

The Power of Art: The Woman Artist in Rachel Crothers' *He and She* and Tina Howe's *Painting Churches*

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"I'll hate myself because I gave it up—and I almost hate—hate—her." (Crothers)

"You just don't take me seriously! Poor old Mags and her ridiculous portraits. . ." (Howe)

The presence of woman artists in female-authored plays is conspicuously frequent in two distinctive periods in the history of the American theatre and drama, in the 1910s and 1970s. Arguably, the increasing number of women playwrights as well as the dramatization of the issues of female creativity in the two periods coincides with the rise of the first and second waves of American feminism. In both eras women's fight for freedom and equality was high on the agenda, though with slightly different immediate aims. At the beginning of the twentieth century the primary aim was obtaining voting rights, while in the 1960s, fuelled by the Civil Rights Movement and sparked by Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the women's movement addressed unequal opportunities for women in workplaces and education. Curiously enough, the "new woman" of the 1910s transformed into a "rare woman" in the 1960s due to the patriarchal society's huge discrimination against women in many facets of life.

Admittedly, a conventionally male-dominated realm, the theatre—destined to give voice to conflicting ideas in a community or society—served as an appropriate venue to deal with, challenge, and reflect on the changing social attitude towards women's socially ascribed roles in both

waves of feminism. In their pursuit for freedom and independence many talented women found that artistic endeavour was particularly rewarding. Thus it is not merely new generations of female playwrights that emerged in both periods but also numerous plays by them explored the relationship between the woman artist and the society. These women playwrights, I suggest, can be credited with establishing the subgenre of *female Künstlerdrama*¹ within the history of American drama and theatre. As regards its theme, at the beginning of the century female *Künstlerdrama* mainly addresses society's exclusionary attitude to women artists, while in the second period the thematic focus shifts to the presentation of women artists' inner struggle for recognition in family and society. The prevalent dramatic mode applied is realism, yet carefully adjusted to the thematic focus. Thus earlier playwrights use "muckraking realism"² (Graver 711), which dominated American Theatre from 1905 to 1917 and can appropriately depict the social norms of early twentieth-century American society. Toward the end of the century, however, dramatists tend to use different kinds of "realisms" such as psychological, lyrical, surrealist, symbolic, expressionist, and even postmodernist, which are appropriate to reveal complex inner processes of the characters.

Major representatives in the first period include Zona Gale (1874–1938), Marion Craig Wentworth (1872–?), and most importantly, successful director, playwright and actress Rachel Crothers (1878–1958). Though Crothers "was a consistent and acknowledged presence" for over thirty years (1907–1938) in American theatre, her work was marginalized by contemporary critics and was rewritten in the American dramatic canon only after the second wave of the feminist theatre movement (Murphy 82). Her dramatic output stands out as she wrote a large number of plays that deal with "the struggle of women to define their values in the face of the conflicting demands of nurturing a family and pursuing a career" (82). Her most significant plays with women artist protagonists in them include *A Man's World* (1909) and *He and She* (1911).

¹ "Künstlerdrama" is a commonly used designation of plays with artist characters in them. Csilla Bertha also uses this term to identify the so-called "artist-drama" in contemporary Irish theatre and drama (347).

² As defined by David Graver muckraking realism takes "the pedagogical concerns of 'evolutionary realism' and shifts to an interest in broader social issues with plots that hinged on partisan politics" (711).

Female Künstlerdrama continues to flourish from the 1970s, as the following brief list of authors and their works testify: Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976), Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), as well as her Pulitzer Prize winning play, *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), Heather McDonald's *Dream of a Common Language* (1992), and Rebecca Gilman's *The Sweetest Thing in Baseball* (2004) all discuss women artists' struggle for self-definition. The centrality of the woman artists, however, is especially striking in Tina Howe's (1937-) plays. From the beginning of her career nearly all her characters are women artists. As she admits in an interview: "I have an obsession with art. It runs through all of my plays" (qtd. in Barlow 241). Indeed, her first rather controversial plays including *The Nest* (1970) and *Birth After Birth* (written in 1973 and first produced in 1995) deal with female creativity, while her later works such as *Museum* (1976), *The Art of Dining* (1979), and *Painting Churches* (1983) all center around the portrayal of female artists.

For the present study I have chosen Crothers' *He and She* and Howe's *Painting Churches* as their thematic similarities offer vistas for comparison. Though written more than seventy years apart from each other, they both deal with the permanence of women artists' hunger for the approval and their failure to find self-fulfilment both in the public and private spheres of their lives. Their respective female protagonists, Anne Herford, a sculptor in Crothers' play, and Margaret Church, a painter in Howe's play, both long for the approval of their talent. Apparently, Ann's artistic endeavors are supported in her family as it is her husband, Tom—a sculptor himself—who teaches the mastery of sculpting to Ann. Yet, when she wins a competition for a major commission which everybody thought would go to her husband, she is compelled to give up her career so that she can devote her life entirely to her motherly duties. By contrast, born into a much more fortunate era in terms of opportunities for women artists, Mags is a highly successful portrait painter who is going to have her first solo exhibition in a prestigious New York gallery—an event Ann could not even have dreamt about—yet her parents have failed to acknowledge her talent. In the course of the plays the two female protagonists go through major changes in terms of understanding themselves and perceiving reality due to the revelatory and redemptive functions of art. In this paper I will argue that despite differences in the temporal and socio-political contexts the two plays are set in, both plays

explore how art contributes to a woman artist's self-definition and her perception of reality.

The artist's understanding of reality through creating art is central to both plays. While Crothers' interest lies in the impact that the final artistic product exerts on the family members, Howe centers her play on the troublesome process of artistic creation, which transforms into a re-creation of the parent-daughter relationship. After winning the competition "in a fair, fine, hard fight" (Crothers 310), Ann faces the dilemma whether to take up the opportunity and launch a full-fledged professional career or to submit to patriarchal expectations and denounce the prize. Ann decides to accept the job, a major commission for doing a frieze. With her act she chooses to oppose society's double standards, though in those days "Victorian society did not deem it suitable for a woman to dedicate her life to art in a professional way (but approved her taking up art as a hobby)" (Narbona-Carrion and Dolores 70).

The vehemence by which her own relatives disapprove her victory over her husband makes Ann acutely aware of the deep-rooted double standards in society. Susan Gubar's observation appropriately describes this feature of patriarchal society: "our culture is steeped in such myths of male primacy in theological, artistic, and scientific creativity" (244). The pressure Ann resists is enormous as reactions from her family members serve well to make various points of the play and act as mouthpieces of prevalent views in the society. Rehearsing views ingrained in them by the ideology of patriarchal society, each of her relatives condemns Ann for taking her artistic ambitions seriously and disparages her for "neglecting" her duties as a wife and a mother. Ann's daughter, Millicent is a case in the point: "I think that's perfectly horrid, mother. Why should they give it to you? I think father ought to have it—he's the man" (330). Further on, Daisy, Ann's sister-in-law and Dr. Remington, Ann's father both remind her of the primacy of her motherly duties. Daisy sighs: "Oh—I wish the damned frieze were in Guinea and that Ann had nothing to do but take care of Tom and Millicent—like any other woman. I'd give anything is she hadn't won the competition" (328). Dr. Remington remarks: "I'd rather you'd failed a thousand times over—for your own good. What are you going to do with Millicent while you're making this thing?" (325). In spite of the rejections Ann resists the pressure to give up the commission in order to preserve the pride of her husband.

Ann's apparently enlightened and open-minded husband's reaction is most revealing about male oppression in society. Just like Pygmalion,

who shapes and creates his beautiful ivory statue, a female body, Tom, as a teacher of his wife even acknowledges her talent when looking at her frieze: “Beautiful! Astoundingly beautiful! Well as I know you, I didn’t think you had it in you” (Crothers 315). Nevertheless, Tom’s contentment with his own “creation,” that is Ann as a sculptor, lasts as long as he controls his wife’s freedom and independence. When the artistic “product” tries to lead a life of her own and aims to pursue her own career, the mask of the enlightened man shatters immediately: “If another *man* had got it I’d take my licking without whining [...] Why can’t I be that way to *her*” (923). As long as the woman artist remains in the position relegated to her—muted and objectified—the creator is satisfied. Gubar’s extension of the Pygmalion myth highlights the objectified status of the female: “If the creator is a man,” Gubar argues, “the creation itself is the female, who, like Pygmalion’s ivory girl, has no name or identity or voice of her own” (244).

Tom’s pride is further damaged by losing his “breadwinner’s role. He grunts, “a woman can’t mix up in a man’s business [...]. It’s too—distracting—too—take you away from more important things. [...] Millicent and me” (326). All these reactions to Ann’s success underlie that woman cannot be an artist, a creator, or a sculptor. She must not break down or erase the long-established categories produced for women in patriarchal society. A woman’s place and space are predetermined, as Gubar articulates: “Woman is not simply an object, however. If we think in terms of the production of culture, she is an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor” (244).

Howe dramatizes art’s revelatory function through displaying Mags painting her aging parents’ portrait before they move to a smaller house. In return for helping them to pack and move to a cottage from their present home in Beacon Hill, Boston she asks them to let her paint their portrait. What seems to be merely portrait painting provides Mags a deeper insight into the life of her parents and also remedies the conflictual parent-daughter relationship. It is through this process of creating art that Mags eventually understands that the “move to another house has a symbolic as well as an economic end [...]. What they are leaving for is, ultimately, their death” (Bigsby 63–64). Also, the painful act of creation will help her reconcile with her parents and take the journey from selfishness to acceptance, from isolation to inclusion.

The creative process is constantly hindered by Mags’ parents, Fanny and Gardner Church. Fanny keeps asking why she should paint it

now that “they are trying to move” (178) or by posing as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* Fanny and Gardner make fun of what Mags treats as serious work. Mags has to understand she “must ‘see’ her parent before she can paint them, and her painting will reveal just how much she has or has not succeeded in viewing them honestly” (Barlow 245). Apart from being constantly reminded of the necessity of openness and honesty with which an artist must relate to her subject, Mags also perceives the elusiveness of reality. She must learn that art is not a mere copy of reality, neither is it an imitation of another work of art (*Pietà*). Reality has to be fully absorbed and re-created by the artist. Finally, without her parents’ cooperation she will complete the painting by relying on her creativity and her own conception of art, and amazingly, her parents will approve and appreciate that portrait.

The troublesome process of painting her parents’ portrait involves Mags’ equally tormenting route of creating and defining herself. She finds herself confronting all her previous anxieties and traumas because of the denial of her abilities. Independent and successful as Mags may seem to be when she arrives, from the very first moment she enters the family house she uses various means to conceal her sense of insecurity. Her unconventional looks and her constant eating of junk food hide her vulnerability and dissatisfaction with herself. The mask of a trendy woman who “has very much her own look” (Howe 174) soon disappears in a succession of rapid grotesque scenes that present several incidents from her childhood and early adulthood when her talent was badly ignored.

In a dramatic monologue at the end of the first act, Mags recalls a traumatic memory from her childhood. Remembering the past event develops into a carefully built and dynamic climactic scene with Mags’ defining her own values. It also turns out that Mags’ obsession with art grew out of her special relationship with food. Unable to swallow what her mother cooked, Mags was banished from the family table and was forced to eat her food in her bedroom alone. After getting rid of the food (she flushed it all down the toilet), she began creating her first wax masterpiece out of crayons by letting them melt down on the hot radiator thus producing an intricate colourful design that she describes in culinary terms: it looked like “spilled jello, trembling and pulsing” or “it oozed and bubbled like raspberry jam!” (202). Lynda Hart is right in suggesting that Mags “transformed her hunger into art: not in a selfish Faustian quest for knowledge [...] but with the protective, embracing gossamers of love

and forgiveness” (58) as she continued to develop her work. Three months later, as Mags describes the “RADIATOR WAS ... SPECTACULAR!” [...] IT LOOKED LIKE SOME COLOSSAL FRUITCAKE! [sic!] (Howe 202). For every color she imagined a taste: YELLOW: lemon curls dipped in sugar ... RED: glazed cherries laced with rum” (Howe 202). Mags vividly recalls the exhilaration she felt over creation as well as the utter pain when her first piece of art, which “glittered and towered in the moonlight like some ... gigantic Viennese pastry” (203) was destroyed by her parents. In the present now she is able to confront her parents and assert herself as an artist: “It was a monument of my castoff dinners, only I hadn’t built it with food ... I found my own material. [...] I FOUND MY OWN MATERIALS ...!” [sic!] (203). She succeeds in defining herself and overcoming her insecurity by clearly articulating, “I have abilities” (204), which at first she struggles to say but then she repeats it more and more loudly and triumphantly by adding it first “strong” and “very” thus ending it: “I have ...very strong abilities” (203).

Unlike Mags, who is primarily shown in her artist’s role and represents the liberated, self-conscious woman of the 1970s, Ann in *He and She* is depicted in the conventional roles that patriarchal society ascribes to women: a loving wife, a caring mother, and an obeying daughter, yet, at first, she also represents the New Woman, who is able to handle and coordinate all her tasks in her life. Even her husband, Tom confirms how capable Ann is in his reply to his assistant Keith’s question: “[...] How can she keep on that and keep house too?” TOM: Well, they *do*, you know—somehow” (302). Ann’s New Woman status, however, rapidly deteriorates into that of a traditional woman’s who is forced to submit herself to male oppression. When Ann learns that her sixteen-year-old daughter Millicent has fallen in love with the chauffeur at her boarding school, she decides that she must put aside her work and let her husband execute the design so that she can pay closer attention to her daughter. Despite the fact that Ann felt equally the importance of her responsibility as a mother and her duty to be true to herself as an artist, she cannot erase the double standards in society and cannot pursue the life of an artist.

In an equally powerful dramatic monologue at the end of *He and She* Ann also asserts her own talent and clearly defines what it means to be a woman artist in early twentieth-century American society and what it means to be a woman denied an outlet for her creativity. She voices her

bitterness and disappointment since finally she must concede to her primary sex role. Her point is that a society that allows a woman a chance to explore only one part of her potential is unjust:

I'll hate myself because I gave it up—and I almost hate—hate—her. I know. Why I 've seen my men and women up there—their strong limbs stretched—their hair blown back. I've seen the crowd looking up—and I've heard the people say—'A woman did that' and my heart almost burst with pride—not so much that I had done it—but for all women. And then the door opened—and Millicent came in. There isn't any choice, Tom. (Crothers 335).

By contrast, the liberated woman of the 1970, Mags has the chance to rebel and lead the life of a professional artist. Mags' intention to paint her parents *in her own way* is her means of rebellion and her final attempt to gain their approval she desperately longs for. Though they have resigned to the fact that their daughter has become an artist, they have failed to appreciate their daughter's success. Even though Gardner demonstrates his love towards her, he does not regard her as a real artist, only a daughter who is "loaded with talent" (179). When she announces the great news about her one-woman show, apart from her parents' cliché-like expressions of joy—"We're so happy for you" (179)—they both immediately change the subject and turn their attention to eating Saltines (kind of crackers). She bursts out: "You just don't take me seriously! Poor old Mags and her ridiculous portraits..." (189).

At the conclusion, however, Fanny and Gardner see Mags' abilities to use colors and light so inventively that has always been her strong points. Fanny resigns to Mags idiosyncratic way of perceiving and transforming reality. When the lighting effects capture her attention, she can resign to the fact that she is painted with orange hair, purple skin and with no feet but the light reminds her of a Renoir painting with a couple dancing. When the curtain falls Fanny and Gardner dance to a Chopin waltz, imitating figures in a Renoir painting (*Dance at Bougival*, 1883), while Mags watches them moved to tears and a car horn announces their imminent departure from the family home. She gains their approval and unites them in one last extraordinary moment. This is a moment when art transports the characters beyond the fears and longings that mark and mar their lives. How's description of this scene captures the transitory nature and redemptive function of art:

It's great victory for Mags. I think it is one of those transcendent moments. It is as if they are stopping time. They are caught there. That's what a great painting does. It stops the flow. It pins you there. They got so caught up in the painting that time stopped, the decay stopped, and they became timeless. It lasts for one heartbeat, and then is gone. We all know it is a purely theatrical moment, which is why it is so precious." (qtd. in Barlow, 250)

Irrespective of the temporal and spatial settings *He and She* and *Painting Churches* are embedded, their respective female protagonists, Ann and Mags have defined their values and asserted themselves as artists, though Ann had to yield male oppression. Interestingly enough, the male-defined artist (Ann) must withdraw her artistic self from public, whereas no matter how tormenting a process it was for Mags to shape and create herself as an artist, she can fully realize her artistic self in public. Eventually neither of them can realize all her potentials as they both have to sacrifice one part of their lives: either the personal for the public, artistic life (Mags), or the public, artistic life for the personal (Ann).

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