

Self and Sexuality: Contemporary British Women Playwrights and the Problem of Sexual Identity

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When Siren Theatre Company was planning its 1986 "Lesbian Thriller" *Pulp*, company members were deliberately moving beyond a familiar feminist critique of male sexual desire and its objectification of women to a less usual analysis of the constitution of female desire: "This play is about placing our desire as women in the context of the culture we are a part of" (Boston).¹

Central to the group's presentation was Jane Boston's appearance as "the film star" in high heels and a tight, suggestive dress. The company played a dangerous and not always successful game, as Boston admits, by combining a critique of traditional forms of desirability with an attempt to reclaim them. Similarly, in *Time Gentlemen Please* (1978), Monstrous Regiment's cabaret/theatre show on women's sexuality, the women were "outrageously over-dressed" in long, low-cut, sequined gowns (Bailey) in counterpoint to their feminist jokes on sex. As theatre which troubled its audience by sending what seemed to be deliberately contradictory messages, both plays highlight the complex issue of women's sexuality in the contemporary British theatre. Playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker, who acknowledges the strong erotic component in her own plays, characterizes the ambiguity which writers now routinely encounter in bringing any sexually-conscious woman to the stage:

Desire is a move towards something. And possibly I have resisted the idea that women don't desire, you know are the objects of desire, but are not active in that sense. . . . I can't really put it more clearly than that. The eroticism for me is not just women's sexuality. It is

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a broader notion . . . it is the desire . . . [to] find what makes us continue.

The issue of sexuality is further complicated by the fact that Siren, Monstrous Regiment, Wertebaker, and others presenting women on stage usually collapse their attention to the body with an exploration of female subjectivity. In play after play, a character's affirmation of her personal or political self seemingly grows out of a rediscovery or confirmation of her sexual nature. This simple equation of self and sexuality, however, does not erase the difficult conjunctions I noted above. In fact, I will argue below that an unselfconscious conflation of selfhood and sexuality is a distortion of both the plays and the world they represent. Theorists in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism are all suggesting--as the performers in *Pulp* and *Time Gentlemen Please* discovered--that connections between sexuality and self are as troubling as they are liberating.

In her outline of Lacanian psychology, Jacqueline Rose stresses that sexuality and subjectivity come into being simultaneously and that an individual's control and understanding of both are subverted, from the beginning, by the unconscious (Rose 27-30). Luce Irigaray adds that a female's problematic position is exacerbated by a male-determined system which further compromises the development of a female subjectivity: "the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (86).² Rose, Irigaray, and others also emphasize the central role of language in the formation of selves; for Rose "the subject is constituted through language" (31), or as Henriques and her colleagues put it, "entry into language inaugurates the production of subjectivity" (215). Feminists who have schooled themselves in this Lacanian psychoanalysis begin by accepting the impossibility of an integrated self; indeed, they have found in Lacan a way of confirming not only the existence of plural selves and mutable sexualities but also the important possibilities for a change in the formation of selves, women's selves in particular. Henriques *et al.* point to the centrality of language and symbolic representation as the basis for transforming our understanding and representation of women's lives (216-17). Catherine Belsey, who also focuses on the linguistically constructed nature of the Lacanian subject, adds that the positing of a linguistic *process* for identity formation is hopeful: "in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation" ("Constructing" 50). Many other researchers, including Jeffrey Weeks, Wendy Hollway, and Carol Vance and Ann Snitow, have made parallel cases, based on a Lacanian world-view, that if historical, social, and cultural forces have helped to "construct" self and sexuality, then both are open to "investigation and judgment--and change" (Weeks 208).

It has been mostly through an emphasis on a transformable sexuality that theorists interested in empowering women have pioneered a way for those women to claim both a body and a self. Kaja Silverman tells us, in her study

of *Histoire d'O*, that female subjectivity begins with the body (327), though she does stress the linguistic component by suggesting that this is a body "written." Through the body we find the self. And although she has cautioned that feminists perhaps agree least on the issue of sexuality (*Feminist Studies* 11), de Lauretis has also been a key contributor to the critical analysis of sexuality, most recently in *Technologies of Gender* where she urges her readers to broaden their analysis of the causes of sexual oppression. She notes that while the search for a female self in a patriarchal society is *always* compromised by the "negativity of woman" (*Technologies* 19), the necessary way to understanding, even counteracting that negativity is by recognizing woman as a construct of a gender-sex system. A woman-defined sexuality and subjectivity may be possible, she suggests, only when women understand the forces of theory and discourse in their lives. In addition, de Lauretis tells us that the creation of female selfhood and sexuality is not so simple as reversing the analyses and practices which have shaped our sexist world; rather, it involves the imagining of different terms. And Irigaray agrees that the quest for female self and sexuality must be more than reversal: "it [reversal] would leave room neither for women's sexuality, nor for women's imagery, nor for women's language to take (their) place" ("This Sex Which is Not One" 33).

While de Lauretis, Irigaray, and Silverman do not bring their analysis to theatre, their work and its assumptions have influenced and are connected to the scarce work which has drawn connections between women in theatre, their sexuality and selves. Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*, her collaboration with Héléne Cixous, metaphorically connects woman's body with theatre by entitling an early part of her study "Signs and Marks: The Theatre of the Body" (10-14). Clément does not look to theatre directly, but the implications of her analogy are clear in Cixous' earlier essay on women in the theatre, "Aller à la Mer": "It is high time that women gave back to the theatre its fortunate position, its *raison d'être* and what makes it different--the fact that there it is possible to get across the living, breathing, speaking body. . . . The scene takes place where a woman's life takes place, where her life story is decided: inside her body, beginning with her blood" ("Aller à la mer" 547). The body is, for both authors, the promising reason to think of women in connection with theatre. The further correlations that Josette Féral urges suggest that for all three women the conjunction of women and bodies in the theatre offers a unique opportunity for women to claim a self-generated sexuality: "Speak the body, express its sexuality, fill the void of NOTHING: 'They invented all of their sexuality while ours was silent. If we invent ours, theirs will have to be completely rethought. And this body of woman is perpetually told and retold in women's plays'" (552).³ Several American theatre critics have joined these French women in finding the theatre a realistic location for patterning a way out of the currently problematic combination of self and sexuality. Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte have stated the most optimistic case, arguing that "women in the subject position" in theatre offer

the possibility of a whole new discourse, one which would include the option of homosexuality (64-65). Jill Dolan joins Case and Forte in believing that woman is the most promising cite for the transmission, through theatre, of radical ontological changes. Yet she adds a caution about the efficacy of relying on actual bodies for such transformations. In her study of performance art she finds, in fact, that the use of nudity may be counterproductive for such an agenda. Working from the Lacanian notion that both desire and sexuality are cultural constructs, she argues that the formation of alternate constructs is more a matter of language and perception than flesh. While the arguments of these theatre critics do not perfectly harmonize, all work from the premise that essential to the search for a female self on stage is an anatomizing of bodies and sexuality. All agree that theatre's combination of the physical and the literary make it a fertile location for explorations of the female self. As the only literary form with options beyond language (which women do not control), theatre provides an arena not so much for challenging the complex psychological formation of identity (though it does do that) but more for harnessing the "potency of social norms and institutional formations" (Weeks 180) for women. As a challenge to other theorists of the theatre, like Herbert Blau, who are telling us that the self may no longer exist in the theatre, these feminist critics have found the theatre very possibly one of women's best chances for self-definition.

For the men whose visions have guided the development of contemporary British drama--I think of the strong influences of Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, and most recently Howard Barker--a mixture of sexuality and violence has been the dominant expression of the physical, for male as well as for female characters. The rape which insistently informs Barker's work is considered disgusting but necessary and true. Although the more comic work by Tom Stoppard, Doug Lucie, Anthony Minghella, and others usually masks the brutality of its objectification, it generally maintains the equation of a woman's self with her position as a sexual object. Jonathan Gems's recent play *Susan's Breasts* (1985) was not particularly retrograde in its treatment of women, yet the play's title seemed to call for what have become polarized responses to current stage appropriations of sexuality, particularly women's sexuality. Feminists faulted the objectification and bodily dissection indicated in Gems's title. And male reviewers proved the validity of such objections by reading the play's title as a sanctioning of sexual objectification. Francis King punned "the only boobs in evidence here are in dramatic technique"; and Kenneth Hurren joined him, quipping "actress Susan's breasts are so little in evidence as to be almost concave." As Lou Wakefield sums up, a gap remains between the perceptions of men and of women writing in theatre. Of the men she notes, "the men who think they are feminists think they have to find a happy end for our bodies. Because for them we are trapped in our bodies." Of the women, I will suggest in the pages to come that they are finding their own, new routes to subjectivity and that those routes incorporate bodies in a range of ways,

almost all of which move women beyond the standard view of them as troubled objects.

We begin with the work of several theatre collectives for whom drawing attention to the physical presence and powers of women's bodies is a basic goal. Both the Scarlet Harlets and Spare Tyre deal in a straight forward, sometimes naive way with connections of self and sexuality.

The hallmark of the Scarlet Harlets' work is their reliance on the body as an apparatus equipped with infinite capabilities. Their shows--usually an integrated series of skits--have been built around skills like dancing, tumbling, juggling, balancing, and tight-rope walking. In the accompanying dialogue, the women's selfhood is clearly related to both the physical and the sexual, though the body is not paraded as a sexual site. Company member Sue Long, in talking of the 1986 show *Toe on the Line*, insisted not only on connecting the physical and the self, but also on shedding the distancing of naturalism, which makes actor and character into two separate selves. "You start from you," she notes, to emphasize that the bold statements on stage have an enhanced truth because the subject is unmediated. Additionally, in Scarlet Harlet shows, the direct connection urged between the self and the physical is unmistakably political. One number from *Toe on the Line* has two actors sharing a single tight-rope as they recall the history of their lesbian love affair. The audience, on the one hand, admires the women's physical skill, balance, and trust; and on the other hand, it will realize that the image of two lesbians teetering on a thin rope is an appropriate "living" metaphor for a sexuality unsanctioned by much of society. This conflation of social comment and physical representation also distinguishes a skit later in the show when the three company members balance on one another to make beautifully shaped living sculptures. Accompanying the balancing is the show's most overt political dialogue, condemning Margaret Thatcher and her Britain. Long reads the combination of physical cooperation and an agenda for social change to say, "look, we all have got these ideas about how we want the world to change, but we can't do it on our own." This collective accepts an equation of a woman's self with her sexuality, making that her clear road to whatever kind of power she wants.

For the women who make up Spare Tyre, the focus is less on physical agility and more on the psychological effects of women's relationships to their bodies. The comedy of Spare Tyre is uplifting as is that of the Scarlet Harlets, but its message more complex. Although most of Spare Tyre's shows to date have been explorations of women's problematic relation to food (company members were inspired by Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*), they have made women and appetite fertile territory for their goal of helping women find selves. In the process of the shows even more than in their specific content lies Spare Tyre's significant contribution to contemporary theatrical attitudes on the female body.

Collective member Katina Noble explains that the company has focused on eating disorders because through them women all too frequently try to cope with problems of self-image:

We are all striving for that perfect body, and we never quite make it. I think it is so universal in Western women's lives, and it is also so bound up with an enormous lack of self-confidence, self-hatred. . . . In a way, if you start to do other things in your life to feel more confident . . . you will feel less self-hatred. You will not turn it in on your body.

Not only do the shows directly address women's everyday problems of self definition and food with songs like "Everytime my Mother Rings, I want a Mars Bar," "Inside Every Fat Person," and "Putting it off til I'm Thinner," but the company has helped establish a network of self-help groups for women with eating disorders. The actors also append consciousness-raising audience discussion to the end of many performances. The critical voices I turned to earlier in this essay would caution against the direct connection groups like Spare Tyre make between the body and the self; they would find naive the assumption that selves can so clearly be transformed by the increased understanding of social and cultural pressures on women's bodies. While to them the change Spare Tyre has brought to its loyal and enthusiastic audience is at best misleading, Spare Tyre's operations and beliefs predominate among theatre practitioners. Noble, like many, claims to have witnessed direct connections between self understanding and a renewed attention to the "questioning of traditional structures and role models."

What the work of the Scarlet Harlets and Spare Tyre clearly shows is how women's theatre has responded to women's negative self-image. Both groups have demonstrated a success in improving the images of the actual women in their audiences with a focus on the abilities of and the cultural distortions to women's bodies. Bryony Lavery's *Time Gentlemen Please* (1978), written for Monstrous Regiment, also begins from women's negative self-image. Yet in this piece which takes sexuality as its explicit subject, the self-conscious persona of cabaret allows for a consideration of issues only touched on in the celebratory work of the Scarlet Harlets and Spare Tyre.

As writer Lavery describes it, *Time Gentlemen Please* evolved from what was, in 1978, "the enormously dangerous choice of doing a show about sex." From the distance of a decade, it is easy to note that the investigations of sexuality here are predictable. At the time, however, the entire operation was encoded quite differently. For example, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, costuming was provocative with the men outfitted in dark, discreet suits, a distinct contrast to the women "exposed" in "exotic variations on the black and silver trappings of slinky cabaret costume" (Wandor 71). The show's exposure of traditional expectations in heterosexual sex was similarly

controversial. The song "Time Gentlemen Please," addressed to men, criticizes male sex as too urgent, quick, and harsh:

Why all the hurry? Lay back for a little while
 Take all the time you need, do it with perfect style
 Why all the worry? Oh, why spoil a fine affair?
 Take all the time you need, I'll still be there.

Time Gentlemen Please
 Taking time's not a disease

Taking time's aiming to please
 Time Gentlemen, freeze.

The dialogue "Last Night" contrasts this male behavior with the show's more favored female response. In this skit, one of the actors teases us with her detailed account of "weeks of patient work" with a seemingly shy man that lead her not to the "tender, friendly sex" she had longed for, but to a 45-minute gymnastic encounter that leaves her achy, bruised, and bored--and leave him murmuring "terrific." The gap between male and female behaviors outlined in these two segments is representative of other material in the show. Yet as the show toured, this seemingly tame feminist critique drew criticism and misunderstanding along with support. Such direct talk about sex from a woman's point of view was unsettling.

The combination of female subjectivity and sexuality was, in fact, nothing short of explosive. First of all, as Sandy Bailey of Monstrous Regiment reports, in many of the places the show toured--working-class men's clubs, trade union halls, communist party conferences--the women's suggestive costumes were not read as parody. Audience members took the exposed, accented flesh as they were accustomed to, as a sign of women's sexual objectification. This regressive response was accompanied, secondly, by protest from progressive women's groups and lesbian groups who objected to the show's almost exclusive focus on heterosexuality. Lavery acknowledges the limited sexual scope of the show, but notes that in this cabaret (as in the Scarlet Harlots and the Spare Tyre shows) the sexuality presented grew directly from the heterosexual experience of the six actors--"we were doing the show on our own experience of sex." Such a defense did nothing, however, to stop the protests against the show, protests which climaxed in Leeds when radical feminists and gays succeeded in stopping one performance. Objections to the show were raised on a second basis when detractors noted how the sexual discussion and self exploration were based exclusively on middle-class experience. As writer Lavery answered the first charge, so director Susan Todd answered this second one by arguing that with their grounding in a particular sexuality and a particular class, the performers were claiming a sexuality for all women:

[T]he women performers deconstruct their traditional mode of stage presence and abandon coyness, terror and selfdoubt for a direct expression of sexuality. . . . That particular transformation was fought for very hard and it represents a victory for each woman over selfdenigration. (*Morning Star*, November 28, 1978; Wandor 72)

Both Lavery and Todd assume in their defenses that there is a direct connection between an individually emerging sexuality and a stronger self. Objections were raised on the same basic premise. I will conclude my study of *Time Gentlemen Please* by showing, however, that the show encourages a more complex attitude to sexuality than either its defenders or its detractors have suggested in the heat of argument.

In her opening monologue, for example, Mary introduces "identity" as a problematic concept as she expresses her fears of admitting her sexual nature to her mother: "I would hate my mother to see this cabaret. . . . If there's just one person like my mother in the audience tonight, I'm scared." The sexuality that will, throughout the show, serve as the basis for self-abnegation as well as for self-affirmation thus begins as a relative construct dependent on a tie as volatile as a mother-daughter relationship. This awareness of the constructed nature of sexuality extends to language in at least two numbers from the show. Mary, again, begins one such analysis by asking the audience, "When you were a kid, did you have a special word for 'shit'?" Moving from the bodily to the explicitly sexual, she notes that the words for sexual pleasure, "orgasm" for example, aren't women's. After telling us "we shouldn't be afraid of using our own words for these things," she proposes her substitutions: "gloop" for vagina, "Wah hey" for orgasm. She concludes that our present vocabulary of sex fortifies a divisive (what we'd now call essentialist) male and female world. Implied in her comic analysis are some basics of feminist linguistic analysis, most importantly her assumption that language is patriarchal to such a degree that we can't know ourselves. The show's male corollary to this female meditation is a brief exchange between two of the men, Keith and Clive; their "dialogue" on romantic and/or sexual involvement is nothing more than a pastiche of lines from pop songs. Once more the message is that our sexual responses are conventionalized and coded almost beyond our control, usually beyond our consciousness.

Finally, the desire in the show to move beyond conventional sex and simplistic equations of self and sexuality are present, in a small way, in the song "I went to a Marvelous Orgy" where multiple sexual partners are celebrated and, in a large way, in a monologue full of admissions about sexual confusion. I won't overstate the case: none of the examples I have brought together in these last two paragraphs makes a clear-cut case for privileging complicated constructions of self and sexuality. Yet *Time Gentlemen Please* suggests that even in the relatively simple world of women's cabaret, attention

to women's subjectivity and their bodies is complex. The portraits of women's selves and their sexualities are still more diffuse as we turn to fully-scripted plays.

Sue Townsend's *Womberang*, Nell Dunn's *Steaming*, and Jacqueline Rudet's *Basin* are representative of the most significant attitudes to self and sexuality conveyed in recent work. Sue Townsend's first play, *Womberang* (1979), is a pleasantly predictable play in which a group of people, mostly women, gathered in the waiting room of a gynaecological clinic come to some startling self realizations in a body-rich atmosphere. The central character, Rita, transformed into a feminist "activist" by her experiences with divorce, breakdown, and therapy, leads the other women in recognizing their bodies as their own. She motivates Mrs. Connelly to give up her corset and then dance, nearly nude, on waiting room benches. She helps Audrey and James to consummate their marriage, for the first time, in the waiting room changing cubicles. And she declares pregnant Lynda the joyous provider of "the next generation" (96). A good deal of talk about female medical conditions--menopause, dropped wombs, and fertility--accompanies the actual display of bodies. A celebratory feeling grows from the play's multiple transformations, enhanced by gin and a rebellion against hospital administrators. This play's newly recovered selves appear too quickly to be taken as naturalistic portraits of self-affirmation, but the magic of comedy makes the changes effective in a different way. Theatre reviewer Ned Chaillet reported that "the laughter seems motivation enough"; and Townsend's idea is clearly that the recovery of self through body can be best offered as a real possibility for the audience through a shared laughter. Outside of intimations that Rita, like Mrs. Connelly, may be dying, the play is unclouded by shadows, including the recognition that recovering the self is not usually so easy.

While it too involves the discovery of bodies and self in a group environment, Nell Dunn's *Steaming* (1981) allows for a deeper probing of the possible pathways to self discovery. The play presents the relationship of six women who form alliances during their visits to a London Turkish bath. The atmosphere is charged with attention to sexuality both in the talk--which ranges from Josie's energetic fantasies to discussion of marital and extra-marital sex--and in the display of bodies. Four of the six characters appear completely nude at some point, and the women invite our attention to this bodily ambience through mirrors, hugs, massages, and kisses.⁴ Without question, Dunn depends on this intensified physicality to depict a group of women rediscovering selves. Her epigraph privileges a bold subjectivity--"a warrior/Takes responsibility for his acts" (Carlos Castaneda). And character Nancy's move to responsibility is exemplary. From hatred for her mirror image--"God, is that face really mine?" (38)--she comes to a self-affirming thirst for "sexual desire and sexual experience, that melting" (70). As Dunn succinctly puts it, Nancy "had to accept herself physically in order to grow up." Dunn adds, speaking of all the women characters' progress to subjectivity: "I

certainly think there is some idea of revealing themselves, of emotional honesty that went with physical nakedness. I wanted that lovely feeling, here I am."

Yet Dunn's correlation between self discovery and bodily acceptance is far from direct, especially as this play is translated into a theatre space. Dunn calls a "dig at men" her decision to keep the one male character, Bill, behind a glass door. This restriction announces to the audience that men, not women, must accept shadow selves in this world. Yet in the space thus declared fertile for female subjectivity, the multi-dimensional presence of bodies becomes a slippery rock on which to build selves. As Dolan suggests in her analysis of American theatre, real bodies may not be the most effective material with which to study real bodies. In my own experience of watching this play in its 1983 transfer to London's Comedy Theatre, I registered a hush from the audience as Josie first undressed on stage. Ironically, the audience's response to nudity replicated those of characters Dawn and Nancy. Like these two bodyshy women, who must slowly acclimatize themselves to the fleshy environment and who can undress unself-consciously only late in the play, the audience too attempted to accept such uninhibited stage action as wholesome, not titillating. Yet as Dunn knowingly admits, production of the play has not always invited or allowed this vital transition. I do not think it happened in the audience I was a part of. In fact, Dunn found the West-End, transfer production deliberately playing to an audience amused by the women's bodies (the Broadway playbill takes things a step further by making light of an audience with "lonely gentlemen with raincoats on their laps" [36]). She herself could no longer watch. The problems created by the display of bodies was also exacerbated in this production by the very traditional matching of body type to character type. The two most traditionally good-looking bodies belonged to the actresses playing the more "successful" middle-class women, Nancy and Jane; working-class, man-pleaser Josie was fleshy; and Vi was as corpulent as she was pushy. Two later productions have suggested the continuing nature of the problems the play invites with its physical focus. In the Isle of Man, Henry Callow, the bailiff, put out an edict against the play's performance in 1986.⁵ Dunn herself recalls how another theatre company felt compelled to call for a matinee in which the audience was nude; a town council banned the performance. This play will always force its audience to connect self growth to the acceptance of a character's body. But the seriousness with which its message is taken will be variable. Instead of clarifying the feminist link between subjectivity and sexuality, this play and its production history problematize it.

Steaming connects emergence of the self to a warm, though sometimes darkened welcoming of bodies and sexuality. Yet its nudity and its comedy, two qualities which might be expected to ease the personal transformations, do just as much to introduce complications. The group context in this play and in *Womberang* mark another central qualification to the deliberations over self in many contemporary plays. By placing all individual growth so firmly within

a group framework, Dunn and Townsend (like many others) offer something of an analogy on the subject and its multiple nature. These two plays are representative in that the selves they nurture do not mature individually but as components of group interactions. Just as psychologists are now counseling us to understand the "self" as a plurality of attitudes and not as a unity, these playwrights are making self affirmation a necessarily shared and multi-directional process.

Jacqueline Rudet's *Basin* (1985), like Townsend's and Dunn's plays, is aware of its feminist portraiture of self growth and is, like the earlier plays, eased by its comedy and its community of women (the community here is, however, smaller). But while Townsend and Dunn focus on the connections of self and sexuality in a white, heterosexual world, Rudet examines the emergence of a self conditioned by black culture and lesbianism. Again the lives of the play's three women, Mona, Susan, and Michele, are heavily conditioned by familiar societal responses to and expectations about bodies and sex. The three chat early in the play about their often tempestuous and not quite satisfying relationships to men. Desire is unmistakably central in the women's lives. But a focus on the heterosexual sex the women have known begins to shift, first when Susan concludes a long speech with a hint of other possible sexualities: "what I'm struggling to say is that I think I'm growing tired of that lovable, household pet known as the boyfriend" (120). The transfer to a woman-oriented sexuality is considered metaphorically when Susan later talks of basins. A Jamaican mother will give her young daughter (a four-year-old daughter) a basin to wash her "kookalook" (129) in before bed each night, training her in feminine hygiene in preparation for marriage. Thus the basin represents women's enslavement to men's sexual desires. Yet the basin concurrently represents female tradition and community, and it is on this second connotation of the word that the play makes its major turn. As Susan and Mona give up their heterosexual lives to become lovers, they reclaim the basin for themselves. They also reclaim a Jamaican term, "Zammies." "Zammies" is a word which means close friends, intimate and perhaps sexual friends; it is what these two women in the play become.

Rudet, like Townsend and Dunn, uses this sexually-charged world as a foundation for considering the female self. And a clear line is drawn. On the one hand, the female self, as defined in relations with men, is considered weak. Here Michele provides the primary evidence. Mona says of Michele first, "Like I said, you rely too much on men. You've never been alone for two minutes. You don't even know who you are and what you're capable of" (117). Shortly after, Susan adds, "You seem to upset me whenever I see you. You keep saying, 'Things will get better' but its not 'things' that need to get better. It's you!" (119). And by the end of the play, Michele can only manage a feeble "self" defense. She says to Mona, "I still love and respect you and Susan, but you mustn't condemn me for loving Michael. Sometimes people find themselves unable to resist things that are bad for them" (138). Both Mona

and Susan too have been short changed in self development while living their lives for men. Susan explains the developmental situation of all three women, noting that the formation of the female self in a Caribbean culture prepares women for men, but also, inadvertently, aligns them with women:

Do you know what really hurts? The fact that I wasn't given a choice how I should experience my first fuck. Caribbean girls don't have the chance to enjoy childhood, we're catapulted into womanhood from an early age!

How can I help but feel a special warmth towards other black women. You see, not only do I love you but I know how it is to be how you are. (124-25)

Thus, on the other hand, only the female self that is formed together with other women allows women understanding, freedom, and choice. It is this second female, often lesbian self that the play celebrates. Finding the self and its sexuality crippled at best in the heterosexual sphere, *Basin* urges consideration of an all-female alternative. Rudet's portrayal of the inter-relationship of self and sexuality is representative of many efforts to establish women's subjectivity through separatist politics.

Rudet's radical politics are also in evidence in the second trio of plays I wish to consider. These second three plays focus on the institutional, social, and cultural forces which affect the development of self and sexuality to create a theatre less stable, more angry, and perhaps in the end more realistically forward looking.

Jude Alderson's *The Virgins' Revenge* (1985) offers an even more direct assault on traditional concepts of female sexuality than is found in *Time Gentlemen Please* or *Basin*; it does so by shifting the grounds of investigation to examine the commodification of women's self and sexuality.

The play is a collection of four scenes which move us from 2004 AD to Victorian London to mythical Greece to the present. In each scene the two main characters, Philomela and Psyche, cope with events conditioned by some sort of sexual prostitution. Both work in the "Sexual Services" division of a 21st century Selfridge's in the first scene. The governmentally sanctioned sale of sex is effectively dissolving for these women the empowering connection of self and sexuality. As a consequence, Psyche's energies are expended in remembering a distant, prehistoric time when women controlled both their selves and their sex: "When we worked in those temples we had so much power. We were chosen women. Goddesses" (8). She also remembers the loss of such female priority: "But they harnessed my power and built things that bent nature. And then they built things that bent people's minds. And they started with language" (10). This contrast between what women have had

and could have, on the one hand, and what they *do* have, on the other, is the major dialectic from which the play operates.

The division splits the women linguistically, temporally, and physically in the final scene when Philomela and Psyche perform a strangely harmonized duet. Phil remembers back through other women to embroider "an exquisite picture of matrilineal paradise" (43) which ends with her promise, "mother your virgin is singing for revenge" (47). Psyche supports Phil's visionary journey with a down-to-earth, feminist revision of history. Although this counterpointed dialogue introduces the triumphant ending in which the women bake their centuries-long pimp/lover Terry in a pie, any victory is compromised by the play's opening scene, which initiates action by signaling us that even 2004 AD has not seen the end to the institutionalized co-opting of women's bodies. The play's movement back and forth between women's subjection to male notions of desire and women's subject status in defining their own sexuality offers a more complicated model of female sexuality than we have encountered above.

To enhance this counterpoint, Alderson depends on the dislocations of several formal devices: time is not chronological, the narrative moves laterally as much as forward; songs complicate the interpretation of scenes; the realistic and the non-realistic conjoin; and men never appear on stage. Yet Alderson's manipulation of language and silence provides her clearest comment on the images of sexuality in *The Virgins' Revenge*. In Scene One, when Psyche discourses on women's pre-historic power and their subsequent loss of it, she makes language the main cite of the battle, as I noted above. She pauses specifically over the word "virgin," the meaning of which, she tells us, men reduced from an "independent woman of strength and mystery" to "a woman who's never been fucked" (10). Building up their vocabulary with "whore," men further succeeded in splitting "the same woman . . . in two" (10). Psyche's angry story about this transformation of women from subjects to subjected is paralleled by Phil's story of silencing, replayed in sometimes muted form in each of the four scenes. The mythological Phil, of course, has her tongue cut out by Tereus to prevent her telling a tale of sexual abuse. The linguistic loss is presented more symbolically in the Victorian segment where Phil--playing out fantasies for paying male customers--is told by Psyche, "If you speak out but *one word* he will not pay" (25).

Alderson's play is angry, violent, and confrontational. Through its assaults, it offers an investigation of sexuality which does not retreat from the complex nature of the issue. Timberlake Wertenbaker, in *New Anatomies* (1981), likewise offers a sophisticated analysis of sexuality and its institutional and cultural contexts. Together with her cross-gender casting and her main character Isabelle's dream of a genderless existence, Wertenbaker presents an incisive analysis of sexuality. I pointed earlier to Wertenbaker's consciousness of the complex nature of desire. While at one moment she acknowledges that "eroticism is *very* liberating," at the next she qualifies herself remembering that

the etymology of "eros" links it to both the erotic *and* to the asking of questions. This focus on knowledge, more specifically on a political knowledge, is what distinguishes Wertebaker's theatre. She sadly notes the current division in British drama of left-wing political drama from "sexualized" plays, having found that discussions of sexuality are often seen as "anti-socialist." In her work, however, she strives to combine politics with the "enjoyment of life" (the combination is modeled along lines she finds in Eurocommunism). *New Anatomies* portrays Wertebaker's focus on knowing, on the indivisibility of sexuality and a broader political realm.

During Isabelle's opening speech, when she mumbles "I need a fuck" (299), Wertebaker establishes this play's hard-edged portrait of sex. Moments later, when Isabelle addresses her chronicler Severine, her imagery is equally startling: "Your face looks like a big hungry European cock" (300). In the third scene, when Isabelle's sister Natalie coolly says of marital sex "You get used to it," Isabelle interprets the statement to mean "Brutal pain and brutal pleasure, and after, languor" (308). The romance, warmth, and intimacy which informed the physical in *Time Gentlemen Please*, *Womberang*, and *Steaming* are absent. The toughness in Wertebaker's play explains the breakdowns in love and desire in the play; these are most disturbingly present in the dissolution of Isabelle's family. But more importantly, the play's harsh portraits of sexuality make the characters' breakthroughs in connecting self and sexuality more rewardingly different. The difference is first established in the intimacy Isabelle and her brother Antoine share as children. Their love includes lingering embraces, terms of endearment like "beloved" (303-4), and shared dreams of defying conventionality. Though there are suggestions of incest, theirs is an innocent connection, and the only relationship in the play which succeeds--though only for a while--in denying societal restrictions on affection. With reclaiming this non-gendered childhood utopia as her goal, Isabelle dedicates her adult life to recreating the conditions necessary to nurture such love. She realizes, however, that she must challenge social and political orders as well as gender conventions to allow for all the freedoms she wants.

I want to pause over two specific moments during which she struggles to define the new sexuality which can allow her to love and be herself. First during their conversation in the Paris salon--the scene in which women dressed as men far outnumber women dressed as women--Isabelle and Severine consider unconventional blueprints for physical relations:

Severine: We could travel together. I'd enjoy that.

Isabelle: Do you really like women?

Severine: (Seductive) Have you lived in the Orient and remained a prude?

Isabelle: Me? Ha!

Severine: There are thousands of women in this city who would do anything to be made love to by me. But I like women with character.

Isabelle: I'm not a woman. I'm Si Mahmoud. I like men. They like me. As a boy, I mean. And I have a firm rule: no Europeans up my arse. (327)

As Severine opens Isabelle's eyes to the possibility of lesbian attachments, Isabelle dreams of a different unconventionality--attachments of men to men (her comment is complicated, of course, by her being female). The many layers of possibility in this exchange are indicative of the ways in which this play presents the self more as a collection of possibilities than as a unified whole. The self's sexuality is also diversified and plural. A second moment, this one near the end of the play, similarly points to the complexities of sexual desire. As she describes the challenges to and changes in her sexuality while cloistered with men at a desert monastery, Isabelle refuses to interpret her actions in a single or predictable way:

There were many young men of great beauty in those rooms, and we don't hate love. But I couldn't join. They would know I was not completely a man, and also, much of that was gone. Slowly, slowly, the torment of the senses opens to the modulation of the dunes. Only a ripple here and there betrays the passage of the storm. (337)

More than any other play I have considered, Wertebaker's *New Anatomies* presents a portrait of self which is mutable and multiple. The analysis of sexuality, similarly, suggests that we change and we choose our desires, always conditioned by our knowledge of political and social contexts. Our possibilities for happiness depend on our abilities to analyze the forces which shape us.

The connection between social and cultural contexts and the construction of female sexuality that both Alderson and Wertebaker point to also undergirds Sarah Daniels' comprehensive portrait of female self and sexuality in *Byrthrite* (1986). In her foreword to the published version of the play, Jalna Hanmer glosses the play's combined attention to the patriarchal construction of female bodies and the historically difficult development of female subjectivity. She concludes: "The use of medicine and science controlled by men to challenge the independence and subjectivity of women continues as does the challenge to it by women." As a part of that "challenge by women," Daniels' play suggests that comedy serves well as the primary mode for current theatrical analyses of women's self and sexual identity. The play takes place in seventeenth century Essex where a group of young women have created some less-than-sanctioned ways of convening themselves. These range from support groups for lying-in and birthing to nascent theatre companies to female

soldiering. Until her death near the end of the play, 70-year-old Grace is the spiritual guide of the group, sustaining its forays into such dangerous behavior (especially dangerous considering the prevalence, at this time, of witch hunts). In action which moves the women to fuller realization of patriarchal power as well as to a strengthened female subversion of such power, bodies are of central concern. We hear of or see anorexia, wet nurses, rape, menstruation, mothering, bleeding (as a medical cure), birth (including new seventeenth-century technologies like forceps), and sex--heterosexual, lesbian, and gay. Daniels balances a realization of the negative effect of male control of women's bodies against her characters' mounting of a challenge to such power. Early in the play, the most central character, Rose, voices the complete loss of self the patriarchy forces on women through control of their bodies. As she complains to Grace about the unwanted attentions of a farmer, she concludes, "I hate my body. . . . I hate mere thought of touching bodies never mind else" (13). But by late in the play, Grace counteracts Rose's self negation by declaring women's bodies the cite of their power:

Our sex with its single power to give birth, pose a threat to men's power over whole order of villages, towns, counties and countries. That control depends on women cur-tailing to men's ideal of how they should behave. (39)

In the world of this play, so created to sensitize us to the possibilities for self identity and growth in women's bodies, Daniels maps a way to create female subjectivity where only male subjectivity has before been known. This body-based movement from a male to a female order is the direction of the other plays I have examined, but in *Byrthrite* the building of a new order is perhaps the most complete. In her early self-deprecatory fashion, Rose dismisses her way of thinking by noting it "is connected but not in a straight-line way" (13); similarly, Daniels' creation of female subjectivity unfolds in anything but a "straight-line way." It builds from a critique of men and their institutions toward detailing a female way, with its own focus on sexuality and language.

As reviewers of the play noted, Daniels' criticism of men and the world they have created is constant, tough, and bitter. Played by a single actor, the men who *do* appear act reprehensibly, attempting brutal rape, murderous doctoring, and careless soldiering. As Jane and Rose (both posing as soldiers) ponder the behavior of men at the opening of Part Two, Jane seems to summarize the conclusion about men that the play as a whole projects--men must claim their power negatively, through death:

So then, and I've been thinking on this, maybe is compensation for their inabilities. Alarmed that they cannot give life they do find glory in death. Surely that serves as explanation enough as to why

they oft set themselves dangerous tasks for no other purpose than
to prove themselves--t'is envy of birth. (20-21)

To elaborate on the specific problems men have created for the world, Daniels has her characters expose what they see as the limitations of four crucial patriarchal institutions: the church, the class system, the military, and medicine. The church is woefully represented by a parson who finds all women, including his wife Helen, evil, and who forecasts nineteenth-century psychology in categorizing any irregular behavior of his wife as "hysterical humour" (24). A misguided parishoner's mangling of The Lord's Prayer further suggests the shallowness of the church: "Our father witch chart in heaven/Hello to thy brain/Give us this day our daily bread/Forgive us our panes" (24). The class system and its monarchical roots are similarly demonized. The class privilege of Lady H has given her position, but little power and no knowledge; she gives up her money to claim a truer self among the community of peasant women. An anti-royalist message is similarly sent through the little we find out about the war. What we *do* know is that the women soldiers are rightly on the anti-royalist side.

The greatest share of the play's anti-patriarchal energy is directed against the military and medicine, the two main sources of the men's deathpower. The fact that three women pass as soldiers for part of the play mocks the bravado we usually associate with the military. An even more direct critique of military war machines is voiced through the peace protests the women stage in London. And the one male soldier attempts a rape for which two women soldiers kill him. The most intensive institutional scrutiny is reserved for professional medicine, just gaining its first foothold in the play's seventeenth century. While only one doctor appears in the course of the play, the shadow of the profession's quickly growing power unsettles the women in a most basic, because bodily, way. The spectre of modern science and its substitutions for midwives and female support at birth are a main subject of four of the play's five songs. Each of the songs forces on us a Brechtian linguistic catapulting from a seventeenth-century dialect to a twentieth-century technical vocabulary. Rupture is also the topic of the songs. Two verses of "From a Dish to a Dish" suggest the alarms Daniels sounds against the scientific and medical moves which begin in the play's century:

And hormonal manipulation is bombing women's ovaries
And it's unethical not to experiment on spare embryos.
We're in charge of the future, the future perfect nation,
We're in charge of women's bodies, and isn't she a sensation.

I look at her in the Petri dish
And I fuck her with scientists' wish
That I'll create a full-grown dish

Who'll satisfy my every wish
And I'll father the perfect nation. (36)

One of the primary alternatives to the disturbing world these institutions circumscribe is the sexuality of the play's women. For most of them, that sexuality is defined as lesbianism. While heterosexual relations, ironically, empower women to bring forth life, they are not part of the play's resolution. Related to this female sexual alignment is Rose's learning that while dressing as a man brings her new freedoms, it distances her from her self. The play's resolution in a purely female sexual world is not, however, the main basis on which Daniels portrays a reclamation of the self. The power of language is the primary force of the feminist order Daniels proposes.

There are nearly as many references to language as to bodies in the play. Many of the early comments on "tongues" carry with them both positive connotations of female assertiveness and negative connotations which connect a talkative woman with shrewishness. Other comments provide direct indictments of male control of symbolic language. As the play's women begin to gain power, however, language becomes one of their primary tools. For example, just after Mary complains of the potential power men will gain with the printing press, we discover that both Rose and Grace can claim the same power, since they read and write. The women's further acuity in language is clear in their own amateur etymology. Helen notes that for most men Eve is "but a misspelling of Evil" (29). Rose more materially deconstructs Lady H's use of the phrase "for love nor money" noting, "I was but musing on our language. Where the words 'for love' mean 'for nothing'" (34).

Two very public displays of this female command of language convince us of the women's abilities to make political use of the linguistic powers they are acquiring. Helen's transformation from subservient wife to Quaker preacher provides the first example of the women's public linguistic control. Having made a central part of her new sermonizing agenda pointing out "the nature of women's accumbrements" (28), Helen preaches to crowds of women (like that gathered in an inn in Part Two, Scene Two) with a rousing feminist rhetoric:

The battle of men against men is not the war of our time but the fight women have had for their lives. We have shaken their opinion of us as the weaker sex . . . And they have responded with ways more forceful than ever before. Now is not the time for slowing down, for our lives swing more lightly in the balance than ever before. (37)

Second and even more central to the play is Rose's bold claim to the public sphere of playwrighting. We know, from early in the play, that a primary motivation for the women's gatherings has been to work out a performance of

the play Rose is writing. Grace even expresses her dream of forming "a band of traveling players to go from county to county entertaining women" (19). A troupe is never formed, but Daniels' self-reflexive concentration on play-wrighting (this even includes Daniels' self-parodic scene during which Grace and Rose discuss the relation of art to life, 38-41) makes us more aware than even the Brechtian songs of the connection between this play and contemporary empowerment. The final action, which consists of the women burying Rose's play along with Grace's body, tells us plainly that Rose's play and its language are our own:

Jane (remembering): That's why I brought this box for copied version to be secured within and buried next to Grace.

Rose: But it's not had a life yet.

Helen: So if it doesn't come to pass in your lifetime one day when you're long gone it'll be uncovered.

Rose: But s'pose it never gets unearthed?

Jane (turning to face Rose): You're not the only woman in the world, Rose. (44)

With a new language, like these of women's religion and women's drama, women can define and defend their selves and their sexuality.

Even in her exuberance, however, Daniels never forgets the connection between an empowering language and its physical connections. Deaf Ursula's signing, especially during the dumbshow of Part Two, Scene Eight, is a slick reminder of the inseparability of body and language. The women's future plans to reclaim their "byrthrite" likewise forget neither body nor language. Lady H's goal is to set up schools for midwives (35, 43), while Rose's is "teaching girls to read and write" (43). Michael Billington, one of many critics who found more to criticize than to praise in the play, complained of Daniels' conjoining of a feminist critique of patriarchy and the successful recovery of selves: "The arguments about methods of childbirth are grafted arbitrarily onto an upbeat story about female self-discovery." Yet it is this play's melding of a forceful exposure of patriarchy and a coherent, joyous counterpoint that makes it representative of women's stage presentations of identity and its sexual roots.

As de Lauretis puts it, "the stakes, for women, are rooted in the body" ("Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" 12). The authors of the plays I have considered here leave little doubt that they work from some connection between self-growth and sexuality. The more complicated relationships between the self and sexuality that practitioners of psychology, anthropology,

and literary criticism are probing take on a variety of manifestations in the theatre. While for some writers a direct line between a feminist awareness of sexuality and the freedom to express the self must be privileged, as many more are grappling with the complexities of multiple selves and mutable sexualities. If identity is a "strategy" as de Lauretis suggests ("Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" 9), the theatrical search for it will continue to necessitate a knowledge of the constructed nature of society, gender, and sexuality.

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Ames

Notes

1. Material from interviews I conducted between February and May of 1986 has been used throughout the text. Interviews with the following people are cited: Jude Alderson, director and playwright; Sandy Bailey, administrator of Monstrous Regiment; Jane Boston, founder member of Siren Theatre Company; Nell Dunn, playwright; Bryony Lavery, playwright; Sue Long, actor member of Scarlet Harlots; Katina Noble, actor member of Spare Tyre; Lou Wakefield, actor, director, and playwright; Michelene Wandor, playwright and critic; and Timberlake Wertenbaker, playwright.

2. On the related notion of whether or not we can still reasonably talk of "subjects" and "selves" in a world as understood by deconstruction, see Nancy Miller. She argues that "because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis . . . her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, is structurally different" (106).

3. Feral's quotation is from Annie Leclerc, *Parole de Femme* (Paris, 1974) 53.

4. According to Dunn, the amount of nudity depends on the individual production. I refer to her own suggestions in stage directions in noting that two-thirds of the characters appear nude.

5. The play was replaced by *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*. See the report in the *International Herald Tribune*, April 10, 1986, 16.

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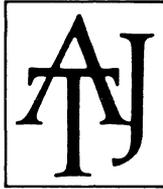
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