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Look forward in anger: non-orthodox structure in the works of Kane, Parks, and Morrison

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LOOK FORWARD IN ANGER: NON-ORTHODOX STRUCTURE IN KANE, PARKS, AND
MORRISON

by

Alison Ruth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Theatre Arts (Dramaturgy) in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Art Borreca

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MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Alison Ruth

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Theatre Arts (Dramaturgy) at the May 2017 graduation.

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To Nina Morrison and Lukas Brasherfons

“If we added up all of women’s depression – all our compulsive smiling, ego-tending, and sacrifice; all our psychosomatic illness, and all our passivity – we could gauge our rage’s unarticulated, negative force.”

Julia Lesage
Women’s Rage

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between dramatic structure and women's responses to oppression. By looking at *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, *Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3* by Suzan-Lori Parks, and *Féminaal* by Nina Morrison, I examine the ways that questions of structure become questions of gender. I argue that these plays' forms are purposeful embodiments of resistance and that the energetic connection between these plays is a current of anger.

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Introduction

This thesis explores Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, Suzan-Lori Parks' *Father Comes Home From the Wars*, and Nina Morrison's *Féminaal* and looks at the relationship between dramatic structure and responses to female oppression. While there is much scholarship written about Kane and Parks, Morrison's *Féminaal* has yet to be published and is relatively unknown. Regardless of the established nature of these works each of them exemplify how dramatic structure, like other confining social structures, is primed for only a certain type of person and story. They illuminate how shocks to this system challenge not only drama, but also other systems of structure that influence our perceptions of gender, race, and sexuality.

As the original production dramaturg for *Féminaal*, I was able not only to track the development of the script, but also to talk with Nina Morrison about her motivations for writing the play. What I remember most vividly from our conversations was my excitement at finding an artistic collaborator who seemed as frustrated and impatient as I did with contemporary plays that were bafflingly tone deaf to issues of sexism. Even more unsettling was witnessing the endless praise that seemed to be heaped on these works. As a result, our discussions moved back and forth between her play and the current political and social climate we were making theater in. I was fascinated and energized by Nina's ideas about subverting dramatic forms that male artists used to create work that was formally exciting but filled with content that felt like an endorsement of the power imbalance between men and women. Through this collaboration I became curious about the

relationship between feminism and dramatic form. Thus, my development as a new play dramaturg led me to a new understanding of extant plays by women. I wondered in what ways other women playwrights were using form for their unique ends.

Placing these three writers side by side, though two are prominent masters of the craft, and one is an “early career” playwright, allows me to explore my strategies as a dramaturg in plays that provide models for this type of structurally subversive storytelling. Analysis of these three plays, which have never been examined beside one another, provide a unique way to look at where deviations from Aristotelian structure point to threads that sew responses to subsumed anger into the fabric of the play. I am interested in how Kane, Parks, and Morrison step outside established frameworks and why those frameworks are ill fitting for their ambitions. This thesis argues that these plays’ forms are purposeful embodiments of resistance against oppression and that the energetic connection between these plays is a current of anger.

When I speak of Anger in this text, I am using the word as a catch-all for the many complex reactions to an historical oppression. The word “anger” has its roots in the Old Norse word “anгр,” which means something closer to grief, sorrow, distress, and agony. It is partially with this broader definition that I use the term, though I have a sense that the word for the largeness of feeling I am exploring does not have a name. What I want to talk about is “anger” augmented with a sense of resistance to oppression, chronic silencing, and the result of a million large and small political and personal slights. I am not only speaking of anger in a personal

sense. I mean Anger in a way that suggests something greater and tied to history. In general, Western culture has placed a sort of prohibition on women's outright expressions of anger. I am examining how these women use playwriting as a way to unearth a phenomenon that lives partially underground.

There is little disagreement across disciplines that a patriarchal society has negative effects on women and their ability to fully realize and express themselves. Scholar Kristin Borgwald describes how patriarchal pressure enforces the idea that women should be selfless caretakers and consequently their desires, interests, and voices are ignored. This causes women to not trust their own judgment and experience. Borgwald writes "Either she does not trust that her thoughts are reasonable and dismisses them internally, or she communicates her thoughts with hesitation causing others to doubt her" (70). This is especially detrimental when it comes to expressions of anger because as Psychologist Harriet Lerner describes, anger is "a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right" (1) In the way that physical pain alerts us that the body is being harmed, the pain that manifests itself as anger signals emotional or ethical damage. Lerner states that anger "preserves the integrity of our self" (1). On a personal level, this affects women deeply, but on a cultural level the impact has been profound as well. And while it is possible that there are inherent or biological differences in the way anger is expressed in men and women, there is no doubt discrepancy in how society acts towards displays of anger shown by men versus women.

As feminist scholar Julia Lesage notes, there are “few conceptual or social structures through which we [women] might authentically express our rage.... in the sphere of cultural production there are few dominant ideological forms that allow us even to think ‘women’s rage.’” In her essay “Women’s Rage,” she points to how the very social construction of gender is oppressive to women and states how un-revolutionary America’s consciousness is regarding women’s rights. She notices a culture and system-wide disenfranchisement that can only be revolutionized with clear political articulations of the rage women feel from grappling with a “colonized mind” (Lesage).

It is important here to distinguish the significance between representations of angry women and expressions of women’s anger. There are certainly works of drama that showcase angry women and for better or for worse there are many that are highly visible in mainstream culture. However, in looking at the structures that contain those stories, there is a question about orthodox dramatic structures and if they encourage true expression of authentic feminine experience. Playwright Sarah Ruhl humorously muses about the concept of the “arc” in drama and asks, “do we think the arc is a natural structure because of the structure of the male orgasm” (Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write*)?

In this text I will be using an Aristotelian idea of structure when I refer to “orthodox” structure, which is in the white European tradition of storytelling. I acknowledge that this is not a universal form of writing drama, and I am applying these rules of structure to all three of these playwrights, including Suzan-Lori Parks,

who has spoken about her work coming from African American storytelling traditions.

The endurance and prevalence of Aristotelian structure certainly suggests that Aristotle was describing something almost universal about the way humans experience story and certain truths about the way drama works. While there may be something inherently masculine about his type of play structure, what makes Aristotelian structure so ripe for feminist upending is its sanctioned dominance over Western drama. When structure, dramatic or societal, becomes identified as a source of oppression, then the subversion of structure becomes an act of revolution. In the context of living under patriarchal structures and systems of oppression, the form that the story resides in is at the very heart of the art making. Questioning the very concept of the construction of the stories we tell as a culture becomes linked to personal expression.

On a structural level an Aristotelian narrative illustrates how male anger is perceived: it is linear, tolerated, and there is weight to it. Men hold the power and thus their heightened feelings have consequence. For example, the Hero's Story is so ingrained and ubiquitous in Western culture (and maybe especially American culture) that it has become inextricably linked with the national narrative. By contrast, there is no pervasive Heroine's story.

Because this format for expressing anger is possibly more accessible for men, and not women, forthright articulations of rage become distorted. The construction of story affects meaning and understanding, and thus is a matter of deep significance. In this text I will examine how Sarah Kane, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Nina

Morrison crafted their work and what relationship that structure has with this concept of Anger as a response to oppression.

Blasted

The first of Sarah Kane's five plays, *Blasted*, premiered on January 12, 1995 at the Royal Court Theater in London. Reviews of the play were famously and predominantly negative. Jack Tinker of the *Daily Mail* described the play as "a disgusting feast of filth" and Nick Curtis of the *London Evening Standard* wrote that the end of the play was "a systematic trawl through the deepest pits of human degradation." The play was so misunderstood that Kane was labeled as not only a talentless playwright, but disturbed and mentally ill. However, not long after these initial reviews, the play was re-evaluated and some critics, including Michael Billington of *The Guardian* openly admitted that he "got it wrong" in his first review and had incorrectly judged Kane and her work. Though *Blasted* is now recognized for its ingenuity, it is not hard to understand the bewilderment and knee-jerk rejection of the critics who first encountered this powerful and aggressive piece of theater.

Blasted begins with Cate and Ian entering a fancy hotel in Leeds, England. Ian is a journalist in his forties and Cate is younger and does not have a job other than taking care of her mother and brother. Ian, with help from a revolver he carries, forces Cate through a series of degrading sexual acts and after he rapes Cate in the night, Cate escapes out of the bathroom window. A soldier involved in the on-going, unnamed conflict outside the hotel knocks on the door and after threatening Ian with his rifle, rapes Ian and eats his eyeballs. After an explosion that leaves the hotel room in ruins, the play ends with Cate feeding Ian, who is starving, blind, and dying.

In a 1998 interview with Dan Rebellato, Sarah Kane describes the connection between *Blasted* and the Bosnian civil war, which was happening while she was writing the play. While she had already determined that the play would be about a rape that occurred in a hotel, several days into writing the script she turned on news coverage about the Bosnian war and saw a Srebrenica woman weeping and begging for help from the United Nations. She describes how the “penny dropped” in this moment and she realized the link between the rape she was writing about and the ongoing war she was seeing violent images of on the television. She notes, in a quote that is often cited in discussions about *Blasted*, that “one is the seed and the other is the tree.” Understanding the connection between senseless real world cruelty, the violence of the characters’ actions, and the turbulent structure of the play snaps the play into focus and provide necessary context to understanding the work. This helps us see that the atrocities committed in the play are reflections of the violence of the time period. While critics may have mused that the violence in the play was the creation of a troubled mind, the connections with the Bosnian War remind us that one only need to look a newspaper to see the source material for the play. The significance of large-scale atrocity growing from smaller moments of brutality greatly informs the play’s form. The purposeful instability of form, something that feels unique to Kane’s writing, mirrors a real-world experience of danger and unpredictability.

Though Kane may not have consciously known much of the content before she started writing, she details clearly that she had explicit goals for the form of the play. She explains: “I think largely what happened was that what I attempted to do,

and probably succeeded, was to create a form for which I couldn't think of an obvious direct precedent so it wasn't possible to say: 'This form is exactly like the form in a play written 20 years ago.' I wanted to create a form that hadn't happened before." Indeed, she so succeeded in creating a new form that the novelty and unfamiliarity was threatening to the play's first audiences. There is a striking boldness in her statement. There is an exciting audacity in claiming complete originality of form, but the statement also points to an awareness of the inadequacy of other types of "known" forms.

One of the most striking ways that Kane subverts traditional structure is in crafting a plot that does not progress in steps that show a cause and effect progression. A play that opens with one character (Ian) verbally berating and physically assaulting another character (Cate) invites us to expect a proportionate reaction from the victimized character. We imagine that reaction to be what will move the plot forward. What we have been taught to expect enters the theater with us, and so what we end up seeking in this play is Cate's anger and a subsequent action that will upend the power dynamics of this relationship. The audience sees a pebble thrown into the lake, and expects to see a ripple later in the play. However, in the refusal to meet our biggest ingrained expectation, we are given the question: Where is the recognition of Cate's anger? When a ripple appears at the other end of the lake, where the pebble wasn't thrown, the audience is left to wonder about that first stone's effect. Where is the reaction to that action? Not only does Kane amplify the absence of consequence of Cate's anger, she manifests that rage in the form of unsatisfying non-events elsewhere in the play.

One of the most noticeable of these “non events” is in the second scene, when Cate bites Ian’s penis “as hard as she can” while having oral sex with him (31). This occurs the morning after Ian has raped her. The stage directions describe that the bite occurs at the point of climax and Ian screams in pain and “tries to pull away but Cate holds on with her teeth” (31). Though this moment might happen in the spirit of revenge, as it occurs after so much abuse has been heaped on Cate, and may appear to be the immediate effect of Ian raping Cate, it does not actually operate dramatically as an “event” in the play that is capable of providing the audience with a sense of justice or logic. This moment does not mark a turning point for either character, nor does it appear to have much consequence on the rest of the play, or even for the rest of the scene. In fact, conversation between them continues and the violence that just occurred is left unremarked on, as if it hadn’t happened at all. Cate’s first words after this moment are about Ian’s work: “You should resign” (31). This moment prompts a feeling even more unfamiliar than a Brechtian device – the strange has been made to seem even stranger than it is. Kane ensures a distancing from these characters with actions that seem neither meaningless nor meaningful.

Kane plays with the stereotype of the “castrating female” in this depiction of a failed castration. Harriet Lerner writes that the label of “castrating bitch” has such power that it encourages women to avoid expression for the fear of being insulted in this way. She states that labels like these “may have the power either to shock us into silence, or to further inflame us by intensifying our feelings of injustice and powerlessness” (8). With the grotesque representation of this act, Kane mocks both our expectations and the cliché itself. Again, there is significance in the fact that this

moment of forthright expression is consequence-less. Its effect is only Ian's temporary discomfort and though it has created momentary spectacle, it is ultimately useless in changing Cate's circumstance. It has failed practically and symbolically.

When the impact of Cate's action can only be intuited through the Ian's experience, the action is robbed of grander meaning. Kane has set up the specifications of this moment of "revenge" to give Cate the least amount of power possible. Not only is the act of violence not *literally* creatable because of the intimacy of the body parts that would need to touch, the very act of a bite is too subtle for the stage. As opposed to a punch or a kick, which places the storytelling burden on both the perpetrator and victim, the violence of biting a penis can only be relayed through observing Ian's orgasmic pain. There is a subtle, but significant, difference between seeing Ian's experience and then inferring Cate's action versus seeing the wind-up of her intent and then the consequences of her actions. What has been done to Ian's genitalia holds the spotlight and not the feeling that Cate has triumphed.

Intensification is created through the confused and perplexed anticipation brought on by this moment. We may feel disappointed not because we feel particularly strongly for Cate, Kane intentionally does not endear her to the audience, but because we have been deprived a story line that would make some sense of this world. There is comfort in cause and effect, in consequences for actions. Furthermore, there is so much that is unsettling about the disproportionate doling out of abuse that there is a growing sense that this world is not tenable. In fact, it may not be the witnessing of such verbal and physical abuse that causes horror, but

that the atrocity is one-sided, without consequence, and escalating. And again, not even the construction of the story is “safe.” There is no predictability in this structure, the way there might be with a linear narrative. As a result, our grip on the play becomes intuitive, rather than literal, and trust can increasingly be placed on the sensory, rather than the cerebral.

In another move of unpredictability, the soldier enters the hotel room, bringing with him a swift change in power dynamics. When Cate escapes the hotel room through the off-stage bathroom window, she is immediately replaced by the Soldier. The Soldier becomes Ian’s new partner in two senses of the word: scene partner and sexual partner. This character’s relationship with anger, however, is on the other end of the spectrum. While Cate was stuttering, epileptic, and weak, the soldier is aggressive, forceful, and uncontrollable. He flaunts his war tales of sexual atrocity, scarfs down food, before standing on the bed and peeing all over the pillows. These easy exhibitions of dominance lead to the soldier raping Ian, and sucking out and eating his eyeballs. The masculine qualities of aggression, dominance, and anguish are collided together as the soldier literally sprays himself around the room, marking his territory: first with his urine, then his semen, and finally, his blood when he kills himself. These acts are enacted on Ian, though there is a purposeful lack of sense in the way punishment is given to him.

The soldier’s easy takeover of power also signals a discussion about gender that the play is in engaging in. There is a glaring lack of equality between Cate and Ian, but the soldier claims immediate dominance over Ian. What makes the gender dynamics so overt in this scene is that holding power is reliant not on the strength of

personality or intelligence, but on the size of one's gun. Their masculinity is symbolized with these key props. Jill Dolan makes this point in her review of Soho Rep's 2009 production of *Blasted*, noting that in this world "only the size of one's gun bestows authority and power." Ian's revolver, which had once been used to coerce a weaponless Cate into sexual acts, is of no use when the soldier walks in with a large military rifle. And if these weapons are physicalizations of masculinity, it is significant that they are devices of destruction that only have the power to threaten and kill. The soldier eventually kills himself with a gun and Ian tries to kill himself the same way.

While the male characters engage in self-destruction that leads to their deaths, Cate returns somehow stronger than she was when she left. Jill Dolan makes the point that "as the play grows ever more grisly, she alone of the three characters – and the only woman—finds her strength." It is Cate who takes the bullets out of Ian's gun and this act prevents him from committing suicide. Her action carries symbolism and imagery of Ian's rape of Cate. Now in the position of power, Cate once again removes the ammunition from Ian's gun, but this time it serves to punish Ian. He begs Cate to help him die and allow him the relief and respite of death. Instead, in an ending that mixes cruelty with tenderness, Cate is his nurturer. She ends the play feeding him.

By the end of the play, we don't witness a clear articulation or an "event" that demonstrates Cate's agency. But what we do start to sense is the strange realization that Cate, shockingly, seems to be gaining strength, even as the other characters weaken and self-destruct. Jill Dolan notes in her review, "Cate ends up the survivor,

and upends the power balance between her and Ian by becoming his protector and nurturer, reversing the roles and expectations Kane establishes at the start.”

While we are denied a moment of Cate erupting with anger or emotion, the play does provide a memorable explosion. The explosion is the first “promise” that the play delivers on. Despite the fact that we were not expecting it in this moment, something was going “break” in this hotel room. We knew something in this play was going to be blasted and felt the need for a disruption of the events onstage. The stage directions for this moment include the only mention of the title. At the top of scene three we see “The hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb” (39). We were waiting for Cate’s destructive eruption, but in a similar subversive move, Kane instead gives us another “effect” that both denies Cate’s expression of anger and eschews the traditional dramatic form.

The entirety of *Blasted* could be interpreted as the shortest sentence that Kane could write that might express her relationship with this type of turmoil. In the Rebellato interview, she was asked “Who do you write for?” Her response was:

Me. I’ve only ever written for myself. In fact, the truth is that (suddenly feel a bit strange here) I’ve only ever written in order to escape from hell. And it’s never worked. But, at the other end, when you sit there and watch something and think: ‘Well, that’s the most perfect expression of hell that I’ve felt’, then maybe it was worth it. I’ve never written anything for anyone else. (Kane)

There is no doubting that *Blasted* depicts a hellish landscape and characters that participate in horrific acts. I could never claim to know what Sarah Kane truly means when she says she’s only ever written so that she could “escape from hell.”

What we do know, however, is that out of the desire to express her personal hell as a way to escape it, and to hold that creation in a form that had not yet been seen, *Blasted* was created. The violence that surrounds and inhabits this play exists in both the form and the content. So much of the play is fraught with pain and cruelty and yet the final moment of the play is one of tenderness. The confusing ending, where rain falls in the hotel room and Ian has the final words of “Thank You,” is a conclusion that feels almost buoyant. It is not exactly hopeful or sweet, but there is a delicacy in this ending. Kane is not the Soldier – strong-arming the audience into watching her play of atrocity and gore before devolving into self-destruction. She has given us a more complicated Hell to grapple with. It exists on earth and it is so destructive, so full of intimacy and hatred and humanity, that it can be representative of physical wars as well as internal ones.

While *Blasted*'s warped form tells a story that feels structurally alien, though emotionally urgent and familiar, Suzan-Lori Parks' *Father Comes Home From the Wars* makes use of structure as a way to highlight the way history and learned narrative forms exclude certain voices. Using the backdrop of the Civil War, Parks' work illuminates the silencing of black women's experiences in her subversive use of Aristotelian structure. In *Father Comes Home From the Wars*, the structure may feel similar, but the dramaturgy works not to complete the Hero's journey, but to bring to light an experience that has not historically been glamorized in the traditional dramatic structures.

On a structural level, Parks and Kane's incorporate anger against oppression differently. While the structure itself is disruptive in *Blasted*, *Father Comes Home*

From the Wars makes its argument in an intellectual and formally track-able way. Rather than blowing up the conventions, she bends and manipulates them in service of her storytelling. Her structural sculpting is as innovative as Kane's, but the rules she breaks lead to a more subtle disturbance.

Father Comes Home from the Wars

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 & 3)* is the beginning of a 9-part play about life beginning in 1862 and moving to present day. Parts 1, 2, and 3 premiered at The Public Theater in New York City in October 2014. Reviews of the first production, which was directed by Jo Bonney, were overwhelmingly positive. New York Times's Charles Isherwood even mentioned that it "might be the best new play" he had seen all year.

Set in Texas during the Civil War, Parts 1 ("The Measure of a Man") and 2 ("A Battle in the Wilderness") tell the story of Hero, a slave who makes the decision to go to war with his slave master and fight for the Confederate army. He leaves his partner, Penny, at the plantation with other slaves including the one-footed Homer, who is also in love with Penny and who we learn once tried to escape the plantation only to be caught when Hero told the Boss-Master-Boss where he had run. Upon being caught, Hero, following his master's order, chopped off Homer's foot. During the war, Hero ends up freeing a captured Union soldier, his Boss-Master-Boss dies, and he returns home a free man. Though Parts 1 and 2 of *Father Comes Home From the Wars* focus on Hero, Part 3 ("The Union of my Confederate Parts") focuses on Penny, the sole female character, and it is the construction of her story that ultimately disrupts our narrative expectations for the play.

Parts 1 and 3 of the play mirror each other as they both open with the same urgent question: Will I stay or will I go? In Part 3, as a group of runaway slaves prepares to continue their escape North, Penny contemplates whether or not she

will join the group, which will probably include an undecided Homer, but only if Penny is with him. Like Hero, Penny's ticking clock is marked by light: she must make her decision before the sun goes down (the runaways will flee under the cover of dark), while Hero had to make his decision before the sun came up (his master will leave for the warfront at daybreak). Penny is torn between staying and leaving, between slavery and freedom, because she is in love with Hero and still believes that he will return home to her. While we eventually learn that Hero has not been faithful to Penny and has married a new woman named Alberta, at the top of the scene neither the audience nor Penny is privy to this fact. Penny's misplaced commitment to Hero mirrors Hero's confusing loyalty to his enslaver. However, a key difference here lies in the careful placement of the disclosure that Hero has married someone new. Parks has purposefully not prepared the audience for this revelation so that Hero can be shattered for Penny and the viewer in the same moment. Upon hearing their heartbreaking exchange, the idea of Hero as a hero is destroyed. After taking out a small photograph of Alberta and showing it to Penny, the moment unfolds:

ULYSSES

Her name's Alberta. The Missus will bring her over here in a couple of days.

PENNY

She's pretty. Who is she?

ULYSSES

Alberta. She's a nice gal. Real nice.

PENNY

Who is she aside from nice?

ULYSSES

She's my new wife.

PENNY

New—

HOMER

New wife?

PENNY

I'm—But I'm—

ULYSSES

You and me, Penny, we don't have no kids. Can't, right? You're still just as pretty, just as strong, but I was thinking it would be good to have children. I was thinking—I know you'll understand. You're good and true like that. Alberta, she'll help you around here. When planting time comes she'll do her part and work right along beside you. And with Homer heading out, we'll need an extra hand. She'll be a help to both of us.

PENNY

But I'm – me.

(Parks 148-149)

This late surprise of information shifts the play's gaze from Hero to Penny. In the final minutes, the audience's sympathy and attention is placed on Penny and the suspense of whether or not Penny will leave instantly doubles.

This alignment between the audience and Penny is significant because suddenly we are witnessing unwritten history. We are not watching Penny discover the sad facts that will shape her life, we are watching "in real time," in present tense, as she learns that she was naive, her loyalty has been betrayed, and that she must leave the plantation with the other runaway slaves. By contrast, though Hero begins with the same question that Penny wrestles with in Part 3, to leave or not to leave, because the title of the play informs us of its ending -- father will come home *from the war* -- there is a different level of suspense, and perhaps investment, in the decision making.

Parks also complicates the congruence between Hero's journey and Penny's journey by drawing a parallel between Hero and the slave master. Even though the Boss-Master-Boss promised Hero his freedom as an incentive to join him in the war, there can never truly be stock in the trustworthiness of the slave owner. As Hero grapples with his decision and sorts through complicated ideas about his own identity, though we are fascinated and seek to understand his idea of truth, the validity of following his master to war and fighting for the Confederate army remains suspicious. We have the benefit of history and know that we are only months away from the abolishment of slavery. The play opens in the spring of 1862 and the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in the winter of 1863. And even if we don't recognize the significance of the dates, we know how the Civil War ends and that the Confederacy will be defeated.

We are reminded of this distrust when Penny has to choose between heading North with the runaway slaves, a journey no doubt full of danger and uncertainty, but that will lead to freedom, and staying at the plantation, a decision that results in continued enslavement, but has the chance of a reunion with Hero. Even before we learn of Hero's new marriage, the echo of his situation in the first scene reverberates. With Penny having to choose between these two perilous options (freedom or slavery), Hero replaces the Boss-Master-Boss as Oppressor. Penny's loyalty to Hero, her enslaver, is again what makes the decision so fraught. Through this displacement, Parks creates the analogy between Man/Woman and Master/Slave.

This comparison illuminates the layers of oppression that Penny lives under. Not only does the play set up a clear hierarchy of status, it also engages in discussions of people being ascribed worth: monetarily and philosophically. In Part 2, Hero and Smith, a passing-for-white black man in the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry have the following exchange:

HERO

How much you think we're gonna be worth when Freedom comes? What kind of price we gonna fetch then?

SMITH

We won't have a price. Just like they don't. That'll be the beauty of it.

HERO

Where's the beauty in not being worth nothing?

.....

HERO

Seems like the worth of a Colored man, once he's made Free, is less than his worth when he's a slave.

(Parks 95-96)

There is an uneasy logic in Hero's comments considering the terrible knowledge that even with slavery abolished and over a century of distance, the perceived societal "value" of the descendants of slaves versus slave owners is not equal. The theme of the economics of human life, applicable to both the 19th century and today, also serves as a reminder where Penny is situated. The play presents an order of the structure of who answers to whom. God is at the top, then the white Slave Owner, then Hero, the black male slave. Penny is below Hero, and her station as a female slave marks her as having the least worth and being the least expensive of everyone. This is underscored by her name: she is literally labeled as one cent.

Hero, on the other hand, has a name that connotes great worth. His name carries associations that promote high, yet predictable, expectations for him. On top of that, the many references to Homer's *The Odyssey* lead us to surmise that Hero is the Odysseus of this narrative. Even when his name changes in Part 3 and he becomes Ulysses, after Union General Ulysses S. Grant, he has simply made the move from a fictional hero to an historical one. And while, in fact, he is the protagonist of this play, Parks' subversive strategies at work at the end of the play upset our assumptions about what we take and carry forward as true and correct. By using labels and scaffolding of history and stories that are known and sanctioned, the switch of focus to Penny at the end of the play highlights her lack of history and recognition and points to the separate differences in what freedom means for Penny and Hero. The play ends with the irony that slaves may be free, but Penny is not. There is no law that can decree illegal the power dynamics that control gender roles.

As in American history, the male Hero's journey occupies the spotlight and is taken as a universal for human experience. Penny's identity as a slave woman gives the last section of the play its main event, disrupting a dramatic and historical structure and storyline that we have become comfortable with. Hero's journey is well documented and known while Penny's journey is unknown and open-ended. There is no Heroine's journey. Because we start with the end: Hero will come home from the war, the question of the play becomes: What happens when he does? By disrupting the Hero's journey at the end of the play, Parks has denied the audience an Aristotelian catharsis. While the story of Hero completing his journey home and getting his freedom is satisfied and complete, Penny's story is not.

Through this subversion of expectations, we see the blind eye that Aristotelian structure turns toward a woman's experience. In a 1994 interview with Han Ong published in *BOMB* magazine, Parks described her relationship with form and content:

I honestly believe that form and content are the same thing. In stepping out of the, "I'm a black person, I'm oppressed, and when I represent myself on stage, I'm going to represent an oppressed person," you are also stepping outside of a particular form. (Parks)

Parks, aware that the container that holds her message carries a message itself, is sensitive to structures that merely reproduce oppression. *Father Comes Home From the Wars* capitalizes on history to play with our expectations. The audience does not get to experience a production that promotes entertainment and lets the audience off of responsibilities of challenging the status quo. Her play calls attention to the absurdity and fictional nature of history and works to correct misrepresentations of black Americans and the silencing of black slave women, who have barely even made it into the history books as an asterisk.

Where Suzan-Lori Parks skewers history for its racial and gender-related injustices with careful and measured subversion, Nina Morrison upends formal parameters with a similar bravery and energy but with different emotional and tonal strategies. *Father Comes Home From the Wars* uses drama and gravity to comment on how women are ignored in the narrative of history while *Féminaal* uses the strategies of humor and levity for the same ends. *Father Comes Home From the*

Wars doesn't allow us to enjoy a Hero's journey, while *Féminaal* allows us to have fun in a history that never occurred.

Féminaal

Nina Morrison wrote *Féminaal* in 2015 and it was produced in the University of Iowa's gallery series in the same year. The story of the play, seen through disjointed, almost rearrangeable, Epic-style scenes, is focused around Klara, a photographer, and Madeline, a pop singer, who become a couple at the beginning of the play when Klara takes a picture of Madeline, which launches Madeline into fame. Over the course of the play, dalliances with other women cause Madeline and Klara to fall in and out of love with one another. Eventually, Madeline leads a full cast song and dance number to get Klara back. Klara rejects her and the play ends with Madeline running off to follow Klara. This storyline is broken up with scenes from present day Iowa City, where modern women, Betty and Jane discuss their feelings on how women are represented in film. At the end of the play, Betty and Jane (who in the University of Iowa production were sitting in the audience) join the other characters onstage and participate in the final song and dance.

Serving as the dramaturg for the production planted the seeds of this thesis. While there are many plays written by women that experiment with form, *Féminaal* is necessary to this thesis because not only does the play explicitly discuss how women are manipulated by form, it allows me to use my own experience as a primary source. Working with the play and playwright so closely caused me to see how an anger-based agenda from a woman manifested itself into a play of such spiritedness and pleasure. *Féminaal's* flippant characters and humorous tone, though delightful and enjoyable to watch, are intentional acts of revolutionary

playwrighting. The fact that Morrison's "Angry Young Woman" look very different from the so-called Angry Young Man is significant.

Having the benefit of knowing Nina and being able to talk to her grants me access that I do not have with Sarah Kane and Suzan-Lori Parks. Nina is such a useful example of a female playwright using the medium of theatre to convey anger, not only because of the strength of her work, but because Nina has such a strikingly congenial presence. While discussions of the artist's personality and intentions may not always be relevant to discussions of their work, in an examination of the relationship between structure and psychology, it is worth bringing up.

There is audacity in making other people watch a manifestation of your perspective and one of the artistic intentions of *Féminaal* was to be overtly obnoxious. Of course, this is what creating art is all about, but it can be wearying to look at so much work that very clearly has not been made for you. Navigating the experience of simultaneously loving, appreciating, finding meaning in and feeling alienated from works of theater or film is commonplace and automatic for many women. It may almost feel reflexive to compartmentalize the components that you are fascinated by from overtones or instances of sexism. In fact, the collective tolerance of sexism is so high that it often feels obvious or "too easy" to point out misogyny in the dramatic arts. When the baseline of sexism is so high, feminist critiques of only the really egregious work are endured. Morrison's exhaustion with continually, even in 2015 (when the play was written), having to view theater as if the masculine perspective were the universal perspective led to the creation of *Féminaal*.

AGREEMENT TO VIEW PERFORMANCE IDENTIFYING AS A WOMAN

This AGREEMENT TO VIEW PERFORMANCE IDENTIFYING AS A WOMAN (the “**Agreement**”) is entered into this __ day of _____, 20__ by and between NINA MORRISON (“**Playwright**”) and _____ (“**Viewer**”) in relation to attendance of Féminaal (the “**Performance**”).

WITNESSETH:

WHEREAS, Playwright acknowledges (i) certain viewers of the Performance may not identify as a woman and (ii) certain viewers may identify as a woman, but may be inclined to view the Performance through a masculine or male lens;

WHEREAS, the Performance shall only be viewed as a woman; and

WHEREAS, Playwright must protect the sanctity of the Performance from the male gaze.

NOW THEREFORE, in consideration of the benefits to be derived from the attendance of the Performance the parties to hereby agree as follows:

1. Playwright Indemnity. Viewer shall indemnify and hold harmless Playwright and Playwright’s agents, representatives, actors, stage hands, family, neighbors, and cats for any loss of enjoyment or understanding of the performance due to Viewer’s failure to view the Performance as a woman.

2. Right of Removal. If, in Playwright’s sole perception, Viewer appears to view the Performance as a man or from a masculine perspective, Playwright shall have the right to remove Viewer from the Performance.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Viewer executes this Agreement as of the date first listed above.

VIEWER SIGNATURE:

Fig. 1, The Contract, *Féminaal*

One of the most pointed ways that Morrison forces a re-envisioning of theater is through the use of a contract stating that the audience must agree to view the performance of *Féminaal* as a woman (See Figure 1). This is a physical piece of paper that is handed to audience members as they walk into the theater and must be signed before the show begins. Morrison reiterates the political intention behind this device: “I loved making the audience sign the contract just because I wanted them to feel my control as author of their experience. I feel so controlled by filmmakers and playwrights and directors who make me see things from a man’s perspective most of the time.” (Morrison)

In fact, Morrison makes great use of her experience viewing work that controls the audience’s perspective so rigidly. *Féminaal*’s influences are Jean-Lu Godard’s *Masculin Féminin* and Bertolt Brecht’s *Baal*. Morrison describes her relationship with French New Wave films in high school as an uneasy fascination. Watching the films and realizing that “women were, essentially, props in the films” was a significant experience that was repeated when she read *Baal*. (Morrison)

Morrison describes a similar phenomenon when she encountered *Baal*:

It was so confusing to me to find this horrible guy who was described as physically unattractive and obviously morally bankrupt, having sex with teenage twins and married women and then having sex with men and then murdering his rival for one man’s affections and his only punishment was that he was probably going to lose his job. I didn’t understand why I was fascinated with him and I didn’t understand why I didn’t ever see woman characters like this. (Morrison)

This strange division with who can be a captivating anti-hero is tied to the centering of the male experience. A “bad” character or anti-hero from a marginalized group runs the risk of reinforcing their own marginality. In addition, there are so few anti-heroines because there are so few heroines.

An important goal of the play was, from its origin, to write female characters who despite “misbehaving,” are not punished. Frequently seen punishment for female characters in plays is rape, suicide, some form of verbal or emotional abuse, or often just disappearance from the play. Morrison picked up on how Baal’s behavior and the subsequent treatment of that behavior highlight a difference in the way “bad” behavior is perceived in men and women. The characters of *Féminaal* model these captivating traits that Baal inhabits. Morrison explains:

I wanted the characters, especially of Madeleine and Klara, to not be particularly noble, long-suffering or morally upright. They are narcissistic, somewhat talented young women who need a lot of attention and happen to enter each other’s lives. The men in the play are there just to occasionally support their journey, but they have no character arcs of their own, even young Paul who is influenced by Klara, but is not central in the play.

Not only is it significant that Madeline and Klara have personalities and behaviors that are typically not praised in women, it is also essential to recognize that they do not change these attributes at the end of the play.

This surprise of lack of change in behavior is highlighted by the structure of the play. Morrison crafts the final perception shift of the play by capitalizing on our expectations that at typically at the end of dramas, something changes. Our innate

(or learned) sense that there must be a reversal, prompts us to look for the moment when the actions of the play will force Madeleine and Klara to change. Traditional structure might lead us to expect one of two scenarios: 1) The play could end with Madeleine going through a personal examination of sorts and realizing that Klara treats her horribly and she decides she does not need her in her life. 2) The play ends with Klara undergoing change and realizing that Madeleine is worth altering her promiscuous ways for, and the couple will finally be together in a meaningful way.

Further tantalizing the audience to expect change is the musical number. Every member of the cast is on stage dancing and singing to Klara for her to “not talk” and “look closer” at Madeleine and “feel harder” for her. This song, this moment, is supposed to break the pattern. This is where the action might progress in an unexpected (but actually completely expected) way. The play winks at the traditional Broadway musical (often so uninterested in challenging the status quo) that ends with a song and dance and big obvious reversal. When the play does not progress in this way, when Klara unceremoniously walks off the stage and Madeleine runs after her, the audience experiences *Féminal*'s “in retrospect, inevitable” moment. In looking back over the play, we realize we were given no reason to think that this ending would break the pattern and be different than the rest of the play. The surprise is that there is no change at all. These women have not been forced to change their behavior. What caused the hope for change is the cultural background of consequences for actions.

We carried that expectation with us when we entered the theater. We held

onto it even when we were told that this viewing experience would be different than others (the Contract formally demanded that we are not to view this play the way we normally would). Having been under the influence of previous modes of thinking (perhaps the male gaze, perhaps traditional forms of structure), the audience is actually given a type of traditional reversal. *Féminal* engages and plays with its relationship to traditional theater: mocking, castigating, and subverting it.

Morrison's decision to set *Féminal* in a fictional depiction of Paris in the 1960s is an act of re-envisioning history. Like Suzan-Lori Parks has done in many of her plays, Morrison's work is a piece of fiction that is in conversation with the dominant historical narrative. She describes:

Many plays and films rewrite history to support the hero narrative when, even if the events are based on reality, they are a gross oversimplification to make the central white man the hero of everything. I wanted to do the same for the central female characters, put them in a world that is made for them to move through with great ease and where they are obviously the heroes at the center. Men are the rulers of the past and future in every iteration, no matter how implausible, but women are held to a bizarrely strict standard of historical accuracy. I want to loosen that standard and re-envision history the way I would like it to be, so that women can finally see themselves differently, as the heroes and centers of the world. (Morrison)

Betty and Jane contribute to this goal by discussing by representing the modern Iowa City female student (a demographic that made up most of the audience in the first production). Their discussion about the very content of the play

they are in is a not-subtle Brechtian device that allows the audience to see the distance between themselves and the performance. Their discussion of the misogyny in French New Wave Cinema, where they say lines like ““I felt so hetero-masculinized looking at these women,” reminds the audience of their responsibility to view this content in a certain way. The women are a way to poke fun at the very act that the audience is engaging in order to elicit insight. The following dialogue points directly to the experience that is unfolding in front of the audience:

BETTY

Sellier goes further and says not only are we forced into a heteromasculinized gaze, but it is the filmmaker’s own gaze, his personal lens viewing women and the world.

JANE

She’s right. It feels like that.

BETTY

By viewing it we are signing the contract, we are complicit. (Morrison 30)

Their dialogue is an insightful remark about art and life outside of this play: we are constantly signing contracts that force us to “be” heterosexual men. We are unknowingly taking on the gaze of and viewing reality as someone else.

Though Betty and Jane’s actions do not mimic those of Madeleine and Klara’s, they highlight in neon colors, questions that the play is asking.

BETTY

The male gaze is so obvious in this. I felt so hetero-masculinized looking at these women.

It is also significant that Betty and Jane join the musical number at the end of the play. Not only has the play given us characters who are “us,” it has them literally

participate in the story onstage. The play advocates new forms by performing a physicalization of the action: we need to leave our current state (like Jane and Betty leave their seats in the audience) and move into a new space. This promotion of new structure is crystallized in Scene 22 when Klara forces Paul to watch her and the Farm Girls kiss:

PAUL

Okay. Okay. Why do you want me to see this?

KLARA

Because I'm tired of war, and without seeing something else we can't change.

PAUL

Do you want me to be uncomfortable?

KLARA

Yes, we all have to get uncomfortable now. It's our civic duty.

(Morrison 51)

The play argues that if we are not shown new ways to think or act, then we cannot change. We cannot move forward, we cannot progress, with the same gaze. The play's structure embodies this message. The movement forward that we were expecting and hoping for does not happen because we were never shown actions that differed from this small pool of behavior. What is so satisfying about *Féminaal*, though, is that its existence is a new model for theater.

Conceived out of a frustration to see different types of theater, *Féminaal* succeeds in provoking the audience to think about what we consume visually. If advertising works, and we know it does, then so does art. What we see matters. When we see images of the same type of woman and the same type of man, over and

over again, we're destined to perpetuate those examples. *Féminal* is a force that is determined to break this pattern.

Conclusion

Blasted, *Father Comes Home from the Wars*, and *Féminaal* are revolutionary plays. Their inventiveness asks us to see women, their anger and their oppression in new forms. Though Cate's anguish is not taken seriously by Ian, Penny's worth is not considered valuable, and Betty and Jane are occupied with how men see and mold them, the structure of these stories illuminates the absurdity of their situations and the crime of the wider culture's apathy. Through unusual and genius dramaturgies, they craft experiences for an audience whereby female anger is revolutionized. They accomplish what Oscar Brownstein articulates in *Strategies of Drama: The*

Experience of Form:

If a true revolution is an overturning of limited frames of reference and therefore the limited options available to us, then [we now see] that there is a way that comedy, drama, art can be revolutionary.

Perhaps there is nothing more revolutionary than that which occurs in the mind when frames of reference creak and groan and then actually shift. (Brownstein 23)

Discussion of how to harness and encase something as complicated and awesome as anger is relevant not only to my interests as a feminist theater artist, but as a believer in works of art as touchstones. These playwrights, as creators of these representational worlds, create meaning through developing a new reality. Though the content of these plays differ, they are all concerned with the inadequacies of the past that continue into the present. The lack of integrity in the way anger is

expressed only serves to promote a crisis of self. For women, this is an especially disturbing trend. In highlighting for us the type of contracts we have allowed ourselves to “sign,” these playwrights move towards more complicated and varied depictions of who women are and how they experience anger to real and recognizable injustice. Their works are forward gazing. They reject histories that have silenced and contorted female anger in search of originality and truth.

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