CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN: NATURALIST PLAYWRIGHT

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This study explores Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s use of the dramatic form to challenge Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism by offering feminist adaptations of Darwin’s theories of natural and sexual selection. As she does in her career-defining manifesto, *Women & Economics* (1898), Gilman in her lesser-known plays deploys her own brand of reform Darwinism to serve the feminist cause. Despite her absence in histories of modern drama, Gilman actively participated in the establishment and development of this literary, historical, and cultural movement. After situating Gilman in the context of nineteenth-century naturalist theater, this thesis examines two short dramatic dialogues she published in 1890, “The Quarrel,” and “Dame Nature Interviewed,” as well as two full-length plays, *Interrupted* (1909) and *The Balsam Fir* (1910). These plays demonstrate Gilman’s efforts to use the dramatic form in her early plays to “rehearse” for *Women & Economics*, and in her later drama, to “stage” the theories she presents in that book.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. STAGING THE DARWINIAN DRAMA</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Determined to Succeed in the “Fascinating Art”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. “Like Asking Wolves”: Male Playwrights Debate the “Woman Question”</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. REHEARSING FOR WOMEN &amp; ECONOMICS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Theater’s Evolutionary Purpose</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. The 1890 Practice Plays</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. STAGING WOMEN &amp; ECONOMICS</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The Balsam Fir</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Interrupted</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Great Minds Adapt Alike</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CONSULTED</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s legacy in American literature has been defined through her most famous work, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a semi-autobiographical short story she published in 1892 about the ineffectiveness of nineteenth century medical treatments for women diagnosed with hysteria. But she became a household name only after she published *Women & Economics* in 1898, her sociological work critiquing Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. In this work, she identifies what she calls the “sexuo-economic relation,” a term she coined to highlight the patriarchal assumptions underlying Spencer’s social Darwinism. The sexuo-economic relation exaggerates the sexual traits of women (particularly reproductive traits) to the exclusion of “economic abilit[ies]” in order for women to survive (9). Gilman’s term exposes the dependence of women upon men for food, shelter, and protection, which, when placed in the context of evolutionary history, means that sex and natural selection are inextricably linked to economics and are therefore man-made rather than “natural.”

While Spencer tended to believe that Darwin’s theories of natural selection and sexual selection implied that women were innately inferior to men, Gilman interpreted those same principles as proof that females were equal (and at times superior) to men. Pointing to examples from biology and evolutionary history, Gilman claimed that the current subjugation of women was an “unnatural,” transitional state (29). In ancient “savage” cultures, for example, females’ unique biological capabilities rendered them equal to males both sexually and economically (6). Furthermore, Gilman claimed, the social dynamics of bees and spiders offer evidence that “[t]he female has been
dominant for the main duration” of the Darwinian drama of evolution (130-1, 135). Because of her feminist critique of social Darwinism, *Women & Economics* instantly became a manifesto for the emerging feminist movement(s) in the United States and Great Britain, where women faced the challenge of advancing women’s rights in societies where social Darwinism saturated public opinion.¹ This prompted Vassar College and other institutes of higher education to require *Women & Economics* as a textbook to balance Spencer’s predominant social Darwinism with Gilman’s brand of reform Darwinism.²

Gilman’s voluminous and varied literary output (which included poems, short stories, novels, lectures, non-fiction, and drama) has been overshadowed by scholarship on “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Women & Economics*. Those familiar with her other texts typically focus on *Herland*, a feminist utopian novel that Gilman published serially in 1915, and which Ann Lane rescued from obscurity in 1979. Scholars not only focus too heavily on a small number of texts such as “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *Women & Economics*, and *Herland*, but they also overlook an entire genre by ignoring her plays, which are the subject of this thesis. Critics describe *Herland* as a fictional representation of the ideas that Gilman first presented in *Women & Economics*; but as true as this is, Gilman’s publication history paints a much more complex picture. *Herland* was the second—not the first—in a series of three utopian novels in which Gilman experimented with her reform Darwinist views through fiction. It was written after

¹ For more on the dominance of Spencer’s interpretation of Darwin, see Hofstadter.
² Reform Darwinists sought to harness the principles of species adaptation to advance progressive reform. Therefore, the word “reform” can refer both to their goal of progressive reform and to their efforts to reform dominant Spencerian interpretations of Darwin. See Judith Allen’s *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* for information on Gilman’s use of reform Darwinism to advance the feminist cause (15-16, 346-349).
Moving the Mountain (1911), and was quickly followed by a sequel, With Her in Ourland (1916). Moreover, as early as 1890—two years before Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” and twenty-five years before she wrote Herland—Gilman experimented with the dramatic form to work out her sociological analysis concerning woman’s place in the world.

Despite her quarrel with Spencer’s interpretation of evolutionary theory, Gilman structured her social philosophy upon her own feminist interpretation of Darwinian theories of natural science. Gilman capitalized on the dramatic form in order to highlight the sexual and economic “drama” inherent in Darwin’s theory of “natural selection.” In Chapter 2, I demonstrate that viewing Gilman in the context of modern naturalist drama illuminates her reformist beliefs and exposes contradictions in modern drama’s supposed feminist agenda. After defining Gilman’s role in the history of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century drama, I examine Gilman’s efforts to use drama in her early career to develop her theory of the “sexuo-economic relation” (Chapter 3), and to put those theories in practice onstage in the style of naturalism in her later career (Chapter 4). By adapting drama to serve the reformist cause, Gilman embodies the very principles of evolutionary progress that she addresses in her plays.

Naturalist playwrights of modern drama viewed theater through a Darwinian lens and brought the scientific method into playwriting by observing everyday life objectively and portraying the human experience as accurately as possible onstage. Social reformers like Henrick Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Gilman soon exploited this scientific form of dramaturgy to expose society’s flaws by using stages as laboratories for the scientific examination of the human experience. Passages in Gilman’s fiction and
nonfiction that describe drama’s potential to assist in socialization and education become even more important to scholars in the context of her relationship with the influential dramatists of her time. Gilman, like Ibsen, Shaw, and James Herne, believed in drama as a form of civic discourse. Gilman’s views regarding the adaptability of drama for social reform further reinforces her relationship to Ibsen, Shaw, and Herne, but it also puts her in conversation with two other leading figures in the movement: August Strindberg, whose public quarrel with Ibsen over the “Woman Question” came to define the birth of modern drama, and Emile Zola, who, in arguing for a naturalist theater in 1881, caused Ibsen and other realists to concentrate on the Darwinian “drama” by incorporating the principles of evolutionary science into their methods of playwriting.3

But even as Gilman’s stature as a feminist lecturer and progressive social reformer steadily rose throughout her long career, she repeatedly saw her dramatic aspirations come within reach only to be snatched from her grasp. The number of works she wrote in other genres eclipses the number of plays she composed, but only because her overall literary output far exceeded that of most writers. As a result, scholars rarely consider Gilman’s role as a dramatist. But her desire to be a dramatist was life-long, and by the time she died in 1935, she had written or co-written at least fifteen (and perhaps as many as seventeen) plays: A Pretty Idiot (1889, with Grace Ellery Channing), Noblesse Oblige (1889, with Channing), “The Quarrel” (1890), “Dame Nature Interviewed” (1890), Changing Hands (1890, with Channing), Jack (1900, with Channing), Impatient Griselda (1901), Mother’s Establishment (1901), Interrupted

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3 For Ibsen and Strindberg's influence on modern drama, see Shideler (Chapters 3-5) and Kuritz (312-15). For Zola’s efforts to bring Darwin’s theories to the theater, see Shideler (Chapter 2) and Kuritz (320-24).
(1909), *The Balsam Fir* (1910), *Three Women* (1911), *Something to Vote For* (1911), at least one unnamed play co-written with her first husband Walter Stetson in 1886, one unnamed play co-written with a sociologist named Hervey White in 1898, and one unnamed play co-written with Channing in 1921.4

Examining Gilman as a dramatist not only offers scholars a more complete understanding of her life’s work by filling gaps in her bibliography, but it also provides a more complex representation of modern drama’s development. While male playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw, and Herne indeed deserve credit for their roles in bringing women’s rights to the forefront of public discussion, their industry’s glass ceiling for women continued to hover considerably low despite its frequent depictions of (and perceived advocacy for) the “New Woman.” Gilman sought to stage her own perspective on the “Woman Question,” and since she was a well-known feminist intellectual who had already demonstrated an ability to succeed in other literary genres, her failure to succeed as a playwright complicates the traditional narrative that scholars tell of modern drama’s birth.

After finishing *The Balsam Fir* in 1910, Gilman sent her manuscript to the office of George M. Cohan and Sam Harris (of the then-famous Broadway production duo “Cohan and Harris”) and to William Archer, the British drama critic best known for bringing Ibsen to the English-speaking world. The play encourages women’s

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4 Full play-texts—either published or in manuscript form—are extant for at least eight of these plays (A Pretty Idiot, “The Quarrel,” “Dame Nature Interviewed,” *Changing Hands, Jack, Interrupted, The Balsam Fir, Three Women, and Something to Vote For*). Notes and outlines are available for two (*Impatient Griselda and Mother’s Establishment*), and the plot of *Noblesse Oblige*, which copyright records confirm was completed, can be inferred from a poem that Gilman wrote with the same title. The existence of other plays is known from Gilman’s diaries and correspondence. She mentions writing “half a play” in 1886, but it is unclear whether this play was ever finished (and, if it was finished, whether it is distinct from one already known). Gilman also mentions pitching an idea in 1888 for a comedy tentatively *The Price of Love*, but it is unclear whether this play was ever actually composed.
professionalization and argues for an equal moral standard for men and women through
the depiction of a young girl who gives birth out of wedlock, but overcomes her
disadvantages to be a respected doctor. Julia R. Tutwiler responded on behalf of Cohan
and Harris, writing to Gilman that although the two producers were “kind and
considerate,” they “declined to give [the play] a second reading even if [Gilman] were
willing to practically re-write it” (f. 139). They mostly agreed with Tutwiler’s own opinion,
which she had sent to Gilman one week before, and which appears to be the earliest
review of Gilman’s drama. Tutwiler found the story unappealing, “too obvious,” “too
short,” and lacking in action; she found the characters inconsistent and the situations
“too slight”; there was not enough suspense and the climax was unconvincing. These
comments suggest that Tutwiler considered the play too didactic or not concerned
enough with aesthetics. While Tutwiler, Cohan, and Harris clearly felt the play’s quality
was lacking enough to preclude resubmission, their detailed criticisms suggest that
Gilman’s stature as a reformer and feminist writer nonetheless deserved their careful
consideration.

Several months later, William Archer wrote a lengthy review of The Balsam Fir,
which was forwarded to Gilman. His review was more detailed than the previous
reviews, and—more importantly—handwritten by Archer himself (rather than an
assistant, as in the case of Cohan and Harris). Archer’s review, although scathing at
times, was much more optimistic: the play, he wrote, was “of so much real ability, and
so excellent in tone and feeling, that one would gladly pass an entirely favorable
judgment upon it” (f. 243). However, Archer agreed with Tutwiler that the play required
serious revision, because “it is unfortunately impossible to predict success for it in its
present form.” His analysis suggests that he found Gilman’s play too psychological for drama. Archer considered the first act “quite well-written,” but his criticisms become stronger as the play progresses to the fourth and final act. In particular, Archer considered the events of Act IV (in which the smell of burning balsam fir triggers a character’s memory) “fatally ridiculous” in a theater, because it “simply cannot be conveyed.” Archer wrote that the idea “might be effective in narrative, [but] not in drama,” which likely played a role in Gilman’s decision to serialize the story as a novel in The Forerunner in 1912 under a new title, Mag-Margorie.

Frederick Wegener examines Gilman’s novelization of The Balsam Fir in his contribution to Charlotte Perkins Gilman: New Texts, New Contexts (2011), a recovery effort by Jennifer S. Tuttle and Carol Farley Kessler, which collects essays on overlooked Gilman texts. Wegener argues that Gilman’s tendency to convert her works from one generic form to another suggests that she found each form valuable for specific uses. Prior to Wegener’s treatment of The Balsam Fir, only Mag-Marjorie, the novelized version of the story, received the attention of Gilman scholars.5 His scholarship is therefore crucial to answer Tuttle and Kessler’s call for “more nuanced and accurate understandings of her work and life” (4). However, Wegener’s examination of the play overlooks Gilman’s treatment of women’s issues in the context of modern drama’s birth and the plays written by male playwrights of the period like Ibsen and Shaw. That both male playwrights were in contact with Archer, whose review of Gilman’s play is central to Wegner’s analysis, suggests that Gilman was in their league,

potentially, as a dramatist.

The plays that receive scholarly attention today are the two one-act plays Gilman published in *The Forerunner* in 1911 (*Something to Vote For* and *Three Women*) and the first play that Gilman wrote in collaboration with Grace Ellery Channing in the 1880s, *A Pretty Idiot*. The two one-act plays are examined due to their accessibility: they are the only plays that reached publication aside from the short 1890 dramatic dialogues, so they were the most well-known by Gilman’s contemporaries. Both plays can be found in Gilman’s magazine, *The Forerunner*; and *Something to Vote For* is anthologized in Bettina Friedl’s *On To Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (1987). *A Pretty Idiot*, on the other hand, while only available in manuscript form through the Schlesinger Library, attracts the attention of Gilman’s biographers because Gilman’s time spent composing the play with Channing helped Gilman to overcome a severe depression in 1888, and she frequently wrote about the play in her diaries. The few scholars who have studied Gilman’s playwriting generally assert that while Gilman was not a good dramatist, her plays illuminate her reformist beliefs. But this same conclusion has been drawn about Gilman’s poems, novels, and short fiction because Gilman herself downplayed the aesthetic quality of her creative work, preferring to identify herself first and foremost as a social critic (*Living* 204). I agree with Christopher P. Wilson’s still-unconventional description of Gilman as a “self-conscious literary craftsperson” (173), considering her enthusiasm for exploring the distinct capabilities of

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6 The lack of scholarly attention to Gilman’s plays is evident in the disagreement among Gilman bibliographies. As Farr notes, Gary Scannhorst’s bibliography lists only “two one act-plays published in…*The Forerunner*, and Ann Lane’s biography of Gilman describes a third, presumably unpublished” (93). (Lane’s biography in fact describes several plays co-written by Gilman and Channing, but it explicitly names only *A Pretty Idiot.*) Furthermore, when readers look up “drama” in the index for *The Abridged Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, they are referred to the index entry for “written work: drama”—but this entry does not exist.
various generic forms and given the influence of her many connections to important literary and theatrical figures.

Marie T. Farr and Katherine Cockin each contributed a chapter to the book *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer* (1999) in which both critics analyze *Three Women*. Gilman converted *Three Women* into a play from a 1908 short story, hoping that a dramatic version could be used as a way to mobilize feminists in the struggle for reform. In an advertisement in *The Forerunner*, Gilman encouraged women’s organizations to perform the two 1911 feminist plays at their meetings by offering production rights to such groups for five dollars. The fact that her advertisement on production rights was focused toward women’s organizations suggests that Gilman was anticipating the feminist agit-prop movement that would develop in the 1930s; rather than appealing to her opponents, Gilman instead attempted to use drama to galvanize women who already supported equality. At least one organization took Gilman up on the offer: Cockin’s essay chronicles the cultural history surrounding the first and only known performance of *Three Women* (or any Gilman play, for that matter) in London in November 1912 for a woman’s suffrage event. Farr’s research, on the other hand, examines *Three Women*’s representation of Gilman’s ideas concerning the theory of home economics and the notion of women’s place in the home versus public society. This thesis considers Gilman’s unexplored dramatic texts and expands the cultural context to include the transatlantic origins of modern drama.

Both Farr and Cockin mention the other 1911 one-act play, *Something to Vote For*, but they do not analyze it or mention the two feminist dialogues that Gilman published two decades earlier. A segment of the fifth chapter in Judith Allen’s *The
Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (2009) carries the heading “Something to Vote For,” but here the play is used primarily as a segue into the topic of Gilman’s suffrage activity. In 2007, Susanne Auflitsch published an article analyzing Something to Vote For in a German scholarly journal, but this untranslated article remains inaccessible to the majority of American scholars. Auflitsch has demonstrated the most familiarity with Gilman’s drama in Staging Separate Spheres (2006), which includes names of Gilman plays that are omitted in other Gilman bibliographies. For now, however, her list of Gilman’s plays remains incomplete because Auflitsch omits Noblesse Oblige, “Dame Nature Interviewed,” and “The Quarrel.” In American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History (1996), Sally Burke explores Gilman as both a dramatist and a social reformer by examining Something to Vote For in the context of suffrage parlor dramas (33-34) while also demonstrating the influence of Gilman’s reform Darwinism on Susan Glaspell’s iconic American feminist drama, Trifles (53).

Considering Gilman in the context of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century theater corrects a critical oversight regarding her role in modern drama because, despite her absence in the histories of this literary, theatrical, and philosophical movement, Gilman actively participated in its establishment. Gilman was not only familiar with Ibsen’s plays, but she also personally acquainted herself with leading figures in modern drama who were known for popularizing Ibsen’s realist style in

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7 The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English’s entry on “modernist women” states that “[t]he period from 1880 to 1920, within which modernism emerged and rose to preeminence as the dominant art form in the West (it remained dominant until the end of World War II), was also the heyday of the first wave of feminism, consolidated in the Woman Suffrage movement. The protagonist of this movement was known as the New Woman: independent, educated, (relatively) sexually liberated, oriented more toward productive life in the public sphere than toward reproductive life in the home.” The entry goes on to say that Modernism “had mothers as well as fathers,” among whom were Gilman (for “The Yellow Wallpaper”), Kate Chopin, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf. However, this entry recognizes Gilman’s role in modernist fiction, not modern drama.
the English-speaking world, such as Shaw, Herne, and Archer. Furthermore, Gilman’s progressive non-fiction works (for which she was most famous during her lifetime), heavily influenced the social debates that motivated modern dramatists in both the United States and Great Britain. Gilman’s later plays, like those of Shaw and Herne, follow the naturalistic styles of nineteenth century realism by bringing Darwin’s theories to the art of dramatic composition.

Gilman’s relationship with drama enhances and clarifies her most famous work, *Women & Economics*. But while most scholars agree that the majority of Gilman’s writings after *Women & Economics* are efforts to put that book’s theories into practice, they pay less attention to the relationship between *Women & Economics* and her earlier writings. Gilman’s diaries, letters, and autobiography reveal that *Women & Economics* was the product of many years’ worth of theoretical development. By introducing previously unknown and therefore unexplained Gilman plays into the critical conversation, I show how Gilman seizes upon her belief in the evolutionary function of theater to stage the Darwinian drama of sexual selection.

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8 Gilman read *A Doll’s House* in 1891 and two years later, she read *Ghosts* (1882) aloud to her close friend, Hattie (Diaries 442, 521). Gilman also attended American productions of Ibsen’s plays and made friends with actresses known for playing Ibsen’s leading female roles (such as Annie Russell and Mary Shaw).
CHAPTER 2

STAGING THE DARWINIAN DRAMA

Despite Gilman’s theatrical ambitions and the importance of women’s rights to the birth of modern drama, scholars of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century theater traditionally focus on the contributions of male playwrights like Henrick Ibsen of Norway, August Strindberg of Sweden, George Bernard Shaw of Britain, James Herne of the United States, and Emile Zola of France. Ross Shideler’s *Questioning the Father* (1999), for example, places Ibsen, Strindberg, and Zola “in a framework built on Darwinism, feminism, and family theory” (4). Notably, Darwinism, feminism, and family theory are areas of thought associated with Gilman’s literary reputation. In this chapter, I situate Gilman in the context of the birth of modern drama, which, because of Ibsen’s famous play, *A Doll’s House* (1879), was inextricably tied to feminism.

Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage

Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) gave new meaning to William Shakespeare’s oft-quoted declaration in *As You Like It* that “all the world’s a stage” and that humans are “merely players” in a larger social drama. Viewing theater as a microcosm of society is an old concept, and it has limits: unlike in society, a dramatist controls all outcomes. But after Darwin put forth a set of seemingly unchanging natural laws to explain human progress, playwrights saw an opportunity to exploit the metaphor’s dramaturgical potential. These playwrights shifted away from early-nineteenth-century melodrama toward a more “naturalist theater,” which summoned Darwin’s theories to investigate the influence of heredity and environment on characters. Intrigued by the possibility of guiding characters’ fates in obedience with
natural laws, playwrights familiar with Darwinism became attracted to progressive social reform.9

Gilman and other reform Darwinists believed that because humans enjoy the ability to reason, to mobilize, and to educate, humans can positively influence the progress of their own species through progressive reform. In this view, the fate of humans is merely governed by—not predetermined by—natural selection. Modern realist playwrights like Ibsen, and his followers, Shaw and Herne, found inspiration in Darwinism because Darwin’s theories sought to explain the very phenomena that they, as dramatists, sought to portray. If biology is the study of life, and theater seeks to portray life, then evolutionary science can strengthen a dramatist’s method of representing the human experience onstage.

Progressive-era reformers often conflated evolutionary science with the art of drama. Dramaturgically speaking, if heredity and environment determine the future of a species, as Darwin’s theories suggested, then a dramatist can develop more “realistic” characters by manipulating environmental factors (through location, timing, or character interaction) and by establishing biographical histories (through the revelation of facts about a character’s family or upbringing). Functionally, this type of drama served the very purpose of progressive reform not only by exposing the harsh realities of life, but also by demonstrating that because reform alters the social environment, humanity can in fact determine its own evolutionary future.

Despite what the term suggests, reform Darwinism reacted more to Herbert Spencer’s interpretation of Darwin’s theories than to Darwinism itself. Spencer discouraged cooperation in favor of competition, while Darwin argued that “social

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9 See Shideler, 7-8.
instincts” (like “sympathy”) evolved through natural selection (Descent of Man IV). Gilman and other women writers saw reform Darwinism as an opportunity to challenge Spencer’s assertion that Darwin’s theories confirmed female biological inferiority. In 1898, Gilman fully presented her Darwinian case for women’s rights in her non-fiction treatise, Women & Economics, which brought her international acclaim for its revolutionary reinterpretation of Darwin’s theories of natural and sexual selection.

The fact that Gilman interrogated the same issues as these naturalist playwrights yet failed to succeed as one exposes a contradiction underlying the formation of modern drama. The male founders of the movement debated the merits of public roles for women while shutting out a high-profile female writer who sought to join their public discussion. Ibsen and Shaw wanted to be seen as advocates of female professionalization, but they showed less fidelity to the cause when it came to their own industry, the theater. Furthermore, as Yvonne Shafer argues in American Women Playwrights: 1900-1950, even though male playwrights addressed the issue of women’s rights, it was important for female playwrights to do so, because “women are likely to view themselves and their roles in society in a markedly different fashion from men” (5). Modern dramatists such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and Herne were therefore prone to oversights because they lacked a female perspective on women’s roles in society. While it could be argued that Gilman was unsuccessful as a playwright simply because her plays lacked quality, scholars in recent years have challenged earlier assumptions that Gilman’s fiction was too didactic to be aesthetic (which suggests that similar incorrect assumptions apply to her drama); and besides, the same criticism is often leveled against the plays of Herne and Shaw, who each enjoyed considerable success
in their countries.¹⁰

Determined to Succeed in the “Fascinating Art”

Gilman’s attraction to the dramatic form was not simply a phase: it was her passion from the beginning through the end of her life. In 1875, when a young Charlotte Anna Perkins was still fifteen years old, she wrote to her estranged father for a “good strong dose of advice” regarding her choice of career (Selected Letters 4). In this letter Gilman described an overwhelming “taste for literature and art…and a lamentable blank in the direction of a means of livelihood.” The budding feminist also told her father that she did not approve of young ladies’ “mending [their] broken fortunes” through “advantageous matrimony,” which many women of the period felt compelled to do because of the sexuo-economic relation.

Gilman worried that authorship and art would fail to provide a steady means of economic independence, despite her talents in both; and although “Phonographic Reporting” (an early form of audio journalism) promised lucrative benefits, she told her father that she doubted “her own ability” to succeed in that profession. At school, she enjoyed “Physiological lectures and specimens,” giving her “vague aspirations to be an M.D.” But her true passion, she tells her father, “more than all, & worse than all, perhaps you will say, I confess to the heinous crime of being strongly attracted to the Stage!!!!!”

Hoping to soften the blow of such an admission, Gilman humorously references Sir Walter Scott’s The Lady of the Lake: “There! The murder is out, the cat has left the bag, the ice is broke, and ‘Come one!; come all!; this rock shall fly, from its firm base, as

¹⁰ Wegener pushes back against the dominant assumption that Gilman was not a talented creative writer. Perry, Waggoner, and Bucks & Nethercot have argued that despite the lack of aesthetic value of Herne’s plays, they are nevertheless important for their social critique and application of Darwinist thought.
soon as I!!!!!” Thematically, this letter’s references to science, art, literature, and journalism foreshadow the life of a progressive polymath.

Although this enthusiastic letter was written when Gilman was only fifteen years old, her enthusiasm for the theater was not just a fleeting childhood fantasy. By the time she wrote her autobiography in the 1930s, this desire was still fresh on her mind (Living, 104-5, 111-2). She lamented the fact that, despite her persistence, she did not achieve success in the “fascinating art” of drama (112). This disappointment did not prevent her from playing the part of her great-aunt, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in a pageant as late as 1932, just three years before her death. Gilman frequently critiqued theatrical performances in her diaries and was part of an acting troupe while living in Pasadena, California. She first began playwriting in 1885 with Grace Ellery Channing; their co-written plays never reached publication, but both she and Channing circulated the manuscript for A Pretty Idiot, among such well-known figures as dramatist George Bernard Shaw and actress Annie Russell (Diaries 633, 707).\(^\text{11}\)

Gilman’s diaries abound with references to reading plays either to herself or, in the performative spirit of the genre, aloud with her friends. Like many an avid reader during her era, she loved to see novels adapted for the stage (The Wizard of Oz, The Prisoner of Zenda, and The Man in the Iron Mask are among those mentioned in her diaries).\(^\text{12}\) Although Gilman read Shakespeare more than any other single playwright, she found the plays of her contemporaries particularly stimulating because they shared her passion for progressive social reform. In 1891, for example, Gilman read Ibsen’s

\(^\text{11}\) Gilman shared A Pretty Idiot with more potential backers than any other play, including those she wrote on her own.
\(^\text{12}\) Incidentally, the most notable dramatization of a novel during Gilman’s lifetime was Gary Aiken’s dramatic adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a novel by Gilman’s aunt, Harriet Beecher Stowe.
groundbreaking play, *A Doll’s House* (1879), which marked a shift in her dramaturgical development (*Diaries 434*).\(^{13}\)

The ephemerality of live theater caused intense emotional responses in Gilman. Madeleine Lucette Ryley’s *Mice and Men* (1902), a romantic comedy critiquing marriage and class inequality, had a powerful effect on her in particular. After seeing renowned stage actress Annie Russell perform in the romantic comedy, Gilman wrote in her diary that it was the “most painful play [she] ever saw” (*Abridged Diaries* 219). That night, she “s[a]t and suffer[ed] and snivel[ed] and c[a]me home very tired,” and awoke the next morning still so “weary and sad from that weepful play” that she passed it “loaf[ing]” (219). Given that Ryley considered her own play a comedy, its emotional impact on Gilman suggests that her profound psychological response was the result of Ryley’s social commentary. Gilman embraced this ability to spark immediate responses in a public forum. This was something that her lectures provided but that her printed poems, short stories, novels, essays, and treatises could not.

Any embarrassment Gilman had as a youth about her passion for drama disappeared after she met Grace Ellery Channing, with whom she co-wrote her first plays, and with whom she would share one of her closest and longest friendships. In the summer of 1887, when Gilman was twenty-seven years old, she suffered a severe depression that Dr. Weir Mitchell’s now-infamous “rest cure” failed to cure, driving her finally to decide that a divorce from her first husband, Charles Walter Stetson, was

\(^{13}\) Prior to 1891, the dramatic texts Gilman wrote on her own are short and didactic dialogues that directly address social issues in a propagandistic way. After, her plays bear a greater resemblance to the still-new concept of the “well-made play,” of which *A Doll’s House* is often cited as an early example. Ibsen’s influence as the “father of Modern Drama” would mark a shift not only in Gilman’s dramaturgy, but that of all dramatists who followed.
necessary. Gilman wrote to a friend that co-writing her first full-length plays with Channing “saved” her from despair (Selected Letters 82). By the time she penned her autobiography in her seventies, Gilman still insisted that what finally “revived” her from that “dreadful” summer was the time she spent playwriting with Channing (Living 104-5). Repeatedly, composing plays provided Gilman respite in times of emotional distress.

Early in her career, Gilman associated playwriting with emotional (and potentially economic) independence, which she felt she lost by marrying Walter Stetson and especially after giving birth to young Katharine. In addition to providing Gilman the artistic outlet she needed to overcome her debilitating depression, her collaboration with Channing also allowed Walter Stetson and Channing to kindle a romance of their own, thereby alleviating the emotional drain caused by Gilman's marital obligations. Once their divorce became final in 1894, Channing married Stetson, thereby becoming Katharine’s stepmother, and in so doing, freeing Gilman from the final burden of motherhood. Gilman’s only regret at the time was the emotional loss of Channing, who had become her dearest friend and an object of her romantic affection. Their playwriting would continue, however. As late as 1921, ten years after Stetson’s death, Gilman wrote to her daughter Katharine that she and Channing had begun to compose a new play.

In 1896, William Gillette, a prominent actor, playwright, and director, read a play

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14 This rest cure would inspire Gilman’s most famous work: her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). For financial reasons, Gilman and Stetson postponed their official divorce until 1894.
15 Gilman and Channing had collaborated on plays as early as 1885, when post-partum depression first compelled Gilman to attempt a trial separation from Stetson (which they would attempt several more times until their divorce became final in 1894). During separations, Gilman often took refuge with Channing, where they would pass the time together writing plays.
that Gilman and Stetson had co-written in 1886. According to Gilman, he was “favorably impressed”; nevertheless, he declined to produce it (Diaries 352). But Gilman was undeterred. Three years later, she wrote to her friend, Martha Luther Lane, that Gillette would soon be visiting, and that he had expressed interest in “bringing out” her play in San Francisco (Selected Letters 51). Unfortunately for Gilman, this never came to pass.

Though Gillette would never follow through with producing a play for Gilman, his occasional interest in her playwriting appears to have motivated her. In 1887, she wrote to Channing her belief that their plays would take

…the world by storm. Hm! We will be the leading dramatists of the age! We will create a new school! We will combine the most literal realism with the highest art, and cover both with the loftiest morality!!! [. . .] My dear girl a good play is a paying thing. If we can write one we can write two. If we can write one in one year we can write another in another year. Yea verily. Our names shall be long in the land. Dr. Mitchell be -------! (Selected Letters, 86)

By seeking to create a “new school” of drama which examined morality by combining “the most literal realism with the highest art,” this letter portrays Gilman as an aspiring playwright well-versed in the naturalist theories of modern drama, which were already being debated in Europe but had yet to take root fully in the United States. Her comment that playwriting could be a “paying thing” emphasizes her desire to establish independence through economic means.

Annie Russell, whose prolific New York City career began in a play by Gillette, was the next big name in American theater to show interest in Gilman’s playwriting. But she, too, would fail to provide Gilman the catapult to theatrical fame that Gilman hoped such a friendship would bring. In 1898, Russell read Gilman and Channing’s

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16 See also Knight & Tuttle (312, n. 14).
17 See Bucks & Nethercot (327-28). James A. Herne, often referred to by scholars as “the American Ibsen,” would not bring the Ibsen’s groundbreaking realism to American stages until the eighteen-nineties.
collaboration, *A Pretty Idiot*. Although Russell liked the play “fairly,” she declined to give it her endorsement (Diaries 713), which undoubtedly would have boosted Gilman’s chances of securing a producer given Russell’s stature on the American stage. But Russell had little reason to believe that Gilman could deliver a success: while Gilman was widely known by this point, her reputation was associated primarily with critical work; and even though women writers in the late nineteenth century were beginning to break gender barriers in fiction, playwriting remained a male-dominated industry. The only women who enjoyed success in theater were young actresses like Russell herself, and the novelty of her own success weakened what influence she might have had on an aspiring feminist’s playwriting career. But Gilman remained steadfast, for, just a few days later, she sent Russell an idea for a new comedy that she would call *The Price of Love* if the actress deemed it promising enough to write. Although Gilman claims Russell liked the idea, *The Price of Love* would remain unwritten without the star’s professional support (713). Gilman’s steadfastness combined her theatrical passion with her desire to be economically, and therefore sexually, independent.

Gilman continued to follow Russell’s career closely, attending numerous productions and occasionally sending the actress letters to praise her performances. In 1908, Russell requested a lunch date with Gilman and her second husband, Houghton, and Gilman apparently interpreted this invitation as a new opportunity to make it as a playwright. Gilman enthusiastically accepted Russell’s offer, promising to bring with her “two appetites, many thanks, and one play!” (Selected Letters 255). Russell withheld her backing from this unnamed play as well, but an undaunted Gilman sent her a new one, *Interrupted*, the following year, shortly after seeing Russell perform in *The Stronger Sex*.
To be sure, Russell valued her association with Gilman, who was already famous in her own right as a social reformer before making Russell’s acquaintance. But Russell’s reluctance to promote Gilman’s plays suggests that she considered Gilman’s playwriting commercially non-viable despite her interest in Gilman’s other work. The risk of associating herself with an unproven female playwright in a male-dominated industry was perhaps too great for Russell.

In spite of her failures at home, Gilman would make her most high-profile and well-established theatrical connection during her speaking tour of England in 1896. One of her earliest publications, a collection of poems titled *In This Our World* (1893), caught the attention of renowned Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, whose intellectual pursuits mirrored Gilman’s in many ways. Although he loved writing drama, he, like Gilman, also enjoyed writing in other literary genres. Also like Gilman, Shaw was a public crusader of progressive reform. To advance his views, he founded the Fabian Society, a group of what Gilman called “intelligent, scientific, practical and efficient English Socialists” who would soon offer Gilman an honorary membership (Living 203).

The Fabians’ interest in what Gilman called her “little first book of poems” led them to invite Gilman to vacation with them at the countryside estate to which they often escaped from city life. During Gilman’s stay at the country home of noted Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Shaw often “sat in one [room] working on his plays, and I in the other with my writing” (203). As she remarked in her diary, Shaw gave her “very good and useful criticism” on her writing (Diaries 633). Watching Shaw’s playwriting in progress—a process of placing “little cubes of wood…here and there, visualizing the positions of his characters on the stage”—influenced Gilman enough for her to mention
it decades later in her autobiography (203). Recognizing Gilman’s talent for social
critique, Shaw offered her many opportunities to publish essays in the American Fabian,
and he continued to support her intellectual pursuits for years to come. But Gilman’s
plays would never receive Shaw’s valuable theatrical endorsement. As a male
playwright, he could have had more influence over Gilman’s theatrical success than
Russell, an ability he proved in 1907 by successfully securing a production of Elizabeth
Robins’s play, Votes For Women at the Royal Court Theater in London. However,
Robins was geographically closer to Shaw, and she was already well-known in
theatrical circles as an actress in English versions of Ibsen’s plays, and as the lover of
renowned theater critic and Ibsen translator, William Archer. Given Sally Peters’s
description of Shaw as a “feminist in spite of himself” (400), Shaw’s influence on the
careers of women dramatists was as selective and self-contradictory as his relationship
to the women’s movement overall.

“Like Asking Wolves”: Male Playwrights Debate the “Woman Question”

The nineteenth-century transition from melodrama to theatrical realism, from
which naturalism developed, is marked by Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (1879). This
controversial play anticipated Gilman’s condemnation of the “sexuo-economic relation,”
a term she coined in her 1898 feminist manifesto, Women & Economics, which held that
modern women were dependent upon men for survival, but not for the reasons Spencer
claimed. Far from being a natural state, the economic dependence of women on men
was “man-made” by artificially tying a woman’s sex functions to her economic
independence in a male effort to reduce sexual competition. Gilman observes that at
some point in evolutionary history, the human male recognized that it would be “cheaper
and easier” to struggle against a “little female” rather than to spar with a male every time he wanted to mate. Consequently, she says, “he instituted the custom of enslaving the female” (60). According to Gilman’s brand of reform Darwinism, female self-determination is both “natural” and necessary for the continued evolutionary progress of the entire human species.

_A Doll’s House_ stunned European audiences with its challenge to traditional notions of the public and private roles of women and because of its revolutionary impact, Joan Templeton calls the play “the _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_ of the women’s rights movement” (28). Throughout the 1880s, productions of _A Doll’s House_ spread to the English-speaking world, where the play met audiences even more hostile than those of continental Europe. The public controversy sparked by the play’s seemingly feminist message prompted fierce resistance by conservatives, who called it an assault on the family, but this resistance only further legitimized the importance of the issue. Europeans quickly realized that a new era was dawning on the Western stage and the “Woman Question” finally came to the forefront of public discussion. Today, scholars consider Ibsen the “father of Modern Drama,” and they frequently cite _A Doll’s House_ as the single play that epitomized the birth of this new kind of theater.\(^{18}\) Ibsen’s play prompted many unauthorized sequels by playwrights who employed his realist style to challenge his feminist message; these plays, along with Strindberg’s _Miss Julie_ (1888), Shaw’s _Candida_ (1894), and Herne’s _Margaret Fleming_ (1890), all owe their genesis to

\(^{18}\) _A Doll’s House_ was, in fact, Ibsen’s fifteenth play, and it was written two years after _The Pillars of Society_, which is arguably equally feminist. However, _A Doll’s House_ received more attention due to its controversial ending, in which Nora abandons her husband and family. For more on Ibsen as the “father of Modern Drama,” see: Harrison (162), Kuritz (312-15), Templeton, and Shideler (59-98).
Ibsen’s provocation.\(^{19}\)

*Miss Julie* (1888) was the most high-profile rebuttal to *A Doll’s House*. Together, these two plays dramatized an already public conflict between the two Scandinavian dramatists concerning the purpose of theater, the influence of Darwin on the stage, and the rights of women both inside and outside the home. Ross Shideler argues that Ibsen and Strindberg “dramatized, often with instinctive and gut-wrenching force, the clashes between men and women as women sought to reconstitute their roles in the family” (46). Although they never met in person, Ibsen and Strindberg were self-described arch-enemies who nevertheless admired each other. Their personal rivalry, which concerned Darwin’s influence on the “Woman Question” (and in turn, the representation of sexual roles onstage), soon overshadowed the firestorm of intellectual debate generated by *A Doll’s House*. The playwrights’ mutual animosity was ideological: while Ibsen was a progressive whose plays heavily influenced Shaw and the Fabians, Strindberg’s interpretation of Darwinism aligned with Spencer’s more individualistic and patriarchal view of social progress. It was perhaps with this conflict in mind that Ibsen wrote, in regard to a bill for women’s property rights, that “to consult men in such a matter is like asking wolves if they desire better protection for the sheep” (*Letters* 228). In late nineteenth century theater, wolves continued to be the only creatures that could be heard on the topic of rights for sheep. It is ironic, then, that Ibsen’s own debate with another male playwright over the “Woman Question” drowned out the voices of women who sought to offer female perspectives.

\(^{19}\) Most of these sequels were written by men; however, Gilman wrote in her diary that she read a sequel by a “Mrs. Cheney” immediately after reading *A Doll’s House*. Because Cheney is still unidentified, it is unknown whether or not her response was positive or negative with respect to Ibsen’s social message (i.e., whether Cheney was a feminist or an “anti”).
In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's heroine, Nora, is a positive portrayal of the archetypal “New Woman” because she evolves from a “wife-child” to an independent adult by the end of the play. While she is deceptive of men for most of the play, Nora’s deceptions are either minor (eating forbidden macaroons) or altruistic (forging a document to save her husband’s life). And although she is dependent on men for most of the play, she casts that dependence aside in the play’s infamous ending, with what Shaw described as the “door slam heard round the world” (472). This “revolt,” in Shaw’s opinion, “is the end of a chapter of human history,” by which he meant that Nora’s independence symbolized the inevitable end of religiously-defined patriarchy.

Julie, Strindberg’s answer to Nora, is a negative portrayal of the New Woman depicted in Spencerian terms. She is, according to Strindberg’s preface to the play, a “half-woman…who pushes her way ahead, selling herself nowadays for power, decorations, honors, and diplomas, as formerly she used to do for money” (68). Her strategy for climbing the social ladder “implies a retrogressive step in evolution, an inferior species who cannot endure” on its own, but that still manages to “pass on [its] wretchedness” because “men seem unconsciously to choose their mates from among [it].” Strindberg goes on to say that “fortunately,” the offspring of these women ultimately “go under” because the notion that these “modern” women could ever be equal to men is unrealistic. Accordingly, Strindberg attributes Julie’s “degenerate” behavior to her mother’s belief in sexual equality, which manifests itself in hatred toward men. In the play, the aristocratic Julie attempts to train her fiancé using a whip, fantasizes about the destruction of the male sex, and eventually orders a male servant to give her orders: “set me in motion—I can’t think or act on my own” (101). Julie’s manipulative personality
paired with her dependence on men illustrates Strindberg’s view of women, which was inspired by Spencer’s interpretation of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection.

Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Herne, and Gilman each linked their own progressive ideologies with their art. Their desires to promote social change corresponded with their commitments to changing how theater depicts reality. By exposing the oppressiveness of the status quo onstage, naturalists could motivate the public to support reform. These playwrights examined the social causes of characters’ behaviors and the influence of a character’s environment on the actions he or she takes; they are therefore more concerned with the motivations for actions than with the actions themselves. Herbert Spencer was familiar with the works of Zola, who was the first to call for a “naturalist” version of realist theater rooted in scientific principles. He wrote that in Zola’s works, “events are the proper products of the characters living under given conditions” (299). Zola claimed that his naturalist plays and novels were studies in human behaviors in “the experimental and scientific spirit of the century” (430). Like Gilman, Zola also saw the socio-educational value of drama and argued that all plays have a moral thesis.

But whereas Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and Zola often depict men grappling to adapt to a world forever changed by Darwin’s recent toppling of religiously-imposed patriarchy, Gilman and other women writers used naturalism to demonstrate that a male-dominated social order was itself a damaging environmental force. The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing notes that as a result, “naturalism by American women writers...owes less to Darwin’s Descent of Man (1877) and its ilk” than to Gilman’s Women & Economics, because Gilman describes economic determinism through the lack of female choice (462). Gilman’s drama, which first rehearses for, then
stages *Women & Economics*, provides a more direct link to naturalist theater than her 1898 manifesto.\(^{20}\)

Aside from Shaw, Gilman had direct associations with other leaders in modern drama that indirectly connected her with Ibsen. American playwright James A. Herne, for example, wrote Gilman a letter in 1894 to request her attendance at a performance of his play, *Shore Acres* (1893), in hopes that Gilman would also bring her other feminist friends, Jane Addams and Helen Campbell. Scholars consider Herne “the American Ibsen” for his dedication to bringing Ibsen’s brand of realism to American stages. When *Margaret Fleming* premiered, critics frequently compared it either to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* or Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, because of its approach to addressing the social ills caused by gender inequality. Bucks and Nethercot point out not only that “Ibsen was being discussed everywhere” in the Western world, but also that Herne actively emulated Ibsen’s style and sought to bring his version of realism to American stages in a way that was true to American (rather than European) experience. In Herne’s first letter to Gilman, he expresses his and his wife’s admiration for two of Gilman’s poems, which she “clipped from a newspaper” and sent to Herne (the progressively independent couple often lived in different cities). One poem of Gilman’s, “Mother to Child,” left Katharine Herne “deeply touched,” while another, “An Obstacle” (which he mistakenly calls “Prejudice”)—the same poem that impressed Shaw and the Fabians—was passed from the feminist Helen Gardener to Katherine before she forwarded it to Herne, who found it “very fine.” Gilman attended the play, but it is unknown whether or not she attended with Addams or Campbell.

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\(^{20}\) Chapters 2 and 3 of this study examine each end of Gilman’s theatrical approach to the “Woman Question” by developing her theory of the “sexuo-economic relation” through dramatic dialogues, then adapting that theory into full-length naturalist plays.
American actress and feminist Mary Shaw also befriended Gilman. While of no relation to George Bernard Shaw, Mary Shaw became famous starring in his and Ibsen’s plays. In 1913, Mary Shaw founded the Gamut Club, which combined the “culture of the women’s club movement, the activist spirit of the suffragist and feminist movements, and theater productions specifically addressed to women” (Cobrin 62). At the Gamut Club’s annual meeting in 1918, the members “unanimously” elected Gilman as an honorary member, a “token of [their] love and appreciation” that Mary Shaw hoped Gilman would accept (f. 142). Presumably, Gilman did accept the honor, because in 1922, Gilman wrote and recited a poem for Mary Shaw at a dinner held for the actress’s birthday. In the poem, Gilman declares that there is “no name more dear / on all the modern stage we hear” than Mary Shaw (f. 189). Mary Shaw’s knowledge of the plays of Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw (and the public’s association of her with them), along with her belief in theater’s potential to be used for feminist reform, explains both feminist’s mutual admiration.21

Gilman joins a tradition of American women at the turn of the century summoning Darwin to combat the perversion of his theories in the form of patriarchal social Darwinism. Gilman challenges Spencer’s interpretation of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection in many of the same ways that her feminist contemporary, Kate Chopin, did. But unlike Chopin, Gilman argues that female sexuality causes—rather than cures—female dependence on men.22 The fallacy of female dependence was important enough to Gilman’s reform Darwinism to inspire her term “sexuo-economic relation,” which by its very nomenclature ties a woman’s sex functions to her economic independence (or,

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21 See Irving for Mary Shaw’s views concerning theater’s feminist potential.
22 See Bender for Chopin’s response to Darwin in The Awakening.
more accurately, dependence). But both Gilman and Chopin share the position that Darwin and Spencer erred in their interpretation of sexual selection, since evolutionary history shows that females, not males, have until recently carried the responsibility of choosing mates.

Chopin’s use of language pertaining to the evolution of animals fortified Bert Bender’s argument that Chopin had Darwin’s texts in mind when she wrote *The Awakening*; this type of terminology illuminates Gilman’s response to Darwin in a similar way. Chopin’s reference to Edna’s “pigeon-house,” Bender points out, recalls the “triumphant female pigeons Darwin describes in *The Descent of Man*” (472). In Gilman’s short dialogue, “Dame Nature Interviewed” (1890), when Nature rejects the claim that she made women inferior, she explains that many creatures are made by humans on their own, such as “mules,” “prize pigs,” and “pouter pigeons” (138). The term “pigeon,” along with Nature’s references to examples of artificial selection, remind readers of Darwin’s own arguments drawing upon animal breeding practices in *The Origin of Species*. These parallels are significant because they demonstrate a pattern of American women summoning Darwin’s own theories in order to refute the dominant interpretations of them.

Drama’s social functions, Gilman claimed, could work to the immediate benefit of the women’s suffrage movement. Theater in the United States and Great Britain had been a male-dominated industry throughout history (a trend that continues to the present day, despite the recent success of a relatively small number of 21st-century women playwrights). In her non-fiction social commentary, *Our Androcentric Culture; or The Man-Made World*, Gilman describes how “men have developed Architecture,
Sculpture, Painting, Music, and the Drama” while women spend their time with “primitive” household crafts as if they “belonged to a lower race” (73). To Gilman, tasks performed only in the home are private, and therefore inferior. So to employ a distinctly public genre in an effort to resist the marginalization of women to the private realm packs a poetically powerful punch. As Sheila Stowell writes in A Stage of Their Own, “among those who actively challenged the relegation of women to a ‘private,’ domesticated world were a number of self-consciously feminist playwrights who used the overtly ‘public’ forum of drama as a point of entry to the debate” (1). Of course, Gilman is not mentioned in Stowell’s book, since Gilman’s place in the history of American feminist theater has yet to be established. But her argument nonetheless applies to Gilman because she, like the many female playwrights who “spawn[ed] a series of ‘agit-prop drama’ that flourished from 1908-1914,” attempted to “make theatre itself part of the cause” (2). Remarkably, Gilman’s first feminist play preceded the aforementioned movement by eighteen years.

As much as Gilman yearned to succeed as a playwright, it is possible that she would not object to history’s omission of her role in the feminist agit-prop movement that began in Great Britain and quickly spread to the United States. After all, Gilman insisted that the theater should not become feminized, but instead should become “less masculized” (Man-Made World 125). Gilman did not consider herself a “feminist,” but rather preferred to label herself a “humanist” (Allen 5). This stresses her belief that motherhood and fatherhood are the only natural sex-functions, and that all other social roles are human functions unrelated to sex. It also aligns her with Ibsen, who, at a

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23 Although “agit-prop” is a term that originated in the 1930s, it has recently been used to describe the type of drama that formed from it (such as Luis Valdez’s drama in the 1960s) as well as the drama that led to it, such as Progressive Era reform plays like those of 1908-1914 mentioned by Stowell.
speech before the Norwegian League for Women’s Rights, “disclaim[ed] the honor of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement” because his “task ha[d] been the description of humanity” (437). He concluded his speech by arguing that “women…shall solve the human problem” by “awaken[ing] a conscious feeling of culture and discipline” (437), which agrees with Gilman’s argument in *Women & Economics* that the advancement of women was necessary for human evolution.

Unlike many suffragists, Gilman was comfortable with men’s involvement in the women’s rights movement because her views are pro-female, not anti-male. For example, Gilman recognized her ex-husband’s entitlement to joint custody of her daughter, because Gilman acknowledged he “had a right to some of her society” (*Living* 233). However, she still valued the “entrance of women upon the stage, and their increased attendance at theatres” because of drama’s unique capabilities to serve the feminist cause (124). Gilman’s subsequent adoption of drama as a non-private, male-dominated forum to advance the cause of women’s suffrage serves as a metaphor for the underlying arguments in “Dame Nature Interviewed” and “The Quarrel,” since both 1890 dialogues challenge the conventional wisdom that evolutionary theory proves female inferiority. In the next Chapter, I examine Gilman’s efforts to develop her nascent theory of the sexuo-economic relation using the dramatic form.
CHAPTER 3

REHEARSING FOR WOMEN & ECONOMICS: GILMAN’S EARLY DRAMA

Gilman’s early dramatizations of the Darwinian “struggle” between the sexes anticipate her complex response to Darwin in Women & Economics (1898). This chapter examines how Gilman uses drama in her early career to interrogate Herbert Spencer’s notions of social progress and Charles Darwin’s theories of sexual selection by adapting the dramatic form to “rehearse” or “practice” the arguments that she would soon publish as non-fiction. This sheds light on the evolution of Gilman’s progressive ideology by illustrating how she developed her theory of the “sexuo-economic relation,” which made her a household name by challenging the dominant assumption advocated by Spencer that Darwin’s theories suggested female inferiority.

While Women & Economics was a step toward the worldview that Gilman later puts in practice in her utopian novels, it was not the first step. In addition to using nonfiction to prepare for novels like Herland (1915), Gilman first uses drama in 1890 to prepare for her 1898 non-fiction treatise, in two short dramatic dialogues printed in a feminist Washington, D.C. newspaper: “Dame Nature Interviewed on the Woman Question as it Looks to Her” and “The Quarrel.” In these brief plays, Gilman tests her feminist brand of reform Darwinism by anticipating and providing “prebuttals,” so to speak, to potential Spencerian counter-arguments against her theory of the “sexuo-economic relation.”

By laying the foundation for Women & Economics, Gilman’s 1890 plays also inform the meanings of the rest of her literary works because, as Susan Auflitsch has pointed out, the texts she composed after Women & Economics expand upon its
arguments (265). The prototypes from these two dramatic dialogues reappear frequently not only in *Women & Economics* but also in her later drama, fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, which Gilman repeatedly adapted from one generic form to another. Wegener and Kessler have noted Gilman’s tendency to fictionalize her own plays and dramatize her own novels or short stories in order to fit a new purpose. But Gilman also adapts drama into nonfiction (and vice versa), and her views regarding theater’s evolutionary purpose suggest that she also valued drama’s inherent ability to adapt to its environment, the audience.

**Theater’s Evolutionary Purpose**

Darwin suggested a link between drama and evolution by using explicitly theatrical language to describe natural selection’s role in evolution. While explaining the utility of aesthetic beauty in one of his editions of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin rejected the argument that beautiful objects are created only for man’s gratification by claiming that if this were true, then “it ought to be shown that there was less beauty on the face of the earth before man appeared than since he came on the stage” (*Variorum* 370, 220.4:d). To describe the enormity of evolutionary time, Darwin refers to the process of evolution as a “slowly changing drama” (524, 31); moths and butterflies who imitate each other’s’ appearances lead him to ask if “nature [has] condescended to the tricks of the stage” (667, 145.13:d); and throughout time, new species have “come on the stage” according to Darwin, “slowly and at successive intervals” (741, 147). Gillian Beers has pointed out that, at least once, Darwin revised his book to avoid theological misinterpretations by replacing “since the first creature…was created” with “since the first organic beings appeared on the stage” (Beers 648). By referring to man as a player
on the earth’s stage, Darwin endorses the naturalist method that would soon take hold in modern drama, and affirms Shakespeare’s observation that “all the world’s a stage.”

Darwin’s use of the term “nature” was therefore readily taken by naturalist playwrights to describe their own roles in presenting life on stage. After all, playwrights “select” environmental conditions the way Nature does in the Darwinian universe. Darwin announces that he will explain his theories of human progress with “two imaginary illustrations”—as an artist might do on a canvas or a dramatist might do on stage. Darwin revised the phrase “natural selection induces divergence of character” to “natural selection leads to divergence of character” (my emphasis), which underscores the delicacy of a naturalist playwright’s influence. “Nature’s productions” (which Darwin distinguishes from “man’s productions,” or, animals bred through artificial selection) summons the idea of a “stage production” put on by playwrights. Given Darwin’s stated preference for Shakespeare’s historical war plays (Autobiography [Norton] 633), his metaphors of battle—particularly his repeated references to natural selection as a “struggle for existence” and sexual selection as a “struggle between the males for possession of the females” (Norton 115)—suggests that human life has unfolded as one long Darwinian tragedy.

Gilman’s fiction and non-fiction offer several glimpses into her own views regarding what she called the “great social function of drama” (The Home 198). The public performance of text gave Gilman a literary form that corresponded to her unique socialist views that emphasized cooperation, education, and community. As a living expression of literature experienced as a group, drama had a greater capacity to mobilize (an audience) rather than just to inspire (a reader). The shared reactions and
mutual responses generated by stage performances coincided with Gilman’s belief in cooperation and communitarian education. Her trust in the educative function of theater manifests itself in one of the advertisements she printed in The Forerunner in 1911, the same year she published both Three Women and Something to Vote For. Gilman recommends an article by Edwena Lawrence that had recently appeared in The Forecast of Philadelphia, titled “The Educational Value of a Theatrical Stock Company.” Drama as an educating tool fits in with Gilman's affinity for “Edutopia”—her belief in social education that encompassed community rearing of children and progress through cooperation.

Gilman considered art—specifically dramatic art—to be a part of Darwin’s inventory of natural human processes. She once wrote that “all natural mingling to perform together…as when we gather in the theater, is legitimate human life” (The Home 198). Theater defines humanity not only because humans are the only species known to use this form of expression, but also because theater serves both aesthetic and utilitarian purposes at once. Drama, to Gilman, is “not only a human distinction, but one of our noblest arts…[it] is religious, educational, patriotic…[and it appears] in audible, visible forms, alive and moving” (Man-Made World 123).

Further advancing the social function of theater, Gilman published a short article in the American Journal of Sociology in which she argues that “Shakespeare’s great service was to enrich the world with…the works of his mind” and goes on to claim that whether or not the playwright “had many children is a matter of minor consequence”

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24 Unfortunately, there is no evidence that this article or the journal in which it was purportedly published ever existed. The building in which Gilman’s advertisement says The Forecast was printed still exists in Philadelphia, but its current occupants have no record that a publishing house ever operated there. United States copyright records, however, confirm that Edwena Lawrence wrote plays during this time, so the article’s existence is plausible (albeit unconfirmed).
("Social Darwinism" 713). Because of this, Spencer’s emphasis on species survival is flawed, since in that view, Shakespeare’s influence on humanity is achieved through biological reproduction, not literary talent. Gilman takes the Darwinian-Spencerian notion of heterogeneity in a slightly different direction, however, by arguing that “specialization and organization are the basis of human progress” (62). Therefore, the theater, with its communitarian impulse and edifying content, serves an evolutionary purpose.

Aside from mobilization, drama’s social function is to educate. In Gilman’s first piece of speculative fiction, Moving the Mountain, the protagonist is transported just decades into the future; but in that time, American society had progressed to a form of “new humanitarianism” that was “beyond Socialism” (41, 37). Readers can view Gilman’s futuristic representation of American society in the 1920s (and, later in the novel, the 1940s) as Gilman’s utopian dream for America. In Gilman’s vision, the protagonist expresses approval that in the future, “the theatre...[is] now the daily companion and teacher” (226). The inclusion of both “companion” and “teacher” underscores Gilman’s belief that plays have the ability both to mobilize the public and to edify them.

Drama, in Gilman’s idealized vision of the world, becomes society’s main form of education. In the futuristic world of Gilman’s imagining,

[t]he little ones played through all their first years of instruction, played the old stone age (most natural to them)[,] the new stone age, the first stages of industry. Older children learned history that way; and as they reached years of appreciation, special dramas were written for them, in which psychology and sociology were learned without hearing their names. (226-7)

The theater not only mobilizes and educates, but it does so silently: the “students” (for lack of a better term) do not hear the names of the subjects they are being taught. They
learn without realizing it, and this unconscious absorption of knowledge is more successful in Gilman’s opinion because it is more likely to be applied rather than memorized. Here, Gilman expands the concept of “socialization” (non-institutionalized education received from family and friends, and through experience) to the dramatic form.

Characters similarly value drama as a form of education and mobilization in Gilman’s second utopian novel, *Herland*. The chauvinist Terry reacts “incredulous[ly]” to the notion that a society of women could be advanced enough to have the ability to organize (57-58), which highlights his recognition of the social importance of mobilization. The Herlanders’ cooperative group action occurs indirectly as a result of drama, which educates society, and in turn, mobilizes it for the purpose of progressive change. Despite Vann’s assessment of Herland’s drama as “rather flat” due to the lack of “sex motive,” his description still resembles Gilman’s hope for the use of theater in a Progressive society, because not only the adults, but also the babies joined in it...taking part as naturally as ours would frolic round a Christmas tree—it was overpowering in the impression of joyous, triumphant life...[T]he drama, the dance, music, religion, and education were all very close together; and instead of developing them in detached lines, they had kept the connection. (99-100)

In this passage, Gilman suggests that in the early phases of evolutionary history, drama enjoyed a greater influence on human life—an influence that worked in harmony with all other social forms of public human experience, such as education, music, and religion.

As modern women should reclaim their ancient evolutionary superiority, so should humans reincorporate drama into everyday life as it had been in prehistory. Because of the social function of drama, Herlanders receive “all education but no schooling,” which highlights the distinction between institutionalized education and
socialization (106). Vann continuously sees children playing, or sometimes “engaged in peaceful researches of their own,” but he never sees them at school (106). In Gilman's ideal society, education happens through social interaction and the arts, and theater has the advantage of combining both. Children of Herland did not go to school, Vann says, “—at least [not] to their knowledge” (106). They never experience the “forcible feeding’ of the mind” that Gilman’s contemporaries (and ours) believed education required (106). Drama as a social tool works best when incorporated into a social paradigm that merges all aspects of community, including religion, music, education, and community organization.

The 1890 Practice Plays

Gilman experienced the educative value of theater through the development of her reform Darwinism. Gilman recorded her brainstorming process self-consciously through drama in 1893 when she published a “Chat with Charlotte Perkins Stetson” in San Francisco’s Morning Call. The subtitle of this dialogue noted that Gilman “appear[ed] in a dual role” by “posing as interviewer and interviewed” in a discussion on the “present [women’s] movement.” This more facetious form of theoretical experimentation is a form of drama, and it illustrates how the dialectic form of drama helped Gilman to find her voice on what her contemporaries called the “Woman Question.”

It is appropriate, then, that “The Quarrel” and “Dame Nature Interviewed” appear to function as preludes to Women & Economics. Like her naturalist

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25 Another similar example of this process is a short narrative published in 1891 under the title “Society and the Philosopher,” in which Gilman explores the relationship between social theorists and the public they analyze. The allegory unfolds through a dialogue between two characters acting as symbols for the two concepts, Society and Philosophers. Although Gilman wrote the dialogue in prose rather than drama, the majority of the text is a two-way conversation much like the “Chat with Charlotte Perkins Stetson,” “The Quarrel,” and “Dame Nature Interviewed.”
contemporaries, Gilman used theater to demonstrate (and often experiment with) the struggle between the sexes. I argue that these first dramatic dialogues not only gave Gilman a way to hone her dramatic skills, but they also gave her a way to flesh out the theories she would put forth in her 1898 treatise.

“The Quarrel” was originally published as “A Dramatic View” in a multi-genre series called “The Ceaseless Struggle of Sex.” Gilman employs parallel structure among scenes to communicate the “ceaseless struggle” between two characters, tellingly the gender pronouns, “He” and “She.” Each scene in this short play begins with the character “He” excitedly declaring to “She” that he “like[s]” her, to which She responds in kind (239). By the end of each scene, however, He and She quarrel: at the end of the first four scenes, “they fight”; but by the end of scene five, “they fight—awfully!” (239-40). The ceaseless struggle of sex, according to this play, is a phase of oppression that continues to cycle only if allowed by the oppressed.

Gilman exploits form in “The Quarrel” to emphasize the unending socio-economic struggle between the sexes. The parallelism of each scene is further reinforced by a gesture carried out just after the first lines of dialog: in scenes one through four, He and She “embrace,” but by scene five they only “shake hands” (239). So, in each scene, the two sexes agree to mutual attraction, then carry out some sort of physical exchange; but by the fifth scene (the end of this cycle of the “ceaseless struggle”), the exchange is less

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26 Although the newspaper did not print the title because it was part of an already-titled series, a note on Gilman’s clipping of the publication, now located at the Schlesinger Library, indicates that Gilman’s title was “The Quarrel.”

27 In lines and stage directions, “The Quarrel” contains only 351 words. It contains five short scenes, the first four of which could be performed in less than five minutes; the fifth scene is relatively longer but still brief enough that the entire play would never exceed ten minutes if staged. The character names, “He” and “She” are used as the title of a play, He and She (1920), by the feminist playwright Rachel Crothers, which reveals the frequency of female playwrights’ depiction of men and women as gendered Darwinian animals disconnected from individuality and subject to environmental and hereditary factors.
cordial. He and She have become more independent even though his position on women’s roles has not changed. Although the struggle between the sexes may be “ceaseless,” Gilman argues that it will end with the elevation of women whether or not men consent. Gilman contends that the current oppressed status of women is a temporary part of the evolutionary timeline, and, like in “The Quarrel,” the actions of men can only accelerate or delay the already inevitable conclusion of upheaval.

After the embrace (or handshake, as in the case of the fifth scene), Gilman introduces a gender conflict, listed in order: (1) He “want[s] more of” She; (2) He decides She should “cook” while he “hunt[s]”; (3) He decides that because She “is so pretty in the home,” she should stay there; (4) He describes She in contradictions like “lovely but wicked”; finally, (5) He describes Darwinian reasons why She should “stay behind” and not “get even” with him socially (she was “naturally evolved” to do so, He says, because man is “the strongest”). Each scene’s progression from cordiality to conflict causes a sense of endless monotony—a feeling Gilman surely experienced both in her first marriage and in her public struggle for women’s rights.

The majority of the play’s references to Darwin occur in the fifth scene of “The Quarrel” and they mirror passages from Women & Economics. (Incidentally, Darwin introduced his theory of sexual selection in the fifth chapter of On the Origin of Species [1859].) In “The Quarrel,” Gilman’s symbolic evolutionary male, He, declares in Scene Five that She, despite being his “queen,” is also his “slave” (239), which recalls the “master-slave dialectic” that G. W. F. Hegel put forth in The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807). This rehearses Gilman’s argument in Women & Economics that at one point in evolutionary history, the human male recognized that it would be “cheaper and easier”
to struggle against a “little female” rather than to spar with a male every time he wanted to mate, so “he instituted the custom of enslaving the female” (60). Throughout her enslavement, man continued to regard the female sex as having what Darwin called “greater tenderness and less selfishness” and a maternal instinct that fostered cooperation (Norton 234). Men, on the other hand, are predisposed to compete with other men. Even though the female sex’s perceived cooperative traits were considered biologically inferior in a Darwinian world focused on species reproduction, they were nevertheless regarded as morally superior, and Gilman’s character He exposes this contradiction.

As seen with Women & Economics, one of Gilman’s preferred rhetorical strategies is to point out the inconsistencies of opposing theories. For example, Gilman repeatedly cites the queen bee as a rare example of an instance in which the modification of females—and the relegation of them to private life—was both appropriate and necessary (19, 72, 171). In the context of Gilman’s response to Darwin, the character He’s contradictory statement that She is at once his queen and his slave might also suggest that He believes that a woman’s relegation to private life is appropriate and necessary (as with queen bees). Gilman exposes another contradiction when He asserts that although it is “impossible for [She] to get out from behind,” He will still fight to the death to prevent her from doing so (240). But this is illogical because if the advancement of women is impossible, then preventative measures are unnecessary. In this line Gilman not only rejects the notion that Darwin’s theories confirm female inferiority, but she also implicitly criticizes the larger sociopolitical motivations of people who adhere to that view.
While most scholars agree that the majority of Gilman’s writings after *Women & Economics* expanded and clarified that book’s arguments, they pay less attention to the relationship between *Women & Economics* and her earlier writings. Gilman’s diaries, letters, and autobiography reveal that *Women & Economics* was the product of many years’ worth of theoretical development. In fact, Gilman repeatedly referred to the book as a “book” before it was ever completed. The ways in which Gilman portrays the relationship between men and women in her early plays demonstrates that drama not only helped her develop her theory of the “sexuo-economic relation,” but it also emphasizes Gilman’s belief in drama’s utilitarian purpose. If drama could help Gilman reach her explanation of the “ceaseless struggle,” then its potential could be used for even larger social goals. Furthermore, by giving Spencerian critics a character role in the form of He, Gilman can better satirize what she sees as untenable and self-contradictory arguments regarding female inferiority.

In “Dame Nature Interviewed” (1890), Gilman similarly lampoons the contradictory logic of the prevailing theories of female superiority. But in this play, Gilman explores her reform Darwinist ideas more fully and provides a more concise dramatic version of the arguments she presents in *Women & Economics*. Although longer than “The Quarrel,” “Dame Nature Interviewed” contains only a single scene with two characters: a male, “Reporter,” and a female, “Nature.” As the play’s full title reveals, Reporter interviews Nature “on the Woman Question as it looks to her” (138). Gilman speaks through the archetype of (Mother) Nature to voice her opinion on woman’s place in evolutionary history. In so doing, she seizes the authoritative expertise of that role while also reminding readers (or hypothetical audience members)
that their own cultural history once valued maternal evolutionary power.\textsuperscript{28}

Nature chides the reporter (and men in general) for “getting around [her] laws” by “shut[ting]” women up rather than allowing them to exercise their “free choice of the best” males (139). By removing female agency, Nature argues, men had “upset [her] beautiful arrangement of sexual selection” (139). Gilman expands upon this idea in \textit{Women & Economics} by pointing out the “peculiar inversion” of nature’s “usual habit”: in other species, the “males compete in ornament, and the females select” (54-5). Due to this inversion, the female “finds her economic environment in the male” rather than in the struggle for existence between species (58). This argument first appears in “Dame Nature Interviewed,” when Nature explains that “the struggle for existence…is just \textit{my} [Nature’s own] struggle to adapt the organism to its environment” but males had perverted this arrangement: “\textit{You made yourself her environment}…and she had to struggle with you!” (139). Female inferiority may be the status quo, Gilman explains, but Darwin’s theories prove that the status quo is far from “natural.”

In response to the reporter’s question regarding the “present advance of women” Nature proclaims that she not only approves of it, but that she is responsible for it as well (138). This claim surprises the reporter, because he had been under the impression that Nature “made the other kind of woman,” the subservient female resigned to the home (138). Somewhat offended, Nature explains that because man has “individual volition,” he was able to, as the reporter puts it, “make things against nature” such as the servile woman of the nineteenth century (138). This recalls the passage in \textit{Women

\textsuperscript{28} Discussing Tennyson’s \textit{In Memorium}, James Eli Adams argues in “Woman Red in tooth and Claw” (1989) that after Darwin, personifications of Nature increasingly came to represent a reactionary, even archaic mode of discourse” and that “[t]o question the nature of ‘Nature’…is inescapably to question the nature of woman” (445).
& Economics in which males realize the convenience of “institut[ing] the custom of enslaving” females, making them “modified to sex to an excessive degree” (60, 39). Both through drama and through non-fiction, Gilman upends the Spencerian notion that female inferiority is a biological necessity.

Gilman depicts the character Nature’s role in evolution with language that summons the dramaturgy of naturalist playwrights like Zola, Ibsen, Shaw, and Herne. Nature comments on her excitement with the stage of evolution that involved “protoplasm,” which for her was “great fun” because protoplasm was “so docile!” (138). This parallels a passage in Women & Economics in which Gilman lays out the process of “nature’s slow but sure experiments” with “differentiation,” where “out of the mere protoplasmic masses” evolved the complex human creature (29). Such language summons the naturalists’ belief that the stage should act as a laboratory for experimentation on the human condition in which characters’ fates are determined by the environments that dramatists create (as Gilman observed Shaw practice while composing plays, using his wooden blocks). Gilman not only uses drama to experiment with the human condition, but also to experiment with her own theories.

Nature describes the “amazing and irresistible uprising among women today” as the “best thing that has happened to man since he stood up straight” (139). This means that by resisting patriarchal domination, women play a key role in helping the species to evolve. Gilman later describes the feminist movement in Women & Economics as the “best birth of our century” (144). Gilman’s ideas and the language she uses to express them appear in “Dame Nature Interviewed” before they appear in her non-fiction. In this 1890 play, Gilman not only covers the same issues she later expands upon in 1898, but
she also presents the ideas with similar language, which further demonstrates that she used the dramatic form to rehearse the feminist response to Darwin that she would later publish. By assigning nature a female gender, Gilman emphasizes Darwin’s own recognition of female agency in his argument that “males which conquer their rivals do not obtain possession of the females independently of the choice of the latter” (231). Proper natural selection involves a woman’s choice in a mate; therefore, the man-made sexuo-economic relation hinders the species’ progression to greater variety and diversity.

Nature ambiguously calls scientists her “last babies,” which implies that Nature intended for sociology to give humans the ability to guide their own evolutionary progress. But it “nearly broke [her] heart” to find scientists claiming that she opposed women’s advancement. Gilman’s early drama sets the stage for her future rebuttal to these prevailing scientific assumptions in Women & Economics. The plays she wrote after Women & Economics, on the other hand, demonstrate a more advanced understanding of naturalist theater and a more dedicated effort to see her adaptations of her now-developed theory of the sexuo-economic relation actually performed for audiences. The next chapter examines Gilman’s effort in her later drama to stage Women & Economics.
CHAPTER 4
STAGING WOMEN & ECONOMICS: GILMAN’S LATER DRAMA

Gilman intended her two 1911 one-act plays published in The Forerunner, Three Women and Something to Vote For, to be performed as “parlor plays” by women’s organizations, knowing that so-called “antis” (women who opposed suffrage and professionalization) commonly attended such meetings. By offering characters who overcome previous inclinations for patriarchy (acted in an intimate atmosphere by a friend or acquaintance, no less), Gilman hoped to mobilize women in a united effort to advance social equality. However, with two other full-length plays composed not long before, Interrupted (1909) and The Balsam Fir (1908-1910), Gilman sought to influence the opinions of both women and men. The Balsam Fir and Interrupted are less effective as agit-prop because they address Gilman’s feminist beliefs more indirectly and they are, at four and three acts respectively, longer than the 1890 dialogues and the 1911 one-act plays. These two plays demonstrate Gilman’s experimentation with naturalism, which developed from the theories of Darwin and Spencer that Gilman’s own theories wished to reinterpret in Women & Economics.

The extant manuscripts of The Balsam Fir and Interrupted reveal Gilman’s continued efforts in her post-Women & Economics career to exploit the adaptability of the dramatic form as one of many social (and therefore evolutionary) tools to spread her reform Darwinist beliefs. Gilman wrote such a large volume of work in so many genres because she recognized that in order to propagate her theories to future generations,

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29 Even though the two 1911 plays were one-act plays, I use the term “full-length” to distinguish them from the short 1890 dialogues. The 1890 dialogues were not only less likely to be performed, but they also each lacked a narrative plot. Gilman’s one-act plays are fell-length in the sense that they are complete dramas with unity of time, place, and action, particularly given Strindberg’s preference for one-act plays (because they are dramas condensed to their climax).
she would have to spread (or “multiply”) them as widely as possible during her lifetime. *Women & Economics* defines Gilman’s career not only because it cemented her reputation as a feminist intellectual, but also because the theories that gave birth to *Women & Economics* evolved through frequent dramatic adaptation in the years following its publication. When Gilman focused her attentions on *The Forerunner* a few years after composing *The Balsam Fir* and *Interrupted*, she novelized both plays under new titles (*Mag-Marjorie* and *Won Over*, respectively), adapting once again to the needs of her audience. The fact that Gilman failed to see either manuscript published or produced reinforces the feminist messages promoted in each play by calling attention to the patriarchal biases of an industry associated with the awakening of the New Woman.

Because Gilman’s theatrical success depended on the intervention of someone already independently successful in the industry (i.e., a male), her theory of the sexuo-economic relation is depicted not only in the plays, but also through the context proscribed by their genre. Drama is the only genre that Gilman used for which she achieved neither financial nor professional success. Therefore, when Gilman stages the sexuo-economic relation in *The Balsam Fir* and *Interrupted*, the theatrical context that her generic choice insists upon further emphasizes the very theories she advocates, because the male dominated industry that excluded her nevertheless received (and sometimes took) credit for the awakening of the “New Woman.” If, as Auflitsch claims, “[v]irtually all of Gilman’s subsequent writing was an elaboration on the themes introduced in *Women & Economics*” (265, n 392), then her overlooked dramas

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30 During her long career, Gilman had repeated success with poetry (“An Obstacle,” for example, caught the attention of both Shaw and Herne), short stories (most notably “The Yellow Wallpaper”), non-fiction (*Women & Economics* and *The Man-Made World*, among others), serialized novels (such as *Herland*), and frequent lectures.
of the 1908-1910 offer scholars fresh perspectives on the theories underpinning Gilman’s magnum opus.

**The Balsam Fir**

*The Balsam Fir’s* vernacular speech, use of pantomiming, and calls for actor improvisation are characteristic of naturalism. In fact, Strindberg’s preface to *Miss Julie* advocated such naturalistic devices for future dramas. Furthermore, the play’s subject matter is permeated with Darwinian language, questions of sexual and marital choice, and the breakdown of patriarchal restrictions on the professionalization of women. It tells the story of Maggie, a sixteen-year old orphan girl who is “worked as a slave” by her aunt in a small New York town. Dr. Armstrong, a chauvinistic gynecologist opposed to the professionalization of women, impregnates Maggie with no intention of marrying her (Act I, p. 5). Dr. Newcomb, a pediatrician, genuinely loves Maggie, but he keeps his love a secret.

Miss Yale, an independently wealthy unmarried woman in her forties, (who, like Dr. Newcomb, believes in an equal moral standard between men and women), decides to save Maggie from bearing alone the consequences that Miss Yale believes should be borne by both Newcomb and Maggie. She “adopts” Maggie and pays for her to go to France to be educated as a doctor after giving birth to Dolly, whom Miss Yale raises as another adoptee (Act I, 17-18). Ten years later, Maggie returns to the town as Dr. Margaret Yale, an accomplished oculist, who incidentally shares her name with the

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31 Gilman’s manuscript of *The Balsam Fir* is paginated by act; each new act begins at page one, so citations indicate both act number and page number.
leading role in Herne’s most famous play, *Margaret Fleming*.32 Margaret returns so “wholly another woman” that she is unrecognized by Dr. Armstrong and the rest of the town’s residents.

Armstrong falls so passionately in love with Dr. Yale, that, for the first time in his life, he desires marriage. Like many opposed to women’s rights, Armstrong assumes that Dr. Yale would be willing to give up her profession for love. She refuses to quit practicing medicine, and Dr. Armstrong ultimately relents to marrying a professional woman. He even “forgives” her for mothering an illegitimate child and becomes more enthusiastic after discovering that the child is his (Act III, 10). However, Dr. Yale rejects his proposal for a different reason: her daughter, Dolly (who still thinks Dr. Yale is her adoptive sister), does not like Armstrong. Dolly does, however, approve of Newcomb, who finally professes his love to Dr. Yale, proposes marriage, and puts forth a plan for the two of them to start a medical practice together that combines his resources with her reputation.

Armstrong’s view of women mirrors Strindberg’s, while Newcomb’s views align with Ibsen’s. These parallels, however, are easily overlooked if scholars do not consider Gilman in the context of modern drama’s birth. Regarding Dr. Yale after she exits, Armstrong exclaims, “such hair! such color! such a figure,” to which Newcomb replies, “such brains! such courage! such attainments!” (Act III, 15). Like Strindberg, Armstrong sees women as manipulative creatures that should stay out of the professional world,

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32 While Herne’s *Shore Acres* is the play best known to contemporary scholars of late nineteenth century drama (and was viewed by Gilman at Herne’s request), his most famous and most successful play was *Margaret Fleming*.
particularly science. Strindberg’s preface to Miss Julie describes the title character as representative of the modern woman, a weak species unable to reproduce itself except through passing “its misery [to] the following generation” by fooling men into sexual relationships (160). Gilman’s theory of the sexuo-economic relation agrees with Strindberg’s premise that the modern woman is a weakened “half-woman” (160), but her conclusion in Women & Economics places blame on both men (for causing it) and women (for allowing it to continue). This belief in an equal moral standard is advocated by Miss Yale in The Balsam Fir, who makes it her life’s mission to save women from being “ruined” by a pregnancy that required male action to create. Armstrong values women only for their sexual use, avoiding marriage until the end of the play despite his reputation for repeatedly “ruining” girls. Newcomb, however, is sympathetic to the feminist cause, supports women becoming doctors, and declines Armstrong’s efforts to sexualize women in conversation.

Balsam fir, which gives the play its title, is introduced in the first scene, at a “picnic party” attended by Miss Yale, Armstrong, Newcomb, a reverend, Mr. Briggs, his wife, Mrs. Briggs, and their daughter Daisy. Miss Yale has been collecting balsam fir to make aromatic pine cushions to give out at Christmastime. After the picnic, Maggie meets Armstrong under a nearby balsam fir, where she discovers that Armstrong will not marry her and had never intended to. The crushed child becomes angry, refuses his offer of money, and yells that she “hate[s]” him. Armstrong, who rationalizes his own behavior through nature’s “laws,” replies that her hatred is “natural,” thereby absolving

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33 It should be noted, however, that even though Strindberg publically opposed feminism, he had three marriages to professional women (albeit marriages full of emotional suffering).
himself of responsibility (I, 14). Miss Yale has been watching these events and after Armstrong leaves, she joins Maggie under the balsam fir and announces her plan.

Maggie accidentally leaves her blue hair ribbon underneath the balsam fir when she exits with Miss Yale; Newcomb retrieves the ribbon, which reappears in Act III to confirm for the audience that Newcomb truly loves Maggie. Soon after, Mrs. Briggs gossips to Miss Yale about Maggie, who in Mrs. Briggs’s opinion “acts disgracefully” by frequently meeting a man by the balsam fir. Mrs. Briggs criticizes Maggie for wearing “ever lasting blue ribbons! Why is it that redheaded girls will wear blue hair-ribbons!” (I, 6). The blue ribbon therefore is therefore seen by Mrs. Briggs as an ornamentation used by girls who are less “fit” to marry (through poor breeding) to improve their ability attract a mate. It occurs to Miss Yale, but not Mrs. Briggs, that the man Maggie is meeting shares moral blame.

As Armstrong and Newcomb represent Strindberg and Ibsen respectively, so too do Miss Yale and Mrs. Briggs represent opposing versions of Progressive Era women. Miss Yale is Gilman’s ideal New Woman: the *dramatis personae* describes her as “unmarried,” “strong,” “independent,” and “opinionative.” And although Miss Yale is “rich,” she is “very plainly dressed.” Like the ideal women depicted in *Herland*, she is practical in her attire, with “plenty of pockets and pocket-handkerchiefs.” Miss Yale is fond of Newcomb, and she thus unsurprisingly dislikes Dr. Armstrong. Miss Yale is a maternal figure to all the characters in the play, to peers and acquaintances. Despite having never been married or given birth biologically, Miss Yale adopts many children (by “giving [them] her name” and paying for their education). In fact, most of the

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34 Gilman does not explain the source of Miss Yale’s fortune. This omission is surprising because it leaves the play vulnerable to criticisms from “antis,” who could suggest that Miss Yale’s reputation would not exist if it weren’t for her wealth—which, if inherited, probably came from a man.
references to “family” in the play refer to Miss Yale’s family, which underscores Gilman’s progressive belief in communitarianism and the “socialization of education.” Miss Yale’s non-biological depiction of maternal instinct demonstrates Gilman’s belief that that one’s environment (particularly one’s social environment) trumps heredity in determining the fate of an individual.

Mrs. Briggs, on the other hand, is “very conservative and domineering,” and her antipathy for her friends’ discussion of women’s rights, combined with her pursuit of Armstrong as a suitor for her young daughter, Daisy, aligns her with the “antis.” Although Mrs. Briggs is “very fond of” Miss Yale, who is her closest and oldest friend, she primarily values Miss Yale’s money, which she hopes that Daisy will inherit. While Mrs. Briggs is a reverend’s wife, Gilman de-emphasizes religion’s influence on her judgment of Mrs. Briggs by describing Rev. Briggs in the *dramatis personae* as a “well-meaning and good-natured clergyman.” In fact, even though Rev. Briggs usually agrees with his wife’s views, Gilman portrays him as an agreeable person who occasionally holds more progressive opinions than his wife. Gilman therefore holds religion less responsible for the oppression of women than the patriarchal system associated with religion.

From the beginning of the play, Miss Yale makes her distaste for Armstrong clear by urging Mrs. Briggs not to pursue him as a potential husband for Daisy. Mrs. Briggs favors Armstrong for her daughter even though she has witnessed him regularly meeting Maggie by a balsam fir, which she says has become a “regular trysting-tree!” Both Miss Yale and Mrs. Briggs agree that this relationship is dangerous, but they disagree about how to distribute blame. Mrs. Briggs suggests that Miss Yale should
scold the “young fool,” Maggie, to which Miss Yale replies that Mrs. Briggs should do the same for “the old scoundrel,” Armstrong (I, 7). Miss Yale reasons that because Armstrong has no intention of marrying Maggie, “he is to blame” for any ensuing scandal. Mrs. Briggs summons the views of the “antis” by countering that a “girl is to blame if she gives way.”

James Herne’s influence on *The Balsam Fir* extended beyond Gilman’s use of the name “Margaret” for a main character that depicts the New Woman. *The Balsam Fir* and Herne’s *Shore Acres* both center around three doctors, a similarity that underscores both dramatists’ concern with the natural sciences. Also like Herne’s plays, *The Balsam Fir* bears similarities to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* through the depiction of wives as juveniles before their transformations to independence. For example, Armstrong calls young Maggie such pet names as “Kiddles,” “Tiddlewinks,” and “little girl,” which recalls of Torvald Helmer’s belittling nicknames for his wife Nora in *A Doll’s House*. Bucks and Nethercot point out that Herne’s Margaret and Ibsen’s Nora are “given to gay, lighthearted conversation and bright dancing movements” and that both are portrayed as “child-wives” (323). Even though Armstrong and Maggie do not marry, Gilman portrays a similar “child-wife” dynamic in *The Balsam Fir* through age disparities, Armstrong’s pet names, and Maggie’s girlish behaviors.

Marriage in *The Balsam Fir* is tied to economics, and this sexuo-economic relation is passed to future generations through socialization. Mrs. Briggs hopes that her daughter Daisy will marry Armstrong not because of the quality of his character, but because he is a more successful doctor than Newcomb. Rev. Briggs agrees, pointing out that in addition to his “brillian[ce],” another advantage to Armstrong is that he was
“independent to begin with” (II, 4). Mrs. Briggs’s desire for her daughter to find an independent husband stems from her inability to imagine her daughter surviving without the support of a man. Even though natural selection usually eliminates traits that promote weakness, uncorrected social evolution—in this case, teaching one’s female offspring to be dependent on men—allows the sexuo-economic relation to endure.

*The Balsam Fir* abounds with references to “nature’s law” regarding the selection of mates. In particular, Mr. and Mrs. Briggs emphasize the naturalist view of heredity’s role in determining an individual’s character by placing value on the fact that Armstrong comes from a wealthy family. These naturalist beliefs are further reinforced when Mrs. Briggs and Miss Yale discuss the latter’s newest adoptee, Dolly (whom Mrs. Briggs does not realize is Dr. Yale’s biological daughter). Mrs. Briggs refers to Dolly as Miss Yale’s latest “experiment,” which recalls Emile Zola’s view of theater as a laboratory in which to experiment with the human condition. In response to Mrs. Briggs’s questions about Maggie’s parents, Miss Yale states that she knew both parents—“a very decent stock on both sides”—but “circumstances ma[d]e it advisable” for Miss Yale to adopt her. Mentioning “circumstances” in addition to Maggie’s breeding balances the naturalist position that held that both heredity and the environment play a role in determining character.

Gilman’s use of both the blue ribbon and the balsam fir as dramatic symbols highlights the play’s relationship to Ibsen’s well-made plays. The plot of *The Balsam Fir* unfolds like the plot of a Scribean “well-made play,” which Ibsen developed into a form better suited for a “drama of ideas” (Johnston 288).35 Johnston notes that the well-made

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35 A “well-made play” typically contains three scenes, while *The Balsam Fir* contains four; but the play nevertheless bears similarities to the form.
play pioneered by Eugene Scribe was the “predominant form of drama in Ibsen’s day” and that it originally sought “to transfer dramatic interest from potentially controversial ideas to innocuous things…to create a maximum of theatrical excitement with minimum intellectual risk.” However, Johnson continues, Ibsen turned things into “subversive vehicles of ideas,” so a “‘drama of ideas’ [was] likely to be a drama of symbolically enrich things” (288). The balsam fir and the blue ribbon together symbolize the sexual and economic prejudices that Maggie is forced to overcome. By extension, these two symbols reinforce Gilman’s argument that economic independence is vital for evolutionary progress through the advancement of women.

The Balsam Fir depicts a woman who finds independence through professionalization before marrying her husband, but the play does not examine the consequences of wives’ careers on marriages that already exist. Gilman personally experienced the ramifications of a newly-awakened wife’s career when she achieved her literary success after her marriage to Walter Stetson. By exploring professionalization’s impact on the quality of spousal relationships after marriage, Interrupted picks up where The Balsam Fir leaves off.

Interrupted

Interrupted tells the story of Stella Widfield, whose husband, Morgan, must come to terms with his wife’s newfound success as a professional writer, playwright, and social critic. Stella finds so much literary success—beginning with an unexpectedly popular play—that she receives a request to lecture for an organization called “The Society of Women Who Work.” This links Stella’s transformation to Gilman’s first marriage because Gilman solidified her literary reputation and began her lecturing
career while married to Walter Stetson. It was also during this time that Gilman used playwriting with Channing to pull herself from depression. Likewise, Stella is “miserable” before she indulges her passion for playwriting (8). The parallels between Gilman’s own experience and Stella’s attempts to balance professional and private life not only reveal Gilman’s biographical inspirations for *Women & Economics*, but they also highlight her unyielding desire to demonstrate publicly, through whatever means necessary, the importance of women’s economic dependence on the evolutionary progress of all humans, male and female.

Stella’s behavior toward her husband before she finds work demonstrates that when confined to the private sphere, Stella was forced to channel her sense of purpose into her marriage, which counterproductively distanced herself from her husband. In the first act, Stella approaches Morgan “affectionately,” “regards him yearningly” and constantly seeks his emotional approval; Morgan is “annoyed” and “struggles” against Stella with “forced cheerfulness.” Morgan’s response provides the rationale behind his ultimate acceptance of Stella’s career by the end of the play, and illustrates Gilman’s argument for the evolutionary value of women’s professionalization. Morgan grows “indifferent” and “impatient” because Stella “thinks of him every minute of every day,” while he wishes she would “think of something else” (10). Morgan’s claim that it would be easier for him if Stella “cared for more things” illustrates Gilman’s argument that female dependence is disadvantageous to both women and men because it promotes tedium. After all, as Stella points out, with a housekeeper and no career, she, like many

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36 The only consistent pagination of this manuscript relies on the handwritten page numbers on the upper-right-hand corner in pages that follow Act I. These handwritten numbers continue from typewritten numbers centered at the top of the pages that contain Act I. The last two pages of Act I are both numbered 22.
women of the period, has nothing else to care for other than her marriage to Morgan.

Through Stella’s experience, Gilman demonstrates that Darwin’s theory of sexual selection supports her own theory that professionalization improves the quality of a spouse’s love. Stella comes to realize that it is “improper” that she previously thought of nothing else but her husband because “a man gets sick and tired of it.” More importantly, however, Stella tells Mrs. Macavelly that she now “values him more than [she] ever did” because of the added “perspective” provided by her literary career. She “has something to do now” besides concern herself with Morgan, which allows both Morgan and Stella to better appreciate the time they spend together. As Stella points out, a man needs to “want” a woman, and this need is satisfied by the division of a woman’s attention. This argument recalls the Darwinian assumption that men are inherently more competitive than women and stresses sexual selection’s reliance on a male’s evolutionary impulse to compete for females. Gilman’s reform Darwinism emphasizes a woman’s choice in order to unmask the fallacy of using Darwin to oppose women’s rights.

The character Smith, an aspiring playwright, emphasizes power struggles in his play-in-progress, which reflects Gilman and Shaw’s socialist desire to use theater to expose the tyranny of oppressive paradigms through accurate portrayals of the Darwinian drama. According to Mrs. Macavelly (whose relationship with Smith echoes Miss Yale’s relationship with Maggie in The Balsam Fir), he is a “revolutionary” because of his upbringing: he “had to work from babyhood” and he only got “night school education.” Consequently his definition of drama, which he reveals while describing his play-in-progress to Stella, emphasizes the “life struggle” against oppression:
It is a Drama, a real Drama. It is to show the Power of Evil – the terrible unescapable Power of Evil! It is the life struggle of the poor! It is the Extortion and Oppression of the Rich!” (38)

The use of the term “life struggle” summons Darwin’s description of evolution as a “struggle for existence,” which can refer to sexual power imbalances as well as class conflict. Unfortunately, however, Smith’s recognition of economic oppression did not lead him to sympathize with the consequences of gender oppression because his own play repeatedly refers to women as “property” (34).

Smith’s play-in-progress summons the plot of Strindberg’s Miss Julie by depicting a woman easily seduced into a socially dangerous affair; these similarities suggest an attempt by Gilman to challenge the most notable anti-feminist naturalist playwright. In Smith’s play, a married woman named Elaine succumbs to the sexual advances of her husband’s secretary with little resistance; in Strindberg’s play, Miss Julie surrenders to the seduction of her servant, Jean. The parallels to Miss Julie are further reinforced by an apparent reference to Jean when Elaine’s husband characterizes the secretary’s desire for his wife “as if a servant had admired her, and was still a useful servant,” in (34). Smith’s Strindbergian assumption that Elaine’s “unhappiness” and the “Power of Evil” were stronger than Elaine’s principles (“what can a woman do!” Smith exclaims) is based on a Spencerian interpretation of Darwinism that deemphasizes Darwin’s own recognition of the role played by female choice in sexual selection.

Interrupted also contains Ibsen’s influence. The Widfields’s housekeeper, for example, is named “Hedda,” which would have reminded any American theater-goer of Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, which tied A Doll’s House as the most-performed Ibsen play in the United States during this period. Furthermore, the “child-wife” dynamic seen in The Balsam Fir, which linked Margaret Fleming to A Doll’s House, also appears in
Interrupted. Morgan implies that Stella is acting like a child when he asks her age while she is overbearingly attentive (7); he eventually explicitly calls her a “foolish child” later in the scene (10). The “child-wife” dynamic that appears in the plays of Ibsen, Herne, and Gilman demonstrate the consequences of restricted roles for women.

The responses of both Morgan and Malina to the professionalization of women illustrate Gilman’s argument that the perceived disadvantages of women’s careers are merely the result of the sexuo-economic relation’s promotion of dependence. Malina is unmarried and recently lost her money; she also “hates men” and consequently assumes that most women are “unhappy” because they must marry. But because she has not found the success in journalism that Stella found in playwriting, Malina considers marrying a man despite her opposition to the idea, because she is not prepared for a life that requires her to work to survive. Morgan is similarly unprepared. In Act I, while irritated by Stella’s excessive attention, Morgan rejects her by claiming that he does not care about her efforts to prepare tea for him; but in Act II, while Stella is occupied with her literary career, the absence of prepared tea frustrates him. Later, however, Morgan admits that he does not hate to make tea, but rather he is unaccustomed to having to do so. He “had to learn how” to do the things his wife usually took care of, which shows that the sexuo-economic relation also causes dependence of men on women.

When Smith and Mrs. Macavelly solicit Stella’s opinion on this so-called “strong scene,” Stella’s criticisms of Smith’s inaccurate rendering of female choice suggests an attempt by Gilman to argue that a truly naturalist theater requires female perspectives to fulfill the naturalists’ stated goal of accurately representing the human experience.
Gilman seems to argue in this scene that, despite Ibsen and Shaw’s efforts to advance women’s rights, both men’s perspectives are unable to effectively challenge the anti-feminist views staged by Strindberg. Stella argues that even if Elaine honestly loved the secretary, “she would take thought for the morrow, and plan for a divorce, and how to marry him.” Blinded by his misinterpretation of Darwin, it fails to occur to Smith that his heroine would make her decisions based on rational thought instead of emotional impulse. Stella reminds Smith that it is not so easy to “break down the principles of an American wife,” to which he replies that “women are women the world over.” Smith’s assumptions regarding gender are too heavily influenced by Spencerian interpretations of the Darwinian drama for him to be able to meet the goals of naturalist theater because Spencer and Smith view the current (subjected) status of women as natural.

When Stella gives her opinion on Smith’s proposal scene, she does so as an expert to a novice. Stella is now a successful playwright, but Smith has struggled and failed to succeed. Smith rejects Stella’s advice regarding Elaine’s response to the secretary’s proposal and, not coincidentally, the play is repeatedly rejected by producers. If modern theater seeks accurately to represent the human experience, then the female perspective—the other half of the human perspective—is vital to the industry’s goals. Stella does not dislike the play; in fact, she tells Smith that he “worked up to [the proposal scene] very well” and that the play “is too good a play to spoil” through an inaccurate love scene (35). Like Gilman, Stella’s success comes not only from her talent, but also from establishing friendships with important figures. Stella has “one good friend on a big weekly, and one on the stage” (28), which brings to mind Gilman’s associations with Annie Russell and Mary Shaw. In Gilman’s ideal society, the
theater industry actually recognizes the value of a woman playwright’s contribution to their expressed desire to depict humanity. But the contrast between Gilman’s failures and Stella’s successes punctures that idealistic vision.

Gilman also uses Smith’s character to examine her own aspirations to be a playwright. Stella responds to Mrs. Macavelly’s news that Smith is an aspiring dramatist by noting that playwrights “bud pretty fast nowadays.” Mrs. Macavelly agrees, adding that they “bloom prematurely” and “few bear fruit,” but that she still believes that “this boy’s got the real thing.” Stella and Mrs. Macavelly acknowledge that any aspiring playwright—even a man—would have had to struggle for success during the post-Ibsen resurgence of interest in playwriting (and therefore “struggle” to survive, in the Darwinian sense). Gilman rationalizes her own failures as a dramatist by arguing that her likelihood of succeeding was low even before taking gender into consideration.

While Gilman frequently depicts older female mentors in her writings, these figures usually mentor younger disadvantaged women, as Miss Yale does for Maggie in The Balsam Fir. Carol Ruth Berkin has argued that these reappearing relationships reflect the influence that Gilman hoped to pass on to future generations of feminists. But Smith’s gender is important because it allows audiences to take his career aspirations seriously because as a male, Smith has a greater chance than most women of overcoming his childhood poverty to achieve success as a playwright. More importantly, Smith’s inability to understand female perspectives on matters of love suggests an attempt by Gilman to condemn the inherent hypocrisy looming over the history of modern drama—the fact that only male playwrights like Ibsen and Shaw were able to publicize onstage their perspectives concerning the “Woman Question.”
By titling her play *Interrupted*, Gilman stresses the importance of her varied use of the word throughout the play to evoke both positive and negative connotations. Interruption is first associated negatively with Smith because he protests the fact that the Widfields and their friends continuously interrupt his attempts to describe his play. Smith and Morgan both complain about being interrupted by a woman, but they regard the interruption in contrasting ways. While Smith wants Alicia’s undivided attention and feels interrupted if she changes the subject away from playwriting, Morgan views the attentions of Stella and Alicia as interruptions from his reading. During Act III, while the audience is meant to assume that Morgan has transferred his affections to Alicia, “interrupted” suggests that Stella’s career had interrupted her marriage to Morgan. But, in keeping with Gilman’s argument that professionalization serves an evolutionary purpose, Stella and Morgan reconcile after discovering that Stella’s career has improved their marriage by balancing their attentions. This final interpretation of “interruption” argues that by interrupting the time a wife spends “womaning around”—that is, seeking the approval of her husband—both spouses better value their time spent together.

When Gilman novelized *Interrupted*, she changed the title to *Won Over*, and in so doing, she transferred the emphasis of the story away from Smith’s ignorance of women’s needs and toward Morgan’s acceptance of Stella’s career. Evolution, according to Gilman, was only briefly “interrupted” by society’s refusal to acknowledge the significance of women’s contribution to evolution—an error that is corrected by “winning over” the hearts and minds of men and women. Gilman’s varied redeployment of the concept of interruption demonstrates her efforts to adapt literary devices to
criticize society in ways that reflect her frequent generic transpositions to and from the
dramatic form.

Great Minds Adapt Alike

In 1914, Gilman received an anonymous letter from a man who claimed to be a
successful writer and an “ardent feminist” who had “long been cogitating upon a means
of bringing [Gilman’s] ideas to the attention of large numbers of average Americans,
instead of allowing them to be in the luxury of a few forerunners.” By dropping the name
of Gilman’s journal, The Forerunner, his proclaimed familiarity with her ideas appears
authentic. He wrote to inform Gilman that he had adapted one of her novels into “a
popular play,” but would not reveal which novel he had converted until after Gilman
guessed. He told her that he submitted the manuscript to a “fearless critic of the drama
and clever producer” who was willing to produce the play after a few minor revisions to
improve “characterisation.” Her novel was easily adapted into a drama, he explains,
“because [Gilman’s] novels are not so much fiction and art as they are pure science—
splendid antiseptic surgical operations upon some mental cancer of society, performed
with the faultless skill and precision of which [she] alone of our thinkers is thinkable.”
Significantly, he “adapted [Gilman’s] dialogue straight” without making any changes.
Knowingly or not, the man clearly agreed with Gilman that drama holds certain
advantages over fiction in the effort to spread reformist beliefs.

Gilman kept two drafts of her response to the anonymous writer, which, along
with his original, are now located at the Schlesinger Library. Her response suggests that
she knew which novel her admirer had converted:

I regret that your interest in Feminism and Gilmanism has let you to waste your
time in dramatizing a copyrighted novel. If you had consulted the author and
owner beforehand you would have saved yourself the misplaced effort. I write plays as well as novels and the one you have selected—conspicuously the only one open to such treatment—was first written as a play, and is intended to be re-written as a play. It is no wonder you “adapted the dialogue straight”—it was taken straight from a play, in large part. If I knew you, trusted you, and thought your dramatic work better than mine (which is quite possible) we might make a business arrangement, but I certainly can make no terms with a post-office box.

Gilman seems certain that she knows which novel received this anonymous writer’s attention, even though neither letter describes a plot or names a title. But Gilman’s belief that the converted story was “the only one open to such treatment” and her admission that the dialogue “was taken straight from” her original play suggests that the novel that he dramatized was Mag-Margorie (originally The Balsam Fir) since, as Frederick Wegener has noted, the novel lifts most of its dialogue from The Balsam Fir (107). And while Gilman shared Interrupted with Annie Russell, she solicited reviews of The Balsam Fir from such prominent figures in the theater industry as William Archer and the production duo Cohan & Harris, which reveals her belief that The Balsam Fir particularly deserved to be performed. The fact that it was “first written as a play, and is intended to be re-written as a play” certainly narrows the possibilities down to The Balsam Fir and Interrupted because both plays were later novelized in Gilman’s journal The Forerunner, which the writer not-so-subtly hints that he read, and both plays seek to stage the theories that defined her contribution to feminist reform Darwinism.

Gilman’s attitude toward the anonymous writer reveals much less dependence on men for theatrical success than her previous attempts to acquire theatrical celebrity endorsements would suggest. By this point, Gilman had finally set herself free from the

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37 The novel converted was probably revealed by the writer’s unexplained colloquial spelling, “caws of women,” although I have been unable to confirm that this colloquialism was used in the dialogue of one of Gilman’s novels.
38 Gilman’s “Three Women” is ruled out by the fact that it is a short story (not a novel) and by the fact that it was adapted into drama, not from it.
struggle to make it in an industry that underappreciated female talent. Had Gilman focused her efforts on publishing her plays before staging them, she might have had a better chance at ultimately securing a producer. After all, each of Ibsen’s plays was published before it was performed. If Gilman’s plays had been published, the anonymous writer would not have needed to “[consult] the author and owner beforehand” in order to know that the novels were originally written as plays.

But had Gilman published her plays instead of staging them, she would have betrayed her desire to deploy drama’s public forum to advance social reform; the evolutionary function of theater relies on its ephemeral ability to mobilize and educate the public. Since Gilman was already well-published, we can assume that she had promoted in print whatever messages she felt could be textually conveyed; other messages, however, required a public forum. Although Gilman surely appreciated the anonymous writer’s characterization of her works as “pure science,” his presumption that she was not a playwright offended her by highlighting the theater industry’s prejudice against female dramatists. Gilman found economic independence as a lecturer by seizing upon her intellectual abilities, and by eventually viewing playwriting as a hobby rather than a profession (which allowed her to reject the man’s offer to stage her novelized play), Gilman preserved the independence she had struggled to earn.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Gilman’s poem, “An Obstacle,” does not reveal the gender of its narrator, which perhaps explains why its portrayal of a person’s imaginative approach to overcoming oppression was admired by both George Bernard Shaw and James Herne. In the poem, the narrator’s mountain path is blocked by “a Prejudice” and the narrator unsuccessfully tries persuasion and force to get around him. (Tellingly, the Prejudice’s gender is revealed.) Finally, Gilman’s narrator tells us,

I approached that awful incubus
With an absent-minded air–
And I walked directly through him,
As if he wasn’t there! (80-81)

Given Gilman’s autobiographical tendencies and her life-long struggle for women’s rights, the poem’s narrator is most likely a woman. Herne, for example, received the poem from his wife, who had herself received it from the feminist Helen Gardener; but Herne personally found the poem “very fine,” which means that he saw its applicability to the overall human struggle against oppression. Shaw so identified with the mountain climber’s struggle against the “Prejudice” that he cited the poem consistently to illustrate the way he felt social reformers should approach injustices.

The poem provides a useful context for viewing Gilman’s playwriting not only because it is associated with figures like Herne and Shaw, but also because it demonstrates how Gilman responded to her repeated failure to succeed in the their industry. Twenty-first century theater remains such a male-dominated industry that Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Paula Vogel often claims that “any woman who is a playwright is already a feminist.” Other contemporary female playwrights, particularly
Sarah Ruhl, often quote Vogel’s aphorism to highlight the obstacles that continue to face women playwrights who seek to stage their perspectives of the human experience. Gilman’s efforts to succeed as a modern dramatist before rare examples of successful women playwrights like Susan Glaspell or Rachel Crothers recalls the climber’s defiance against the “huge and high” Prejudice blocking the mountain path. Even though Gilman never found fame or fortune writing plays, she continued playwriting even after giving up her aspirations for a career in the theater. In so doing, she “walked through” the industry’s gender bias “as if it wasn’t there” and continued to experiment with the form.

In November 1933, a seventy-three-year-old Charlotte Perkins Gilman, stricken with cancer, wrote her cousin and literary executor, Lyman Beecher Stowe, hoping to dramatize the 1892 short story that had already defined her place in American literature.

Look here, I’ve had an idea! I think I told you my “Yellow Wall Paper” came out in the Oct. Golden Book. Why, wouldn’t that make a gorgeous monologue! Stage setting of the room and the Paper, the four windows—the moonlight on the paper—changing lights, and movement—and the woman staring! I could do it myself, in a drawing room and make everybody’s flesh creep…. (Selected Letters 285)³⁹

Today, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is now one of only two Gilman works known to have been staged, and dramatizations of the short story have been produced with stunning frequency since her death in 1935.⁴⁰ Gilman’s theatrical legacy currently resides in this short story, even though she never adapted it herself as a drama (as she did with “Three Women”). But this letter reveals that she herself suggested that the story

³⁹ The rest of this letter indicates that Gilman followed American theater closely even in her final sick years. Referencing an expressionist play by Eugene O’Neill, Gilman continues: “I think it would make a real Emperor Jones’y thing on the stage….Perhaps Kate Hepburn would consider it,—though she’s pretty young. Oh if [Russian-American actress Alla] Nazimova would! She’s not dead is she?”

⁴⁰ In 1912, a women’s organization in London put on Gilman’s short-story-turned-play, Three Women (1911)—the only known performance of a Gilman play-text and the only work staged during her lifetime.
become a dramatic monologue, and her desire so late in life to have her story shared with live theater audiences bookends a long creative life that, from beginning to end, consistently took drama seriously as a public art.
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