plays Glaspell wrote or coauthored for the Players range from the amusing (most notably *Suppressed Desires* and *Tickless Time*, her collaborations with Cook) to the profoundly tragic, like *Trifles* and *The Verge*. The seriocomic *Woman's Honor* (1918), which critic Edwin Bjorkman characterized as "a farce that cuts more deeply than many tragedies," occupies a central place in the Glaspell canon. When a young man accused of murder refuses to reveal the name of the lover who could provide him an alibi, a procession of women offer to play the role. As characters with names like the Cheated One and the Shielded One gather on the stage, they reveal how they have suffered from a patriarchal concept of "honor" that defines their integrity wholly in sexual terms.

Rita Creighton Smith's *The Rescue* (1918) owes little to the Freudian theories that were a major topic of conversation in intellectual circles at the time, theories that Glaspell and Cook satirized in *Suppressed Desires*. It does, however, probe the concept of madness in ways that would later be echoed in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Smith, an aspiring dramatist, was not an active member of the Provincetown group, although she may have submitted *The Rescue* to them. Equally likely, one or more Players might have seen it performed at Harvard in 1916 or read it in George Pierce Baker's *Plays of the Harvard Dramatic Club*. *The Rescue's* protagonist is young Anna Warden, who has returned to the grim New England home of her paternal ancestors. What makes Smith's exploration of the subject of madness particularly intriguing is her depiction of the Hawthornesque house in which insanity dwells, a house adorned with pictures of dead relatives. Just as Neith Boyce presents rural domesticity as stultifying in *Winter's Night*, Smith paints her aristocratic Puritan world as lethal. Anna Warden's "prison" is grander than Rachel Westcott's farmhouse, to be sure, but both characters believe that escaping to cities and pursuing careers offer their only chance for happiness.

Alice Rostetter, a teacher who went on to write several dramas for young people, apparently saw the Provincetown theater primarily as a place to hone her acting skills: she performed the role of Mrs. Phelan in her own comedy, *The Widow's Veil* (1919), and acted in about a half dozen plays by others. Rostetter's *Veil*, one of the wittiest and most original works staged by the Provincetown Players, takes the form of a discussion between young Katie McManus and her neighbor, Mrs. Phelan, carried on across a tenement air-shaft. Married only ten days, Katie is worried about her ailing husband. The

worldly-wise Mrs. Phelan “comforts” her with stories of death and dying, eventually providing a widow’s veil in which Katie looks particularly attractive. Rostetter is clearly mocking the vanity and shallowness of her female characters, but she is also offering a sardonically unromantic view of marriage: after less than two weeks of wedded life, widowhood holds a certain appeal for this harried bride.

Bosworth Crocker’s *The Baby Carriage* (1919) is another comedy set among the working classes. Even though Crocker (a pseudonym for Mary Arnold Crocker Childs Lewisohn) was not a member of the Provincetown Players and at first did not even know that they were rehearsing her script, she was certainly familiar with the group through her husband, critic Ludwig Lewisohn. *The Baby Carriage* finds Goldie Lezinsky—an immigrant Jewish mother of three young sons—pregnant with what she hopes will be a daughter. The play concerns her attempts to persuade her husband, a struggling tailor, to let her buy the expected offspring a secondhand baby carriage. Hung on this spare plot is a battle between a practical, ambitious woman who wants her children to rise in American society and an unworldly man who shuns assimilation and prefers reading the Talmud to sewing trousers.

Sharing the bill with *The Baby Carriage* was Mary Foster Barber’s naturalistic *The Squealer* (1919). How the Provincetowners acquired *The Squealer* is unknown, although Barber was living in New York City at the time of its production and might well have offered them the script. At the center of *The Squealer* is Margaret Kerrigan, the strong-willed wife of a miner who has joined the radical Molly Maguires, a group of Irish American coal miners who protested working conditions in the late nineteenth century. A drama about labor strife was almost guaranteed to appeal to the Players, several of whom (most notably John Reed and Susan Glaspell) had been involved in the 1913 march and pageant in support of striking silk workers in New Jersey. But *The Squealer*’s portrait of the Molly Maguires is not particularly positive, and the issue at hand is personal loyalty rather than economic fairness. When Margaret learns that her husband has betrayed his fellow workers—using her need for him as an excuse—she refuses to compromise *her* honor by aiding him. Like Tani, the protagonist of Rita Wellman’s *The String of the Samisen*, Margaret contradicts the popular assumption that women value romantic love above all else. *The Squealer* also presents an ironic contrast to *Woman’s Honor* that Glaspell must have appreciated, for “woman’s honor” in this case has nothing to do with chastity.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was already an acclaimed poet when she joined the Provincetown Players, and she would go on to become the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Millay not only proved a popular actress with the group but even persuaded her two sisters and mother to join her. Millay’s earliest works presented by the Players—*The Princess Marries the Page* and *Two Slatterns and a King*—were originally written and staged when she

was a student at Vassar. Her third was *Aria da Capo* (1919), an antiwar parable that embeds a tragedy in a seemingly lighthearted harlequinade. Composed immediately after the conclusion of World War I, *Aria* is an intricately woven critique of middle- and upper-class aesthetes who blithely debate the merits of artistic movements while ignoring the deadly conflicts around them. Millay succeeds in presenting an engaging comedy that not only illustrates the dangers of capitalism and the ease with which war arises, but indicts the members of the audience for the destruction enacted onstage. One of the best plays to appear on the Provincetown stage, *Aria da Capo* foreshadows Walt Kelly's famous *Pogo* cartoon: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Edna Ferber was still another future Pulitzer Prize recipient whose work was produced by the Provincetown Players. Although she would win her award for fiction, her collaborations with George S. Kaufman made her an important figure in the American theater as well. Ferber knew several Players but was dismayed to learn that the company was rehearsing an unauthorized adaptation of her short story "The Eldest." In the end, Ferber herself provided a stage version. It is not surprising that the Players were attracted to *The Eldest* (1920), a realistic, distinctly antiromantic tale in the tradition of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*, and even Neith Boyce's *Winter's Night*. In this bitter love triangle, the middle-aged protagonist, Rose, spends her days slaving for her ungrateful parents and siblings. She carries a torch for Henry, a long-ago suitor who left her because she would not abandon her family. When he returns, however, he woos Rose's much-younger sister: by the rules of the double standard, Rose is an old maid while Henry is a desirable mature man.

The final play in this anthology comes from Djuna Barnes, a modernist novelist, poet, dramatist, and painter who was one of the twentieth century's most original voices. Barnes was an active member of the Players, and during their so-called "season of youth," 1919 to 1920, a trio of her comedies appeared on their stage: *Three from the Earth*, in which a female "adventurist" is confronted by the sons of a former lover; *An Irish Triangle*, a droll defense of the benefits of adultery; and *Kurzy of the Sea* (1920). *Kurzy* follows the fortunes of young Rory McRace, who masks his fear of the female sex by making preposterous demands for a prospective wife; he believes he deserves "a Queen or a Saint or a Venus," although he himself is a lazy fisherman of limited intelligence. Rory's encounter with a "mermaid" reveals not only that his view of the partner he deserves is egotistically inflated, but that the net of marriage is one in which some women do not wish to be caught.



The women whose works were presented by the Provincetown Players were in many ways a special group. Though they hailed from as far west as Washington

State and as far east as Maine, half had at least some college education (a rare opportunity for women at this time) and almost all spent several years in New York City. A significant number—notably Louise Bryant, Neith Boyce, Edna Ferber, Susan Glaspell, and Djuna Barnes—pursued journalism at some point in their careers. Ferber and Barnes never married, and others about whom we have limited information likely made the same choice. Most of these women continued to write fiction or poetry throughout their lives, often earning—as in the case of Susan Glaspell and Neith Boyce—the bulk of their families' income. In general they represented those who had, since before the turn of the twentieth century, been dubbed the “new woman.” June Sochen offers a broad but useful definition of this phenomenon: “She had more schooling, was economically and socially independent, was more aware of the world's opportunities and problems, and, if she was single, was living in the growing apartment houses of the big cities.”

It would be erroneous to suggest, however, that the female Provincetown Players—actresses, directors, and staff, as well as playwrights—had a clear sense of themselves as a unified cohort. When Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote the medieval melodrama *The Lamp and the Bell* for a Vassar anniversary, for example, she admonished her sister Norma: “Don't let any of the *Provincetown Players* get hold of it to read. . . . They would hate it, & make fun of it, & old Djuna Barnes would rag you about it, hoping it would get to me.” The Provincetowners were an often contentious lot, and Millay's comment confirms that there were animosities among the women as well as the men. Cheryl Black concludes that “differences between and among the women dispel the romantic illusion of universal sisterhood even in so homogenous a group as this.” More likely, as scholar Anne Corey argues, they viewed themselves and the male members of the company as radicals whose feminism was part and parcel of their rejection of bourgeois codes.

Just as the writers represented a wide range of experiences and viewpoints, the Provincetown Players' offerings were nothing if not eclectic. What else can one make of the opening bill of the 1918–19 season, which included Edna St. Vincent Millay's verse fairy tale *The Princess Marries the Page*, O'Neill's grim exercise in collective madness *Where the Cross Is Made*, and Kiper Frank's *Gee-Rusalem*, a satire of nearly every contemporary “ism”? We should, therefore, avoid sweeping generalizations about the group's work or about the work of one segment of it. Still, without making the naïve assumption that the Provincetown's women writers viewed the world through some uniform feminist lens, we can explore their plays as a reflection of the interests and perspectives of a collection of talented, astute, politically savvy writers early in the twentieth century. Several of these plays remain stageworthy today, and all are important literary, cultural, and social documents that fuse theatrical originality with contemporary concerns. Moreover, by looking closely at the work of these female colleagues, we will gain a deeper understanding of the

cross-fertilization that undoubtedly took place among people committed to the idea of theater as a communal enterprise. The two most important dramatists the Provincetown Players produced—Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill—did not write in isolation.

The second decade of the twentieth century is often cited as the period when literary modernism was born. No two scholars define *modernism* the same way, and books with titles like *Gendered Modernisms*, *The Gender of Modernism*, and *Refiguring Modernism* point to the phallogocentric bias of early framings of the term. Nevertheless, even a mainstream work like William Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature* offers a useful outline:

In a broad sense *modern* is applied to writing marked by a strong and conscious break with tradition. It employs a distinctive kind of imagination that insists on having its general frame of reference within itself. . . . *Modern* implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss and despair. . . . It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the rhetoric by which they are sanctioned and communicated.

Djuna Barnes has long been considered a modernist writer. *Kurzy of the Sea* may be one of her less innovative works, but its inversion of the myth about which gender sees marriage as a trap is surely “a conscious break with tradition.” Joseph Aimone comments that “Millay’s dramatic writing . . . argues for her seriousness as a modern writer, beginning with *Aria da Capo*, her first mature dramatic text.” Kornelia Tancheva suggests that the works of Neith Boyce, Louise Bryant, and Djuna Barnes “offered significant challenges and subversive strategies to the dominant dramatic and theatrical discourse and elaborated an idiosyncratic language and *mise-en-scène*, exploding the conventions of both traditional theater and modernist male drama.” In her important book *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*, Brenda Murphy expands on these earlier analyses.

Another modernist hallmark of many of these plays is the refusal to provide pat endings, neat conclusions that wrap up the works into tidy packages the audience can take home with them. Critic John Corbin lamented the lack of “dramatic climax” in Barber’s *The Squealer*, while the reviewer for Boston’s *Evening Transcript* similarly complained that the end of Smith’s *The Rescue* did not guarantee the protagonist’s “ultimate salvation.” Instead of an ending, Wellman’s *The Rib-Person* provides a new beginning for at least two of the three main characters, and near chaos reigns at the close of Glaspell’s *Woman’s Honor*. The clearest rejection of traditional dramatic climax occurs in Millay’s circular *Aria da Capo*, which concludes precisely where it began. These women eschew not only the forms of the well-made play and its predecessors but the underlying implication that humankind’s deepest problems can be solved in an hour or two.

To a greater or lesser extent, all of the works included here can be considered modernist. The stylistic innovations of Bryant's *The Game*, Davies's *The Slave with Two Faces*, and Millay's *Aria da Capo* are perhaps most evident, but other challenges to theatrical and cultural traditions are equally important. Alice Rostetter's *The Widow's Veil* was not the first Provincetown play to be set in an airshaft—that honor goes to *Down the Airshaft* by Irwin Granich (aka Michael Gold)—but Rostetter redefines it as a gendered space, a rare place where women can speak freely. The deliberate banality of Ferber's *The Eldest* is a commentary on both literature and women's experiences; as a character in the short story version explains, this glimpse into Rose's life has "no plot" because her life has none. *Winter's Night*, Glaspell's *Woman's Honor*, and Barber's *The Squealer* are only the three most obvious instances in which "the rhetoric" that "sanctioned and communicated" societal values is questioned. Jacob in *Winter's Night* is so immersed in conventional notions of what women need and want that he cannot grasp what his sister-in-law is saying. Glaspell's characters challenge men's right to determine the meaning of the term *woman's honor*, and Barber's Jim is astonished to find that he has wrongly construed his wife Margaret's understanding of the words *love* and *honor*. These writers, in sum, question the construction of the very language we speak.

The subjects addressed in Provincetown plays by women run the gamut from labor unrest (*The Squealer*) to Cubist art (*Aria da Capo*). Although usually considered the concern of men—in literature and in the "real world"—war figures prominently in a number of Provincetown works by writers of both sexes. George Cram Cook, for example, adapted Aristophanes' antiwar *Lysistrata* into *The Athenian Women*, and World War I plays a role in Rita Wellman's *The Rib-Person* and Louise Bryant's *The Game*. The former does not take a stand on the conflict, but the latter—with its pointed references to young soldiers dying in battle—is clearly critical of the conflict. In February 1917, as it became increasingly evident that the United States would soon enter the fray, the Players mounted a program called the "war bill" that included Granich's *Ivan's Homecoming* (apparently lost) as well as Eugene O'Neill's melodramatic *The Sniper*, set in Belgium. The third work was Rita Wellman's *Barbarians*, a cynical comedy about how lonely women romanticize enemy soldiers. Unquestionably the strongest antiwar work performed by the Players was Millay's *Aria da Capo*, a brilliant riff on the dangers of apathy. Not surprisingly, all the war plays by female writers demonstrate how violence affects women and/or how women share responsibility for failing to stop conflict.

Scholar Gerhard Bach rightly observes that "Glaspell's preference for female characters is established at the very beginning of her playwriting career." As might be expected, most works by her sister dramatists also place women at the center of the action. Ranging from a young miner's wife to a pregnant Jewish immigrant to a farm widow determined to forge a career, the protagonists of the plays included in this volume are predominantly female. Further,

many of these works either celebrate female friendship or point out the necessity of women's banding together in the face of a hostile world. Goldie's strongest ally in *The Baby Carriage*, for example, is not her husband Solomon but Mrs. Rooney, an Irish friend who understands what it is to be a female member of a despised minority trying to assimilate into the dominant culture. Smith's Anna Warden is "rescued" by a sympathetic housekeeper, while most of the characters in *Woman's Honor* join together in realizing that their lives have been limited—albeit in different ways—by the patriarchal concept of female virtue.

Like *Woman's Honor*, most of these plays challenge received wisdom about women—another marker of their "modernism." Linda Ben-Zvi writes that Glaspell's characters break "the stereotype of women desiring stability and the comfort of place," and the same is true of Boyce's Rachel Westcott, who has had more than enough of domesticity. Wellman's female characters yearn to travel the world, Barnes's Kurzy swims away across the sea, and even Crocker's Goldie wants a baby carriage so her hoped-for daughter can move beyond her mother's place. Mary Foster Barber's Margaret invokes an untraditional notion of woman's honor when she condemns her husband's actions, while Mary Carolyn Davies's First Girl survives because she refuses to engage in typically "feminine" behavior.

There were surely limits to what these women felt would be accepted by the Players. However brave these writers were about challenging conventional mores in their lives and writing, lesbian sexuality, for instance, was a subject they either chose not to explore, or were not welcome to explore, on the Provincetown stage. J. Ellen Gainor analyzes the intense female bonds in Glaspell's *Bernice*, and Cheryl Black extends this discussion in her "queer" readings of several Glaspell works. Most of the female friendships depicted in the plays in this anthology would comfortably fit somewhere along Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum." Still, despite the fact that Players like Millay and Barnes were involved in sexual relationships with other women, these experiences were not translated to the Provincetown stage. It is unlikely that Barnes offered the group her overtly lesbian *The Dove*, written the year after her trio of productions by the Players, and even less likely that they would have performed it if she had. Given the political and social context of the early twentieth century, the women writers of the Provincetown were admirably candid in challenging myths about female needs and desires. Works like *Kurzy of the Sea* and especially *Barbarians* foreground characters who freely express sexual yearnings, distinguishing them from the Victorian "angel in the house" who had dominated popular ideology just a few years earlier. Those yearnings, nevertheless, are cast in a heterosexual mold.

The women of the Provincetown Players were particularly concerned with the problems inherent in male–female relationships, both inside and outside of marriage. Their male colleagues, of course, were turning their attention to

the same issues. Winthrop Parkhurst's comedy *Getting Unmarried* includes Harold States's proclamation that the marriage vows—"For 'better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, till death do us part'"—are "just about as cheerful as a coroner's report." Rather than exploring deeper tensions between men and women, however, the play concludes that Harold and Mary States will rekindle their love if they pretend to be divorced; it is the state (all puns intended) of marriage that is the problem. Alfred Kreymborg's whimsical *Lima Beans* finds a comic resolution to marital problems in the wife's capitulation to her husband's taste in vegetables; on a grimmer note O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* depicts a man driven to suicide by the harridan he was forced to marry. The women, by contrast, offer a particularly female (if not always feminist) perspective on the condition to which every woman supposedly aspires. While O'Neill portrays the protagonist of *Before Breakfast* as an alcoholic shrew, Rostetter suggests (perhaps in response) that wives may have reasons to wish themselves widows. And the rather jaundiced—although comic—view of marriage in *The Widow's Veil* has links to Bosworth Crocker's *The Baby Carriage*, and even to the far more serious *Winter's Night*. Wedlock for these female characters is far from the bliss they have been promised.

In his autobiography *A Victorian in the Modern World*, Hutchins Hapgood muses, "Neith and I . . . were conscious of the latent feminism urging men to give up the ascendancy which women thought they had, and women to demand from men that which they didn't really want, namely so-called freedom from the ideal of monogamy." Hapgood's characterization of feminism here is more than a little disingenuous. In two of her works, *Constancy* and *Enemies*, Boyce does suggest that women still cherish "the ideal of monogamy," but this view is challenged in other plays by Provincetown women, notably Rita Wellman's *The Rib-Person*, Susan Glaspell's *The Verge*, and all three Djuna Barnes comedies. The debate about monogamy and the double standard that raged within the feminist community was echoed in the Provincetown plays, and the female dramatists' views were by no means as uniformly conservative as Hapgood suggests. Moreover, Hapgood pointedly says nothing about *men's* attitude toward monogamy—something for which he, at least in his personal life, showed little regard.

Even more telling, Hapgood's claim that women only "thought" men had "ascendancy" over women reveals his failure to acknowledge the legal, financial, and societal power men held. Yet Hapgood and such fellow Provincetowners as Harry Kemp, Max Eastman, and Floyd Dell apparently saw themselves as feminists. In his book *Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism*, Floyd Dell claims that males support feminism because they "are tired of subservient women; or, to speak more exactly, of the seemingly subservient woman who effects her will by stealth—the pretty slave with all the slave's subtlety and cleverness." According to Dell's skewed reasoning, the real

power has always been held by women, just as the plantations were actually controlled by the enslaved. The women's movement, he concludes, is *men's* attempt to gain back their rightful power: men "are responsible for the movement . . . whose demands it must ultimately fulfill."

The comments by Hapgood and Dell suggest just how chilling an environment even the supposedly liberal Provincetown Players could be for women who seriously challenged paternal attitudes and patriarchal traditions. As Brenda Murphy observes, "many of the male Players . . . affirmed the prevailing feminist ideology while they never overcame a deep psychological resistance to the perceived threat of the new, emancipated woman." It is not surprising that Boyce's most potent dramatic critique of the power men have over women, *Winter's Night*, is also her most coded work, set at a comfortable distance from the bohemian worlds of Greenwich Village and Provincetown as well as the suburban home she shared with Hapgood. Such thinly veiled hostility to feminism may also partly explain why Glaspell in *Woman's Honor* and Barnes in *Kurzy of the Sea* use comic modes to critique the dangerous ideals men craft for women to live up to. Dell insisted that "the Village . . . wanted its most serious beliefs mocked at; it enjoyed laughing at its own convictions." *The Rib-Person*, *Aria da Capo*, and *Woman's Honor* bear out his claim. It may also be, however, that women writers sensed the covert strain of antifeminism among male colleagues at the Provincetown Players and therefore found it difficult to present a serious, positive portrayal of the "new woman." Humor was safer.

Historian June Sochen asserts that Provincetown plays depict "the problem of woman in the modern world," and to a certain extent this is true. Surely Rita Wellman's *Funiculi-Funicula* and *The Rib-Person* showcase urban characters facing contemporary dilemmas, and Millay's Pierrot and Columbine, although given traditional names and costumes in *Aria da Capo*, could have been plucked straight from a Provincetown audience. But the predominant image of the "new woman" was, according to Elizabeth Ammons, a "middle-class white ideal," and many of the protagonists in works by Provincetown women are excluded by class, if not race, from this popular conception. A significant number of the plays in this volume—*Winter's Night*, *The Widow's Veil*, *The Baby Carriage*, *The Squealer*, *The Eldest*, and *Kurzy of the Sea*—center around peasants, working-class, or lower-middle-class women who seem in many ways untouched by the contemporary world. The lives of these characters, in farmhouses or tenements, are scarcely different from those that women of previous generations would have led and are generally very distant from the lives enjoyed by their sophisticated, educated creators. Rather, the writers' *approach* to these characters suggests a modern perspective on age-old situations.

Cheryl Black argues that the radical women of bohemia "rejected comfortable or privileged backgrounds to ally themselves ideologically with the

working class.” Going further, historian Christine Stansell contends in *American Moderns* that “middle-class feminists . . . idealized young working-women as heroines, active shapers of their own destinies.” Perhaps these playwrights were heeding the modernist call to explore the lives of those whom traditionally elitist drama had ignored, as Ibsen had done with his focus on the bourgeoisie and Synge had done in his peasant plays. Some of the Provincetown women had substantial knowledge of how the “other half” lived; Glaspell, for example, based *Trifles* on a trial she covered as a reporter in Iowa. The plight of the accused woman evidently struck a chord that resonated years later when she began writing drama. The choice of subject and setting may well reflect a social concern on the part of these writers, whose generally liberal political sympathies and egalitarian ethos would have led them to tell the stories of such entrapped farmwives as Boyce’s Rachel Westcott or her urban counterparts, like Crocker’s Goldie Lezinsky and Rostetter’s Katy MacManus. Perhaps too the women writers of the Provincetown Players recognized that the “problems” identified by feminists were in fact not particularly modern but rather were challenges faced by women at all times and in all places. Rachel Westcott in her remote farmhouse was as hungry for aesthetic beauty and artistic freedom as any bohemian in her Greenwich Village flat. Finally, it is also likely that, given the mixed messages they were receiving from the men around them, at least some of the Provincetown women felt more comfortable criticizing marriage from a distance—with protagonists clearly separated in time, place, and/or class from their creators.

What virtually all these plays share, regardless of the economic status and environment of their characters, is an honest look at the lives of women, particularly in their relationships to men, and a refusal to sentimentalize such traditional social ideals as courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Motherhood—viewed as women’s destiny in both sacred and secular realms—is a prime example. According to Lois W. Banner, author of *Women in Modern America*, “feminists of all persuasions [in the years before 1920] . . . agreed that the chief fulfillment of a woman’s life was motherhood,” and Sochen takes a questionable essentialist position when she argues that “like all women, the feminists [of the period] had maternal needs. They too wanted to be wives and mothers, *but* they wanted other roles as well.” While it is true that mothering is a concern in a number of plays by Provincetown women, motherhood—like marriage—is rarely portrayed as either the end of a quest or the biological mandate Sochen postulates. The women writers of the Provincetown were no more likely to idealize motherhood than they were to romanticize marriage.

A number of plays treat motherhood as one among many concerns, or as merely one part of a nexus of social issues. In *The Baby Carriage* the focus is not the maternal role so much as an age-old economic problem: how a poor family provides for its children. Molly McRace’s dilemma in *Kurzy of the Sea* is how to get her lazy adult son married and out of her hair (a perhaps timeless

dilemma), while Sarah Levy's inability to control her adolescent children in Florence Kiper Frank's *Gee-Rusalem* is a source of comedy.

When the Provincetown women focus on motherhood, they frequently portray children as a burden rather than as the cherished fulfillment of "maternal needs." In Glaspell's comic *Chains of Dew*, for example, Seymore Standish's mother declares that the seven children she raised were "too many" and donates \$700 to the cause of birth control. More ominously, Claire Archer in *The Verge* brutally rejects the teenage daughter she believes is interfering with her scientific quest. In the works included in this volume, motherhood generally plays either a secondary role or none at all. Rachel in *Winter's Night* never had children and expresses little regret over their absence; neither Anna Warden in *The Rescue* nor any of the women in *The Rib-Person* mentions offspring in her future plans. Motherhood in Ferber's *The Eldest* is represented by the whining offstage voice of a woman who has taken to her bed rather than cater to her demanding family; her counterpart is the unseen baby in *The Widow's Veil*, a bawling infant who has inherited his "father's bad temper."

Like most women of their generation—including many who considered themselves feminists—the Provincetown Players' female dramatists seemed unable to envision a woman who could balance a family and a flourishing career. In her 1914 essay "Some American Plays from the Feminist Viewpoint," Florence Kiper Frank called for "the drama of the married woman with a vocation," but very few Provincetowners heeded her challenge, and those who did paraded an ominous, if brief, array of neglected and resented children (*The Verge* and *Funiculi-Funicula*) and suitors or spouses, like Jacob in *Winter's Night*, who cannot comprehend the women's career aspirations. The conflicts these writers depicted on the stage in Greenwich Village echoed those dramatized by Broadway's most successful woman playwright of the period, Rachel Crothers. Crothers wrote dozens of plays during her long career, nearly all centering on female characters. She limned the pain her characters suffer in choosing between a profession on the one hand and family or romance on the other, yet she could not imagine a woman who reconciled the two. In *He and She*, for instance, sculptor Ann Herford decides she must give up the commission she has won in order to tend to her teenage daughter, who (apparently because of maternal neglect) has taken up with an "inappropriate" young man. Even the protagonist of *Gee-Rusalem*, Kiper Frank's own contribution to the Provincetown, frames her future as a choice between a family *or* a vocation. Ironically, several of the Provincetowners were themselves married women—some with children—who enjoyed significant literary, theatrical, and/or journalistic careers. In this important case, they did not hold the mirror up to themselves when they created their characters.

There is a distinct chronological pattern in women's contributions to the Provincetown Players. Following the lead of Susan Glaspell and Neith Boyce, women writers became progressively more involved in the group over its first

few years. Excluding revivals, during the two seasons from November 1917 to May 1919, sixteen plays by women (plus one coauthored work) were staged. In 1920–21, by contrast, only Evelyn Scott's *Love* joined Glaspell's *Inheritors* as new Provincetown works, and by the final season, Glaspell was the sole female dramatist being produced by the Players. One reason for this decline is simply the group's shift to longer texts: fewer plays were presented during the last years. Some fourteen works premiered in 1918–19; by the final season three years later, that number had dwindled to eight. Perhaps too the women writers, who in some cases had to fit their playwriting into time shared with family obligations, found the one-act form more congenial and hence were reluctant to follow the trend to longer dramas. Except for Glaspell, only Evelyn Scott (and perhaps Florence Kiper Frank, depending on what version of *Geerusalem* was staged) had full-length works performed by the Provincetown Players.

Women may well have been attracted to the Provincetown Players by what today might be called its feminist structure: emphasis on community, commitment to decision making by consensus, absence of a rigid power hierarchy, and disdain for commercial success. In actual practice, however, this devotion to egalitarian process was never entirely feasible, and it waned as the group evolved from a community of dedicated experimenters toward a more conventional producing organization. Some women, like Edna Kenton and Eleanor Fitzgerald, were comfortable with the transition, but they were not dramatists—the ones most affected by such changes.

Another appeal of the Provincetown Players—something virtually unavailable on Broadway—was the chance to have plays directed by empathetic women. As the original scheme that required authors to stage their own dramas proved unworkable, directors were assigned to most productions. Nina Moise directed Wellman's *Barbarians*, Davies's *The Slave with Two Faces*, and Boyce's *Winter's Night*, as well as at least four Glaspell offerings, while Helen Westley staged Barnes's *Irish Triangle* and *Kurzy of the Sea*. Moise left the Players in the spring of 1918 and Westley directed nothing after *Kurzy* in March of 1920. Still an additional factor may have been the Players' increasing turn toward professionalism. Starting in late 1918, theater critics were given free tickets to performances, as they were in the commercial theater. Since theater reviewers in this country were and still are overwhelmingly male, this change may have discouraged women playwrights. Some critics approached the works with open minds, but even the eminent John Corbin of the *New York Times* resorted to backhanded praise when, for example, he lauded Glaspell for her "subtle feminine intuition."

Finally, individual personalities were likely also a factor in women writers' departure from the theater. Jig Cook, the group's guiding force, had difficulties abiding by communal decisions and saw himself as the first among