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KAPLAN, ZOË CORALNIK
WOMAN IN FOCUS IN MAJOR PLAYS AND PRODUCTIONS
OF RACHEL CROTHERS.

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, PH.D., 1979

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WOMAN IN FOCUS IN MAJOR PLAYS
AND PRODUCTIONS
OF RACHEL CROTHERS

by

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ZOE CORALNIK KAPLAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doc-
tor of Philosophy, The City University of
New York.

1979

FOR CAROLINE
AND
TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION.....	vii
Chapter	
1 FROM BLOOMINGTON TO BROADWAY.....	1
2 INFLUENCES, DRAMATIC APPROACH, AND THE "NEW WOMAN".....	12
3 THE FIRST TWO HITS AND THEIR HEROINES.....	33
4 TWO MAVERICK PLAYS.....	59
5 THREE PLAYS OF THE NINETEEN-TWENTIES.....	98
6 THREE PLAYS OF THE NINETEEN-THIRTIES.....	170
7 REMINISCENCES AND ASSESSMENTS.....	239
8 CONCLUSIONS.....	257
APPENDIX: FIRST PRODUCTION LIST OF ALL RACHEL CROTHERS' PLAYS.....	281
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	283

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INTRODUCTION

The career of Rachel Crothers (1878-1958) was a uniquely successful one. She was a prodigy on the Broadway scene for over thirty years spanning the period from 1906 to 1938, with over twenty-five produced plays to her credit. She functioned as playwright and complete metteur-en-scène -- director, set and costume designer and casting director -- as well as playing the lead in at least one production, that of He and She in 1920. A more conscientious theatrical practitioner would be hard to find in the American theatre.

Crothers' achievement was twofold. She succeeded as a woman in a male-dominated society, and she broke new ground on behalf of women in dramatizing and illuminating their dilemmas in modern life. She served as an example through her own success and through the subject matter of her plays. Invariably Crothers dealt, in one guise or another, with the timely problems of the "new woman" as she evolved over this thirty year period, beginning with The Three of Us in 1906 and ending with the 1937 production of Susan and God. Both her central theme with variations of woman-in-conflict and the timeliness of her plots help to explain the extent of her success and influence. as well as her limitations.

This work deals with ten of Crothers' outstanding dramas and social comedies, each concerned with one or more aspects of feminine life and hardships. Written with insight, briskness, humor and occasional irony, especially in the later plays, they are divided into natural groupings:¹ The early dramas of women's emancipation during the Edwardian era (The Three of Us, 1906, and A Man's World, 1910); two maverick plays of the World War I period, one supporting old-fashioned marital loyalty (Old Lady 31, 1916), the other probing marriage-career conflicts (He and She, 1920); the treatment, often humorous but with an unmistakably didactic base, of the flapper (Nice People, 1921), the "generation gap" (Mary the Third, 1923), and modern divorce (Let Us Be Gay, 1929), all of which characterized Crothers' plays of the '20s. Her brand of sophisticated comedy was timely in the '30s, including pieces which purported to show how mutual understanding can keep a marriage together (As Husbands Go, 1931) and the ironies that result when a wife and mistress leave a man simultaneously (When Ladies Meet, 1932), while her final offering ended her long Broadway career on a note of admonition for those women who "love" humanity at the expense of their home and family with Susan and God, 1937.²

¹All dates given here -- and throughout -- are those of the original Broadway productions.

²Other plays such as Myself-Bettina, 1908, Ourselves, 1913, Young Wisdom, 1914, and A Little Journey, 1918, which also deal with women pitted against their environment, were not chosen for this study because their "advanced" ideas and dramatizations -- of the double standard of morality, for example -- are handled more effectively in the ten selected.

The sources that have been most helpful in doing the research for this study are both private and public. The private sources consisted of interviews with such celebrated artists as Walter Abel, Nancy Coleman, Selena Royle, Paul McGrath and Vera Allen, such well-known producers as Jean Dalrymple, such experienced journalists as Marion Spitzer Thompson and Radie Harris, and such personal acquaintances of Crothers as Mrs. Margaret Riddle of Bloomington, Illinois. Among the major public sources consulted were the Museum of the City of New York Theatre Collection which had recently acquired some hitherto untapped Crothers memorabilia under the bequest of Angeline C. (Mrs. Anthony D.) Hoagland, the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Withers Public Library and the McLean County Historical Society, both of Bloomington.

This work begins with a biographical chapter stressing the lonely character of the playwright's childhood and its effects on her determination to succeed as a woman in the world of the theatre.

Chapter Two discusses some of her influences, both personal and literary, her philosophy of art and her pragmatic view of her craft, together with the focus of her theatrical concentration; The "new woman" in her then-current ramifications.

Chapters Three to Six deal with the ten plays noted above. Since the theatre reflects the world around it, each of these

four chapters begins with a brief overview, indicating the backdrop against which these plays were written and produced. Then, after analyzing them, chiefly from the "woman's angle," two other contemporary dramas are compared with each Crothers play under discussion. The chapters conclude with some critical reviews of the Crothers productions.

Each of these chapters considers the plays primarily from the standpoint of the female characters and their relationships as wife, mother, mistress, friend, career woman. Although Crothers denied being a feminist,³ she inevitably dealt with "the general question of women's rights and responsibilities, [for which the] author has stood for some time as a representative in drama."⁴ She was a feminist by inclination and temperament rather than by conscious or political decision, rarely engaging in political activity. Nor did her heroines, moving as they did within the generally conventional milieus to which Crothers assigned them, make especially conscious decisions that would have put them in the forefront of their times and sex. Her initial burst of idealism which ended in 1920 with the New York production of He and She had given the stage exceptions to this in the characters of Frank Ware in A Man's World, 1910, Ruth Creel and, in part, Ann Herford in He and She, all of whom typified her earlier

³As did Ibsen, according to his famous speech, delivered in Oslo in 1898, and reiterated by Eva LeGallienne, in an article entitled "Ibsen, the Shy Giant," which appeared in The Saturday Review, August 14, 1971, p. 26. Crothers' early plays were compared to Ibsen thematically, as will be noted in Chapter Two.

⁴Arthur Hobson Quinn (ed.), Representative American Plays, (7th ed.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p. 893.

approach to female progress. The right to make choices is the heart of the matter that Crothers presents. Although her women characters start with a fierce need for financial and emotional independence, with the idealism and innocence of a young Rhy McChesney in The Three of Us (Chapter Three), and end with an unquestioning acceptance of financial and emotional dependence, with the selfishness and world-weary boredom of a mature Susan Trexel in Susan and God (Chapter Six), other Crothers heroines lie between these extremes. They move away from the idea that total independence for women is the solution to life's problems and toward Crothers' growing conviction that loneliness, not dependence, is the worse alternative for the vast female majority.

Putting it another way, Crothers' mature understanding of the human condition and her coming to grips with the realization that people -- men and women -- are needy and not invincible came to supercede her earlier conviction that independence was the sine qua non of female liberation. It was not that Crothers came to think that women should be dependent after all or that she abandoned her principles, as many have thought. Rather, as her plays continually demonstrate, she seems to have given up on the readiness of most women to come to grips with the realities of independence. ("It is the fashion today to say that women have arrived. They haven't; they have a long way to go.")⁵

⁵The New York Evening World, Article on women by Marguerite Moers Marshall, undated except as 1914. (In the MCNY Theatre Collection) The early date of this statement only underscores Crothers youthful optimism, demonstrated by writing plays that opted for the very state she said did not yet exist. Years later she wrote differently, having found that this view still held for most members of her sex.

Chapter Seven is devoted to reminiscences about Crothers from theatrical personages -- actors and actresses, producers and publicists -- who knew her and who had worked with her. Many letters are quoted from admirers of her work, letters which particularly emphasize the feminine bias of her thought and the reactions this provoked.

Chapter Eight summarizes the theatrical influence that she exerted in her time and explains her popularity. This chapter points up the seeming replacement of a private life with a public one. It considers the meticulous quality of her productions and her total commitment to them, which may explain her lack of staying power as a playwright once she had stopped contributing existentially to the theatre: No one else would be willing or able to stage her plays as she had. The chapter further suggests some possible influence she may have had on her contemporaries and on today's female playwrights, and it touches upon the possible stageworthiness of her plays for revival...two recent Off-Off Broadway productions being cited. Two of her strengths, after all, continue to be her gift for dialogue and her concern, as a woman, with women and their destinies. Ultimately, the element of "plus ça change..." is always present in her work. And, whatever their choices and motivations, it is always the women who are the movers and seekers in the plays of Rachel Crothers.

CHAPTER I

From Bloomington to Broadway

Rachel Crothers was born in the heartland of America in 1878, in Bloomington, Illinois, "that famous little town whence so many famous people have sprung."¹ A White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Victorian stronghold, it was known as the "cultural capital"² of the State. Her parents, Eli Kirk Crothers and Marie Louise DePew Crothers, were both physicians, her mother being the first woman ever to practice medicine in Bloomington. When Rachel was small, Mrs. Crothers became a doctor because her husband had gone bankrupt -- "your father was too generous and trusted too many people" -- and "with Father's faith to back her through these hard years. . .this shy, sensitive woman gave up her personal life and her fastidious housekeeping and became the leading woman physician in that part of the country."³

Rachel was the youngest child of a large family (there had been nine originally, but five had died) and a lonely one

¹Rachel Crothers, "The Box in the Attic", (Unfinished fragment of Crothers' autobiography, dated March 12, 1953), p. 2. Type-script is in the Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York (hereafter to be referred to as "MCNY") and is part of the Angeline C. Hoagland bequest of Crothers memorabilia. This collection is in four boxes and one large envelope. Much of the material is loose, but there are three "Scrapbooks" and one marked "Newspaper Clippings". Where appropriate, these will be designated as such.

²Taped interview with Mrs. Margaret Riddle, Bloomington, Illinois resident and longtime acquaintance of Rachel Crothers and family, August 6, 1976.

³Crothers, "The Box in the Attic," p. 19.

despite her having siblings. ("There were two brothers and a sister all enough older than I was to separate me from them completely, and of course they went to school so I had no one to play with but the paper dolls.")⁴ These paper dolls were of more than ordinary childish significance because here was the "beginning of it all -- far, far from Broadway".⁵ This statement is not mere rhetoric for Crothers goes on to say quite seriously and with the hindsight of the successful artist who sees a direct line of descent in her work: "My theatre came into being on the floor with my paper dolls when I was four years old -- building houses for them out of books -- speaking their dialogue -- living their lives -- finishing one set of lines before I began another."⁶ She goes on: "These dolls -- or people rather -- were cut from fashion sheets. . .The thin ones [which] were pliable and could be made to move about and to sit on the cardboard furniture."⁷ Evidently her predilection for the predominantly female motif of her work had its beginnings here too: "The ladies became absolutely the people they were supposed to be -- looking exactly as they should."⁸ Conversely, and as a continuum in her adult theatrical life, "the men were difficult to find."⁹ But to the small, lonely child (who "knew that I must be very quiet about all this. The woman sitting before the fire was my mother who must not be disturbed. . .She held on her lap the biggest book bound in pale

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., pp. 11-12.

⁸Ibid., p. 12.

⁹Ibid.

leather. . .Gray's Anatomy. . .")¹⁰ the dolls "were people not actors -- because I didn't know about actors and plays. I didn't know that what I was doing then was what I would be doing for most of my life -- writing the plays -- casting them -- directing them -- designing the sets, etc."¹¹ It might seem that some call in the blood was present in this four-year old, some congenital predilection or at least some environmental encouragement, but the playwright would not concede this:

The psychiatrists have been telling us for a very long time that character is formed between the ages of three and seven years by the influence and environment surrounding the child -- but it was neither influence nor inheritance which made this four-year-old child create a theatre. Long afterwards I learned that the theatre was a remote and disreputable thing to my family.¹²

(Her first play, written and produced at the age of twelve, was done in secret because both parents "though they were enlightened physicians, held the theatre to be an abomination aimed to entice young feet in the ways of sin.")¹³ Crothers, while she readily acknowledged the source of her infatuation ("the longing for companionship of course made me bring the dolls to life"),¹⁴ insisted that it was not deterministic: ". . .why did my fight for happiness make me choose that strange alien thing -- the theatre? Can psychiatrists tell us these things? I think not. Only God."¹⁵

¹⁰Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 16.

¹³Henry James Forman, The Story of Rachel Crothers, (Vol. III), p. 24., "Hometown in the Cornbelt," ed. Clara Louise Kessler. (A collection of unpublished manuscripts, typewritten and bound in five volumes, 1958. The typescripts are in the Bloomington Library and in the McLean County Historical Society also in Bloomington.)

¹⁴Crothers, "The Box in the Attic," p. 16.

¹⁵Ibid.

Marie Louise Crothers' study and hard work "won out to success" -- although she had to "struggle against the strong prejudice and skepticism which prevailed against women in that profession. . ." -- and in an amazingly few years she helped to pay Father's debts and bought a substantial house and made another home for us."¹⁶ Soon the little girl's loneliness abated as her theatrical activities began in earnest with the first play with which she was ever associated. Its title was Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining.

Happy times began for me with plenty of friends in school. One girl in particular -- May -- I especially loved and admired. She was adorably pretty and an awful lot of fun. We had in common a strong sense of the dramatic. When we were perhaps twelve I suggested that we write a play to which she acquiesced and we began this drama in collaboration in profound secrecy. As the work progressed, we were more and more absorbed in it. . . May sometimes became a little bored and weary with the hard work I had got her into -- but not for a moment did I let her stop. ¹⁷

(Her drive for perfection is already evident, and in later years many people who worked under Crothers' direction spoke of her as a "martinet".) All the elements and aspects of the production which was staged in May's house for a group of their parents' friends were handled by the two girls. Here was a portent of Crothers' adult methods, and her confidence in her own powers was already noticeable: "[Although] I can not at all remember the reaction of that distinguished first night audience, I only know that they didn't laugh. They were probably dumfounded [sic] that

¹⁶Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁸Ibid.

--such as it was -- we had delivered a complete thing."¹⁹ A "complete thing" was to be the hallmark of all Rachel Crothers' future work in the theatre.

At the beginning, her working life conformed to a conventional pattern. Despite her passion for the theatre, she attended the Illinois State Normal School and subsequently taught school in Bloomington on weekdays and a Bible class on Sundays. But the transition from this milieu into the theatre was made through this very Sunday school, for "it was to divert and instruct her Sunday school pupils that she set out on the road to fame as a dramatist. Her first plays [were] chiefly one-acters, and in order to still the protests [of the Sunday School authorities] . . . she called them "sketches." Their success encouraged her to continue such writing and later she gave up her school work and went to New York to prepare for the stage."²⁰

The Chicago Tribune for September 25, 1897, reported that "Miss Rachel Crothers of Bloomington, Ill. begins a Histrionic Career Under Flattering Auspices." The article goes on to tell of her first professional engagement with the eminent E.H. Sothern Company in New York after having completed her dramatic training in Boston where she had chosen to go to study in 1892 and later at New York's Stanhope-Wheatcroft School of Acting.²¹ She is

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Gilbert Kanour, "For Theater Goers," The Baltimore Evening Sun, June 17, 1943.

²¹There is no mention anywhere of her family's reaction to these decisions, but it can be inferred that they did not stand in her way. It is even probable that she was helped by them financially through some of these years, until the Sothern engagement and later her teaching job at the Wheatcroft School (around 1899) rendered her more independent.

described as "a pretty and graceful girl, full of life and spirit and of the most natural and engaging manners. . . [and is] distinguished for her amiability and simplicity. . . [as well as her 'enthusiastic devotion'] . . . [to] dramatic affairs." What does not come through in this early glimpse of Rachel is the extraordinary determination, ambition and self-reliance that was to characterize her. At a most auspicious moment in her life,²² and with an attractive touch of self-mockery, she gave a personal picture of herself at this period. Thinking of herself first as an actress, and, characteristically, seriously expecting to be "the greatest actress the world has ever known," she came to New York "where I knew no one. . . either in or out of the theatre -- but I had heard of David Belasco and Daniel Frohman -- and they were good enough to answer my letters and see me."²³ (Nothing came of these contacts, but they illustrate Rachel's lack of inhibition in pursuing her chosen path.) "Yes," she reminisced, "it was a grave adventure -- coming out of the security of home into the battlefield of the world alone. . . with nothing. . . to fight with but that elusive intangible thing called talent."²⁴ That, one might add, and a lot of self-confidence, willingness to work, and belief in the achievement of the American dream. Since she felt she had "burned her bridges," Crothers enrolled in the Wheatcroft School of Acting -- "not that I thought I needed it at all"²⁵ and

²²When the Chi Omega National Achievement Award for 1938 was presented to her at the White House on April 25, 1939.

²³Crothers' acceptance speech for the Chi Omega National Achievement Award, The White House, April 25, 1939. (Typescript in MCNY).

²⁴Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵Ibid., p. 3.

when the course was finished a miracle happened. Mrs. Wheatcroft -- the head of the school -- asked me if I would stay on as a coach and help to put on the one-act plays which were given in public every season to display the pupils."²⁶

These early years of the new century, then, saw Rachel at the Wheatcroft School and building her craft, or indeed her many crafts. Here was her chance, and she used it to her best advantage, as was her habit, to learn all phases of theatre. For here "complete freedom was given her [and it was here] she developed what [grew] to be one of the most important sides of her success -- that of directing and supervising entirely the production of her plays."²⁷ As she herself said, ". . .in this school of acting, I had the theatre in miniature -- a great chance to learn something about what I've been doing ever since."²⁸

For a while, acting dominated her personal ambition, but she continued to write the required one-acters, receiving promising notices on both scores. For example, in the New York Express for October 4, 1902, out of three one-act plays given at the Madison Square Theatre by students of the Wheatcroft School, the one by Crothers ("the head teacher of the school") was singled out for excellence. "The best play of the afternoon [a one-acter entitled Which Way? and the best piece of acting were done by Miss Rachel Crothers. . .Miss Crothers made the hit of the performance and was assailed with 'bravos' -- an unusual incident at a dramatic

²⁶"Rachel Crothers" (article, no source, author or date given. MCNY).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Chi Omega Award Acceptance Speech, p. 3.

school matinee." With such gathering momentum for Rachel and the continuing production of more of her plays at the Wheatcroft School (notably The Rector in 1902 and Nora in 1903), Broadway and her first hit -- The Three of Us in 1906 -- were not far away. After that first big success in 1906, she never really stopped, theatrically speaking, and over the next thirty years gave New York over twenty-five well-received productions.

The other external events of Crothers' life had mainly to do with public service. Just as her plays were largely appeals to women regarding the problems of women, so the causes with which she associated herself, had some feminine bias. In World War I, for example, she organized the ladies of "The Professional Women's League" into a group called "Stage Women's War Relief," as well as being involved in "The Woman's Theatre," advertised as ". . . a group of successful women organized to promote women's work in the theatre and to render aid and give counsel to all who may apply."²⁹ Her leadership qualities eventually led her, in World War II, to found and become first president of the American Theater Wing. (" . . . What we are doing here, is the greatest drama, the greatest cause in the world today, helping to save civilization.")³⁰ She also helped to start New York's celebrated Stage Door Canteen for servicemen. During the Depression, together with John Golden

²⁹Flyer, undated, with no mention of title or source. (MCNY)

³⁰Mary Tobin, "A Cordial Talk with Rachel Crothers," The New York Post, December 29, 1941.

-- her partner in many productions -- and a few other theatrical celebrities, Crothers founded the Stage Relief Fund for the purpose of giving help to unemployed theatre people. Its slogan, "Let us help each other," was indicative of Crothers' belief in active social commitment.

There were many honors bestowed on Rachel Crothers during her long, productive life, the most prestigious being the Chi Omega National Achievement Award for 1938 presented annually to an outstanding woman in the professions or the arts, which was presented to her at a White House reception in April of 1939 by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, then the First Lady. The Pulitzer Prize for Drama, however, always eluded her even though she was considered America's leading woman dramatist before Lillian Hellman, and the leading exponent of plays "in which she deals with a problem created by some demand of woman's nature."³¹ (Two female contemporaries, nowhere nearly so commercially successful as Crothers were accorded that honor: Zona Gale for Miss Lulu Bett in 1921 and Susan Glaspell for Alison's House in 1931.) Yet her unique ability to combine "amusement with instruction"³² won her the respect of her peers as well as the plaudits of her audiences.

Very little is known about the personal life of this eminent author. She never married and there is no mention of a single

³¹Quinn, Representative American Plays, p. 894.

³²John Mason Brown, Speech made at Chi Omega National Achievement Award Ceremony honoring Rachel Crothers, April 25, 1939, The Eleusis of Chi Omega (Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, Vol. XII, No. 3, September, 1939), p. 413.

romance, either in the memorabilia, the memories of those who knew her, or her own accounts. Clearly she prized privacy. (An extant fragment of her autobiography -- "The Box in the Attic" -- dated 1953, omits any mention of personal relationships other than family and childhood friends.) The reasons for her never having married have been variously speculated upon. One conjecture is that she was too busy. (" . . . Having just finished one play, another is already at the boiling point in her ceaselessly active imagination. . . .")³³ Another is that she was a lesbian. (She had a woman companion who lived with her for years and they went everywhere together. "The relation has been ideal," Crothers once said in an interview. "I have my work and she has hers. I write plays and she keeps my apartment.")³⁴ A third is that: "Maybe she had the feeling she couldn't be the right kind of wife. . . she didn't have time for marriage.")³⁵ A final conjecture is that she never found a man worthy of her. (She once told this to Jean Dalrymple, the well-known producer, who, as a theatrical neophyte, dared to pose the question to her on a Connecticut golf course at the zenith of her career in the 1930s.)³⁶ Unless further evidence is unearthed, her private life must remain conjecture.

What emerges, from the material available, is the picture of a woman who was immersed in her work; in this case, exceedingly remunerative and apparently satisfying work by a woman who seemed

³³The New York Evening Post, article untitled and anonymous, December 4, 1931, (MCNY)

³⁴The Pantagraph, Bloomington, Ill., article untitled and undated.

³⁵Interview with Mrs. Riddle.

³⁶Private interview with Jean Dalrymple, New York, April, 1976.

to live through her plays.³⁷ Theatre, as she once told Djuna Barnes who interviewed her for the May, 1931 issue of the Theatre Guild Magazine, filled her life, and that life focussed on the theatrical expression of the conflicts experienced by women in our society. As Mrs. Margaret Riddle of Bloomington, who had been acquainted with Crothers, commented: "She lived very much to herself. That was her life, and the plays just rolled out of her."³⁸

³⁷In later years, much of Crothers' work was done at her Redding, Conn. home, "Roadside". Her sister, Lulu, in an undated Pantagraph (Bloomington) interview called it "the house the plays built."

³⁸Interview with Mrs. Riddle.

CHAPTER 2

Influences, Dramatic Approach, and the "New Woman"

Rachel Crothers was above all a practical playwright. She practiced her art with a sure professional hand, paying minute attention, as will be shown, to all details of casting and production, and always her antenna were sensitive to the predilections and responses of her audience. ("A mixed audience -- highbrow and lowbrow -- make an 'aggregate'.")¹ But where did she spring from, dramatically speaking? What were some of the sources, some of the influences that formed her? What was her approach to dramaturgy and to stagecraft, what her philosophy of art? What underlay her main themes, namely love and the male-female relationship and succeeding phases of the "new woman"? ?

As we have seen, loneliness influenced her, imagination influenced her; more importantly, perhaps, women influenced her profoundly, beginning with her mother. She emulated the example set by that mother, since both of them entered and succeeded in what were aggressively male preserves: Medicine for the one, successful playwriting and directing for the other. Being a career woman, then, was taking a path that was not unprecedented for Rachel. In the example of her mother, too, lay the seed of

¹The Boston Evening Transcript, Interview with Rachel Crothers, February 14, 1912 (Scrapbook, "Newspaper Clippings," MCNY)

Crothers' strong conviction that economic independence is essential to female liberation, a point she was to stress in so many of her plays, beginning with The Three of Us in 1906 and going right through her social comedies of the 1930s, although more latterly she tended to base that economic independence on inherited wealth.² Other women who are known to have been influences in her life were those she mentions as having been most helpful in her chosen career, namely Mrs. Wheatcroft of the Stanhope-Wheatcroft Dramatic School, the already famous Carlotta Nilsson, star of Crothers' first Broadway hit, The Three of Us, and Maxine Elliott, a theatrical luminary of the first two decades of the century, and the person who gave Rachel her first chance to stage, professionally, a play of her own. (The play was Myself-- Bettina, 1908, which Miss Elliott produced and in which she starred.) Crothers claimed that she "owed her freedom"³ to these three women, that "it has always been a woman who helped me,"⁴ and that "for a woman it is best to look to women for help."⁵ She reported once, with more than a touch of irony, that "once she had proved herself, men were very willing to let her do the work."⁶

It would have been odd for a dramatist of Crothers' generation not to have some such youthful reminiscence as this one:

²Nice People (1921) and Susan and God (1937) are cases in point.

³Djuna Barnes, "The Tireless Rachel Crothers," Theatre Guild Magazine, Vol. VIII, Number 8 (May, 1931), p. 18.

⁴The LeRoy Journal, LeRoy, Ill., March 6, 1953, Section 2, p. 9. (MCNY)

⁵Barnes, p. 18.

⁶*Ibid.*

". . . [In] the evitable dramatic club [at the Illinois State Normal School in Bloomington from which Crothers was graduated] which opened the door of heaven for me. . . I found a wonderful play [that] was so quiet but so exciting and [in which] people talked as people really do. I told them that [for the purposes of] our Club. . . I could easily rewrite it and that the name of this play was The Doll's House [sic] written by somebody named Ibsen."⁷ Not everyone would have assumed the possibility of improving upon the original, but Crothers' self-confidence was more naive than audacious. Perhaps it is not stretching coincidence too far when we note that later, at one of the semi-annual student matinees given at the Wheatcroft School, a one-act sketch called Nora by Rachel Crothers was presented and well-received. "The item of news for Broadway is that in the bright white light of Nora the pall of amateurism dropped from these amateurs as a garment, and they walked through real scenes of real life like real people."⁸ The master's precepts had clearly affected the pupil.

Crothers' plays, even those that are lightest in tone (As Husbands Go, 1931, for example), always had a thesis, a concern for what lies beneath surfaces, a serious moral base. In 1907, one critic wrote that "there is the veracious moving quality of Hauptmann in Miss Crothers' writing."⁹ It is this moral grounding

⁷Chi Omega Award, National Achievement Award Acceptance Speech, The White House, April 25, 1939, p. 2.

⁸New York newspaper, unnamed and undated, except as 1903. (MCNY)

⁹Chicago Record-Herald, Review of "Myself-Bettina," February 11, 1908.

that links her to Ibsen. "Certainly no other playwright has understood women as Ibsen did,"¹⁰ and the reality with which he portrayed his female characters, "accepting them as men's equals"¹¹ makes him a literary godfather to Crothers' heroines. An admirer of the great Norwegian wrote a negative criticism on this very subject about an early play by Crothers, The Coming of Mrs. Patrick, 1907. Here, some Ibsen-like characteristics were detected but to our author's detriment. The writer asserts that Crothers tries to imitate Ibsen's realism but fails. He speaks of "how far she has yet to go, how feeble are all our flickering imaginations, how stumbling and clumsy our technique beside the visions and the handiwork of that grim old Viking of the modern theatre."¹² Crothers seems to have been influenced, too, by the strong female characters of Ibsen's most voluble supporter, Shaw, whom she also admired -- "Shaw is, to me, the greatest of the literary dramatists . . . [a] genius"¹³ -- and by the true-to-life characterizations and "marvelous [sic] innate quality"¹⁴ of Chekhov.¹⁵

Most likely Miss Crothers saw some Ibsen productions at the time of her earliest writing, since they were staged and presented

¹⁰Eva LaGallienne, "Ibsen, the Shy Giant," The Saturday Review, August 14, 1971, p. 24.

¹¹Ibid., p. 25.

¹²Walter P. Eaton, Article on Crothers' "The Coming of Mrs. Patrick," The Sun, undated except as 1907. (MCNY)

¹³Rachel Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," (lectures), The Art of Playwriting (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928), p. 128.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵In A Man's World (1910) we see Crothers' nearest approximation to some Chekhovian characters.

in that era by "the superb American actress Mrs. Fiske. [Minnie Maddern Fiske, 1865-1932] who did more for Ibsen in the Nineties and early 1900s than anyone else,"¹⁶ and it can be safely surmised that the budding actress-author took advantage of all the theatre she could. Therefore, further dramatic influences can be inferred by relating her work to that of some of her successful older contemporaries. Such inferences point to dramas of playwrights like the "brilliantly successful"¹⁷ Bronson Howard whose praise of The Three of Us ("it is simply a stroke of genius")¹⁸ remained one of the high points of her professional satisfaction; the social comedies of Clyde Fitch¹⁹ -- to some of whose plays with Western settings²⁰ may have been owed aspects of The Three of Us -- as well as the sophistication of Langdon Mitchell;²¹ and the works of William Vaughan Moody, who brought new dramatic complexity to the stage in his Western-based theatre pieces.²² Although elements of influence from such writers would have been almost

¹⁶Le Gallienne, p. 26.

¹⁷Crothers, "The Box in the Attic," p. 9.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Clyde Fitch, "The Play and the Public," Representative Plays by American Dramatists, ed. Montrose Moses (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., Vol III, 1964), p. 530. Fitch's dramaturgy, even if only osmotically absorbed, is akin to Crothers': "Apart from the question of literature, apart from the question of art, reflect the real thing with true observation and with sincere feeling for what it is and what it represents, and that is art and literature in a modern play."

²⁰The Cowboy and the Lady, 1899, and The Girl and the Judge, 1900.

²¹Mitchell propounded daring, though aptly handled, concepts of divorce with such a play as The New York Idea, 1906.

²²The Great Divide, 1906, and The Faith Healer, 1909.

inevitably absorbed, Crothers herself was one of the innovators²³ of the new realism, the new American style.²⁴ It was in her later plays -- of the '20s and '30s -- that she tended to adopt a comedic approach which linked her to the style of some of her peers and predecessors.

John Golden, in his humorous tribute to Rachel Crothers at the White House reception honoring her in April, 1939, gave a mock-historical dramatic overview, and lightly traced her lineage to Sappho -- "one of the first women playwrights"²⁵ -- and to Hroswitha, the 10th-century literary nun. As for the 18th century's Mrs. Inchbald, Hannah Cowley, Fanny Burney and Mrs. Cibber, and proceeding to the 19th century's Mrs. Henry Wood who wrote the melodrama East Lynne ("...the wiser ones of ...that day shuddered at its infantile plot and dialogue"),²⁶ Golden called them all inferior to the "sweet, young retiring girl who had come out of the West and written a play called The Three of Us. This unknown genius was none other than Rachel Crothers²⁷. . ."

Because she developed a solid sense of craft and of what makes a piece of theatre work effective, Crothers' plays are enjoyable and "well-made." For if Crothers was an innovator in subject matter she was not one in style. As a realist ("...I

²³Eleanor Flexner, American Playwrights: 1918-1938 (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1938), p. 29.

²⁴The Naturalism--with Expressionistic overtones--of Frank Wedekind's Spring Awakening (1892), for example, would have been as alien to her spirit as were the Symbolist plays which theatrically paralleled her formative years.

²⁵John Golden's speech, The Eleusis of Chi Omega, p. 415.

²⁶Ibid., p. 416.

²⁷Ibid., p. 417.

believe that great realism -- realism at its best -- is the highest form of dramatic writing"),²⁸ presenting her ideas almost naturalistically at times,²⁹ she stayed within the essential confines of the well-made play. All the characteristics are there, as they are in Ibsen: ". . . suspense, revelations and discoveries, confidants and raisonneurs."³⁰ In Crothers' plays, these last can be said to be personified by Dr. Remington in He and She and Margaret Rainsford in Nice People. Crothers always introduces the scene à faire too, as in the confrontation between Ann and Tom at the end of He and She, for instance, or the showdown between Mary and Claire--the mistress and wife respectively--in Act III of When Ladies Meet. And while she does not achieve the complexity of Ibsen, Crothers' writings are carefully shaped and make telling dramatic points, most of her plays being "light, amusingly handled, [and] dealing with the social problem of the moment rather than that of the race."³¹ Melodrama colors the early plays, especially The Three of Us, in which the heroine, hero and villain are overdrawn and therefore too stereotypic, but the dialogue (" . . . exquisite . . . flowing . . . perfectly and continuously from the beginning to the end of the play. . ."),³² and her accomplishment in being one of those who brought into the theatre

²⁸Crothers, "The Construction of a Play", p. 126.

²⁹Her minute use of detail in stage sets à la Belasco, for instance, bears this out.

³⁰John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1954), p. 111.

³¹Barnes, p. 18.

³²Bronson Howard quoted by Rachel Crothers in "The Box in the Attic," p. 9.

"the progressive and growing thought of her day,"³³ lifts Crothers out of the commonplace and also out of the one-shot-hit class.

The assumption of the fourth wall is always present, and Crothers' dramaturgical technique is also conventional, although her complacency about her own methods is not. "Thinking of writing a play? It's easy. . . anyone can be a playwright. . . because we are all born story-tellers, and a play is merely a story told in dramatic form. Once that form is acquired, the rest is simple. . . a play's story must have clarity above all other qualities if it is to impress its hearers."³⁴ This common sense approach is endemic to Crothers; she invokes no muse -- although she does say that "only the gifted can be helped. . . [those with] dramatic instinct"³⁵ -- and her advice as to how to go about "constructing" a dramatic opus is sound but equally pragmatic. First comes the idea for the story and then the manner³⁶ of constructing it: "Construction is obviously the framework upon which all the other material rests -- the outline by which the story is deployed. . . Good construction builds the story act by act -- always climbing, always advancing. . ."³⁷ After the story comes the dialogue: "Good dialogue conveys to the audience everything by seeming to tell it nothing -- by letting it catch up

³³Flexner, p. 29.

³⁴The Chicago Daily News, Interview with Crothers, no byline, November 5, 1925, (MCNY).

³⁵Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," p. 121.

³⁶In The Quintessence of Ibsenism, Shaw states that in Ibsen's plays it is the "ideas" that are most important. Here is further evidence of Ibsen's influence on Crothers, in this case on her dramaturgy, although the basis of the primacy of plot is, of course, Aristotelian.

³⁷Crothers, "The Construction of a Play", p. 123.

with the characters as it sees them actually living, and overhears their intimate talk to each other."³⁸ And "speech must come out fresh and impulsively from the characters. [Since] good dramatic dialogue reveals but does not explain. . .the fewer words the character speaks and the more he shows of himself by them, the better the writing."³⁹ We are then faced with the last member of this dramaturgical trinity, character, because as Crothers correctly says, the characters "are the story -- and they are the idea -- out of them and their natures it all comes."⁴⁰ Although she was flexible enough to understand that "the laws of playmaking are loose and fluid,"⁴¹ she gives her own method as a formula: "First the idea, then the story which will concretely develop this idea, then the characters which spring instantaneously with the story. . ."⁴² This formula she used over and over with enormous success.

Since Crothers believed that "playwriting includes all the other arts,"⁴³ and since she was the director of her own plays, by and large, it rings true when she says, "It isn't possible for me to separate the writing from the staging of my own plays because it so happens that I began to do it all at the same time. It's therefore very much easier for me to be responsible for everything from the smallest details than it is to translate[sic] it all to someone else."⁴⁴ From the casting through to the

³⁸Ibid., p. 124.

³⁹Ibid., p. 129.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 130.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 129.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 129-130.

⁴³Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 131.

innumerable and most minute production problems, Crothers worked out the problems herself. First of all, she stressed the importance of casting ("when everything else has been done the play is in the hands of the actors.")⁴⁵ To find the right person for the right part,⁴⁶ to compromise "with what the actor has to give and what the character is, until out of the two the person is born -- this is the most fascinating part of all producing."⁴⁷ Author and director fused in her and let her have the supremacy she wanted in the supervision of her plays. For she believed -- and acted upon her belief -- that, other than the dramatist, "most important of all, and the factor that shapes and controls the whole production is the director."⁴⁸

In one of her numerous and frequent interviews, she declared that directing a play "requires more physical strength than most women possess,"⁴⁹ but not being "most women," she managed. She took the sets and lighting as her province too,⁵⁰ as well as the costumes. In reading the directions for the sets in all of Crothers' plays -- red velvet curtains, special carpets, certain kinds of woods -- one notices that she was consistent in her ideal of realism being the best form of theatre.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶She gave many a future star his or her Broadway start, including Tallulah Bankhead and Katharine Cornell in Nice People (1921), and Walter Abel in Mary the Third (1923), to name only three.

⁴⁷Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," p. 123.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 130.

⁴⁹Sara Wilson, "The Woman's Angle," The New York Evening Sun, undated except as October, 1937 (MCNY)

⁵⁰Two notable exceptions were the productions of He and She in 1920, whose set designer was Norman Bel Geddes, and Susan and God, in 1937, whose set designer was Jo Mielziner.

To me -- bringing the play to life -- after the lonely labor of writing it is over -- is the most exciting and thrilling part of it all. To sit alone in the cold dark theatre and see the play take shape -- see the actors become the characters -- to feel the beat of truth and reality come through into an entity -- this is the peak of work and life for me.⁵¹

Since actors, who ultimately carry a play were, to her, the most important consideration after directing and the script itself, the "desperate search"⁵² for the right actor or actress to play a part was to occur over and over again. When she did find what she wanted she could exult -- and did -- that "nothing in life is more thrilling and important than just that."⁵³ Further, she firmly believed that "grace and variety of movement are as necessary [to plays] as color is to painting. . ."⁵⁴ and in the importance of "the choice of settings -- how much change of scene will help the story, or how much more effective [it would be] for the characters to remain in one room throughout the play. . ."⁵⁵ Thus it can be seen that she intertwined all elements so that her dramaturgy and her stagecraft virtually are inseparable.

Her view of staging points up her attention to detail and the control that she exercised:

⁵¹Chi Omega Award Acceptance Speech,, p. 4.

⁵²Crothers, "The Box in the Attic", p. 12.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Crothers, "The Construction of a Play", p. 125.

⁵⁵Ibid.

. . .A vast network of other things [than outlay of money] enter into the simplest production," she said once in a speech. "The sets for the scenery must be designed from an architectural standpoint -- then built -- and then painted. All three done by totally different people. Furniture must be selected and clothes chosen. Men's clothes are usually more or less the regulation thing and not troublesome -- but the good selection of clothes for the women is an intricate and difficult job. The woman must be happy in her things as a woman -- as well as properly dressed for the character. It's fatal to ask an actress to wear something she doesn't like. She must be free and comfortable and feel that she looks well. That keeps her performance [sic]. All the gowns must not only be harmonious with each other but with the background [and] the coloring in the sets. Lights change colors and must be taken into consideration. All this is a complicated difficult business but Oh so interesting. ⁵⁶

Commenting that "above all things the play itself must be watched all during rehearsals -- and in the few weeks on the road before it reaches the metropolitan audience."⁵⁷ She comes full circle and aria da capo-like, starts in on her litany: ". . .unless the kernel of the thing is intrinsically right -- no amount of time or work can make it so."⁵⁸ With her cast, sets and costumes so meticulously chosen, and with a feminine sensitivity brought to bear, her preparations ushered in her rigorous rehearsal techniques and another Crothers play was set in motion.

Crothers kept her finger on the public pulse. Feeling that her themes were "in the air" and that she had the wit to capitalize on their timeliness ("however good or bad the thing in the theatre

⁵⁶Speech given by Crothers at Worcester, Mass. in 1938 (no specific date given) on her own approach to theatre. (Type-script in MCNY)

⁵⁷Ibid. This will be illustrated in Chapter 7, where some actors who worked under her direction reminisce about her.

⁵⁸Ibid.

is, you may know it has happened out there, in reality, before it ever got on to the stage.")⁵⁹ She also knew, as a good craftsman, that "the finer the construction. . .the simpler, of course -- and the less aware of it the audience is."⁶⁰ It was her un-failing understanding of her audience, its wants and expectations as well as its diversity, which insured her wide acceptance. It was the professionalism she brought to her craft, and her ability to get the best possible mileage out of her material and her actors that insured the high quality of her productions. She believed, and acted upon her belief, that in an audience there is

a sort of essence of common sense, or morality [that] oozes out of the crowd and condemns or accepts the play. The greatest masterpiece is the one which is called great by the largest number of different kinds of people, and the test and secret of the great play is that with all its fineness and beauty, it has the power to reach and touch and convince all kinds of people.⁶¹

As we have come to expect from Crothers, here is a purely pragmatic, and yes, democratic, philosophy. Give the public what it wants with an expert hand and what it wants is in the air even if it doesn't know it; furthermore, a playwright who wins the public's attention will succeed. "I do not believe," declared Crothers "there are any masterpieces in oblivion,"⁶² and her explanation of her own success is succinct: "I made it work."⁶³

⁵⁹Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," p. 133.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 125.

⁶¹The Boston Evening Transcript, February 14, 1912.

⁶²Barnes, p. 18.

⁶³Ibid.

"Dramatic art," she wrote, "... .[grows] out of the understanding of human nature and the skill of depicting human nature."⁶⁴ She understood human nature well as the relationships of her characters and her forays into the psyches of her audience show, and she also understood how to convey this understanding by transforming it into art, about which, characteristically, she had definite opinions. "What is art anyway but an interpretation conceived and executed through an individual in whom is concentrated the experience of the ages -- quickened into life by individual genius?"⁶⁵ She approved iconoclasm of ideas, for some old ways could be obstacles. "Tradition. . .has no value except as something to start on," she declared, "and leave from and go on from. There are no laws in the theatre. The way other people did it is of no importance -- but how can we do it -- and what can we add to it are the only things which concern the artist."⁶⁶ No doubt, no equivocation, no dichotomies appear in Crothers' published thought; only one unswerving path and her absolute adherence to it. Still, she was not insensitive to other ideas around her: "Out of all change the real artist gets something,"⁶⁷ and she insisted upon being dramatically courageous. Writing in the 1920s, Crothers spoke of "the revolutionary period the theatre has just gone through,"⁶⁸ and saw it as positive. "The looser, more sketchy and swiftly moving style"⁶⁹ of the times she reacted to

⁶⁴Crothers, "The Construction of a Play", p. 126.

⁶⁵Undated letter by Crothers to John Corbin, dramatic critic for The New York Times during the first quarter of the century. (He also wrote for the New York Sun in the century's first decade.)

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Crothers, "The Construction of a Play", p. 126.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

by incorporating what suited her into her chosen mode of realism. And what suited her was that she realized that the playwright "knows now it is better writing to merely suggest -- to awaken the imagination of the audience [by not telling them] all there is to be told about everything -- and thereby stop their imagination."⁷⁰ She realized that since "the era of photographic realism [is over] . . . imagination is 50% of the play."⁷¹ As has been suggested, in her plays realism always prevailed, but she supported individual approach as independence of spirit, a dramatic flexibility in keeping pace with the times, and a philosophy of art which, however pragmatic, shows a belief in human progress and artistic perfectability.

Since, as Crothers knew, "the stage inevitably is progressive [and] is the most definite, telling and effective reflection of the hour in which we live,"⁷² she appreciated that the hour of the "new woman" had come. Actually, the new woman was already an old story by the early 20th century. Her literary antecedents go back at least as far as the 17th century to such personalities as Madame de Sévigné or the plays of England's redoubtable Mrs. Aphra Behn. She can even be traced back to power-claiming heroines of tragedy such as Antigone, Electra or Medea (if we consider one aspect of the "new woman" to be that of one in a position of power), or to the comic but formidable heroines of Aristophanes.⁷³

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹The New York Times, Interview, no byline, December 3, 1916. (In Scrapbook, "Newspaper Clippings", MCNY)

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Harriet Kriegel (ed.), Women in Drama (New York: Mentor Books, 1975), p. xvi.

In 17th century England she emerged "more significantly in drama than in any other art form of the time."⁷⁴ Since, as Crothers often concurred, art reflects life, the beginnings of the "modern" heroine didn't make their appearance till after Mary Wollstonecraft published her A Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792. But Crothers took no part in political activity per se, nor does she mention politics in her plays, particularly not the outstanding political cause of her young womanhood, namely the Suffrage Movement. Nor, as far as the evidence goes, would it seem that she was aware of or influenced by such seminal thinkers as Mary Wollstonecraft or John Stuart Mill. Always an individualist, in life as in her choice of emphasis in her art, we can assume Crothers was more likely moved by individualists and influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by such 19th century novelists and their "liberated" heroines as Jane Austen's Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice (Austen's irony and humor may have been influential here; her unsentimental objectivity was not), Louisa May Alcott's Jo in Little Women, George Eliot's Maggie Tolleriver in The Mill on the Floss and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch, to name a few outstanding ones. A sensitively submissive heroine on the order of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's Villette would not seem to be the type that appealed to Crothers. Although she was strictly a playwright ("By the time I was twelve I knew that novels were not important and that I must write a play"),⁷⁵

⁷⁴Jean Elizabeth Gagen, The New Woman: Her Emergence in English Drama, 1600-1730 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1954), p. 14.

⁷⁵Chi Omega Award Acceptance Speech, p. 1.

Crothers' point of view does seem to have been shaped by much that preceded her in the novel.⁷⁶ "Literature uses its heroines of spirit to weigh how much change in the relation of the sexes society is able to tolerate at a given moment,"⁷⁷ and certainly Crothers used her "heroines of spirit" to test such change.

Against the consciousness of choice which expanded the liberation of women as the conflicts in several of Crothers' plays ably reflect, the truth of the assertion that both culture and biology are "fundamentally threatened by female spirit"⁷⁸ stands out clearly. It marks the inherent threat that has forced women into an inevitably secondary role in society. All the reasons for this may be lost in the mists of antiquity, but Simone de Beauvoir succinctly says that ". . .humanity [has always been considered] male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being."⁷⁹ Like Shaw, whose "rational woman" is an active antecedent of such Crothers females as Frank Ware and Ann Herford [it was he, after all, "who took up the banner for Nora"]⁸⁰, she wrote of women who

⁷⁶She might have been surprised to know that some comparison between her writing and that of the totally antithetical George Sand might be drawn, since nowadays, as V.S. Pritchett puts it in The New York Review of Books, August 17, 1978, Sand is accounted a moralist.

⁷⁷Diana Trilling, "Lecture on the Liberated Heroine", Columbia University, April 17, 1978. (The Eliot heroines mentioned were suggested by this lecture.)

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. and ed. by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. xvi.

⁸⁰Kriegel, p. xxxi.

want to be whole, who want to know who they are, who want to have the chance to determine their own destiny. "81

Love and the male-female relationship are the dominant themes in Crothers' work, and they include such issues as the double standard of morality, fidelity and divorce, in which the female "side" of these disputes had only very recently come to public attention. Crothers realized, and dramatized the realization, that for all their differences, men and women think alike. "Men and women are fundamentally much more alike than either believes."82 The example of an ideal male-female relationship which she thought possible, one in which both people love and share may have had its origins in the equal partnership of her parents. Combatting age-old prejudice to the contrary, she contended that women are logical ("it is their logic that has made them live out their destiny"),83 that women are pulled in many directions, that women are brave ("... [they] are... daring, they... take the most extraordinary chances... in marriages, you know, why not in life?")84 Women, she believed, are of enormous significance in the world at large, but particularly in theatre. In an early newspaper

81Ibid. Unlike the heroines of Jones or Pinero, whose Zoe Blundell in Mid-Channel (1909), for example, committed suicide because she was hamstrung emotionally and trapped economically. Neither do such destructive females as those portrayed by Strindberg have any place in Crothers' lexicon.

82Paul A. Shinkman, Interview with Rachel Crothers, Central Press Association, Cleveland, Ohio, November 10, 1937.

83Rachel Crothers, "Women Must Live Out Their Destiny," The Theatre Magazine, May, 1910, p. 136.

84Barnes, p. 18.

interview she maintained that

women are by far the stronger element [than men] in the development of the drama because they are the prevailing part of the audience and therefore really largely decide what plays should be seen. . . In general, women's taste in plays is much wider than men's. . . Another reason why the drama has so large an appeal to women is that the majority of plays have for their central figure a woman -- a study of her character and her place and influence in society.⁸⁵

She underscores her point, not taking into consideration the total body of dramatic literature, when she adds that

most of the great modern plays are studies of women. I suppose it is because women in themselves are more dramatic than men, more changing, and a more significant note of the hour in which they live because of their own evolution. If you want to see the sign of the times, watch women. Their evolution is the most important thing in modern life.⁸⁶

These words of a committed feminist, whether she thought of herself as one or not, echo the sentiments of Ibsen on the same subject a few years earlier.

The evolution of women had been a conscious question for a very long time. As early as 1694, Mary Astell had written that "until women are given opportunities for education equal to those given men, no one can judge rightly of their potentialities."⁸⁷ But such advanced thinking which, after long delay and struggle, did eventually lead to the furtherance of women's education a

⁸⁵The Boston Evening Transcript, February 14, 1912.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Gagen., p. 47.

concomitant opportunities, still did not dispel the conflict between different sides of a woman's nature. This was the crucial issue to Crothers and the one she dwelt on in her plays. No easy solutions were propounded -- she "sees no simple answer to this tension between motherhood and a career."⁸⁸ -- and while she herself was a "new woman," she understood that for a woman, in her time at least, a choice had to be made; a "tragic choice" as Dr. Remington puts it in He and She: Whether to forge ahead with her own life and interests or to opt primarily for home and family. An analysis of her plays will show that home and family basically won out. (Crothers implied in several plays, most explicitly in A Man's World, that only a strong, exceptional woman could choose the other path.) It has been stated that "another highly sentimental appeal [in Crothers'] plays is that made by the sentimental glorification of motherhood and the home."⁸⁹ I would not agree, for this makes her sound like an advocate of such ideas as those promulgated by Kathleen Norris, a novelist of the early part of the century, whose novel Mother (ca. 1911) was indeed a glorification of happy motherhood as the sine qua non of female fulfillment. In a play like He and She (written, incidentally, at the exact same time as Mother), Crothers was emphasizing the conflicts of choice and their sometimes strangulating effects. As the modern slogan has it: "Women Belong in the House and the Senate." Crothers would, demonstrably, have substituted the conjunction "or,"

⁸⁸Deborah S. Kolb, "The Rise and Fall of the New Woman in American Drama," Educational Theater Journal (May, 1975), p. 157, in reference to Crothers' He and She.

⁸⁹Irving Abrahamson, The Career of Rachel Crothers (unpublished PhD. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1956), p. 267.

For herself, the choice had been made. As an "advanced" woman and a producing playwright -- "work has no sex"⁹⁰ -- as well as a champion of women in her plays, she took an active part in the progress of that civilization in which she believed. And she knew herself to be an exception. She once wrote to a girlhood friend (Nelle Webb of Bloomington) in a letter that could apply to any of her plays or her causes: "I'm working night and day at this. Only began it two weeks ago and the first women I have called upon have responded gloriously. We can do great things -- but of course a few of us will have to do the work."⁹¹

⁹⁰Rachel Crothers, "The Producing Playwright," Theatre Magazine, Vol. XXIII, No. 203 (January, 1918), p. 31.

⁹¹Undated letter to Nelle Webb, personal friend of Crothers and librarian at Withers Library in Bloomington, Ill. (Photostat in MCNY)

CHAPTER 3

The First Two Hits and Their Heroines

"It was the best of times. . .," "a time of complacency."¹ Those halcyon days of the decade and a half preceding World War I still displayed a sense of 19th-century well-being and upward striving. Science looked like the hope of the future, and the philosophy of the Enlightenment making all things seem reasonable still reigned. Some were secure that "God was in His heaven;" others did not doubt that, at the least, all was going to be all right with the world -- certainly when the miserable social and economic conditions that accompanied the pervasive hope were made to disappear.² In New York, the slums were full and the immigrants kept coming; such horrors as the Triangle Shirt Factory fire occurred and the unions grew and strengthened; and all the while, the unbroken general peace (the Spanish-American War had been a skirmish and the Boer War was far away) seemed the new way of life, the hope of a better future. Alger-like, things could only improve -- and last forever.³ In the theatre -- and "everything we are and do and think and believe gets into the

¹Frederick Lewis Allen, The Big Change (New York: Harper & Bros. 1952), p. 5.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 64.

theatre-- it is the mirror of life"⁴ -- at any rate in the commercial theatre for which Crothers was to write so successfully, the same complacency and sense of essential order prevailed. Despite the recent world impact of André Antoine together with the Naturalists, Ibsen and Shaw,⁵ American commercial realism was still romanticized. (The more "arty" experimental plays, such as those of the Symbolists, were not commercial stuff, and "the decade between 1900 and 1910 was. . .singularly devoid of strongly marked artistic movements.")⁶ In the successful plays of Clyde Fitch and William Vaughan Moody, for example, situations and plot were in the "dominant realistic mode" but still leaning toward "realistic illusionism."⁷ It was in this latter vein that Rachel Crothers entered the world of the Broadway theatre.

The first two plays to be considered here, The Three of Us, 1906, and A Man's World, 1910, have much in common. They demonstrate the development of Crothers' early basic theme of the obstacles women face in society. As will be shown, each heroine dominates her play and deals with the dilemmas of her particular situation with force, personal integrity, and awareness of her rights as an individual. Since Crothers is a playwright and not primarily a polemicist, her solutions are not groundbreaking or even startling, although A Man's World may stand as

⁴Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," p. 133.

⁵In a previous chapter, it was noted that Crothers confessed to admiration of and influence by both these authors' "thesis" plays.

⁶O. Brockett and R. Findlay, A Century of Innovation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 147.

⁷Ibid.

an exception to this statement. Nevertheless, the heroines of these plays are examples of the "new woman," American vintage, before World War I. The attitudes and circumstances of that seemingly innocent era are stamped on the characters in these plays. The setting of the mining camp in Nevada in the first play and the portrait of New York presented in the later work have the unmistakable imprimatur of that pre-automated, optimistic and comparatively conformist era, even though much realistic detail is skilfully interwoven; hence the "realistic illusionism" previously referred to. The same holds true of the dialogue and the ideas of the two plays which also belong to their contemporary theatrical scene. First the idea, then the people who can express this idea and then the story to develop it in,⁸ was the dramatic tenet of Crothers who was "first and foremost. . . the practical practicing dramatist."⁹

Her first resounding success, which reached the Broadway boards on October 17, 1906 with Carlotta Nilsson in the leading role, was The Three of Us. It established its 28-year old author as a new dramatic force to be reckoned with, and exhibited her principal theme, evolving woman. It has been claimed that the defense by the heroine "of her right to do as she pleased without excuse to anyone"¹⁰ in the face of calumny and damning circumstantial

⁸Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," pp. 129-30.

⁹Abrahamson, p. 50.

¹⁰Edmund Gagey, Revolution in American Drama (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), pp. 194-5. (Abrahamson also cites this section of Gagey's book in his work.)

evidence "perhaps did as much for modern American drama as Nora Helmer's shutting of the door to A Doll's House did for modern world drama in general."¹¹ At the least, the independent young heroine, Rhy, became the prototype of succeeding Crothers heroines as a most "vivid and sympathetic presentation of a girl's character."¹² The Three of Us was "one of the earliest plays to sound the trumpet call for the [dramatic] revolution. . .the character of Rhy McChesney [as] an outstanding representative of the New Woman [on] the stage."¹³

The main themes of Crothers' plays are love and woman against society, and her works can easily be divided into categories. The plays of the first portion of her career, from 1906 to the beginning of World War I, were concerned with the sexual double standard in society. In both The Three of Us and A Man's World, not only is this double standard shaken to its already perceptibly loosened foundations, but we notice that the dual rôles of the heroines may burden them with opposed intentions and interests. Yet, "Rhy McChesney's determination to guide and protect her two younger brothers, even against their own ambitions and even at the cost of her own happiness, is appealing because it is carried out without heroics and because it celebrates the loyalty of thousands of women who, in the United States, play the dual rôle of sister and mother."¹⁴

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama (New York: Harper, 1927), Vol. 2, p. 51.

¹³Gagey, pp. 194-5.

¹⁴Quinn, A History of the American Drama, p. 51.

In The Three of Us, Rhy McChesney, the heroine, aged 25, has been left alone in the world with two younger brothers to care for and an inherited claim for a seemingly worthless mine which she believes will eventually pay off. In the small Nevada mining town in which the story is set, two men are in love with Rhy. One is Steve, poor, honorable and her choice, but he feels obliged to stake a rich claim before he can propose marriage to her. The other, the rich and corrupt Berresford, apparently has dishonorable intentions. Now, Rhy "is the head of the family and a woman of business. . ." as well as "an active force," and when she has been put in a false position by giving her word to a clever schemer (Berresford) not to reveal certain information about a crooked mine transaction, she goes to his rooms at night and demands release from her promise."¹⁵ At this juncture, Rhy is suddenly confronted by the double standard of conduct expected from men and women. (Even seeming misconduct on a woman's part, such as visiting a man at his home, is frowned on.) Although there is an essential conventionality to the plot, the "happy ending" of Rhy's reunion with Steve comes about as a result of her determination to remain single and on her own rather than capitulate and ask for understanding in a situation that only appeared compromising. She asks to be taken on trust and love alone, or not at all, and her independence signals her as an in-

¹⁵Ibid.

dependently "liberated" heroine. Steve accepts this condition so that the ending can be seen as the coming together of equals, of a man and a woman who are prepared to give each other real and mutual respect, thereby undermining the double standard. The idea of "revolution" in Crothers' dramatic beginnings is more understandable once that ending is rightly comprehended.

"First the idea, then the people who can express this idea."¹⁶ Crothers states that she has drawn her characters from life and accurately¹⁷ and her play text attests to the truth of her belief. "Inevitability," says Crothers, "is the greatest quality in playwriting, not surprise and invention. They are very fine indeed in farce and the mystery play [sic] but not in drama. Inevitability is a true and psychological result coming out of the natures of the characters as they act and react upon each other under given conditions."¹⁸ In The Three of Us, the "given conditions" are the stage convention of a romanticized West, one seen frequently and successfully on the Broadway stage of that era, notably in David Belasco's Girl of the Golden West in 1903 and William Vaughan Moody's The Great Divide in 1906, the same year as The Three of Us.

The dominant Crothers heroine is described in a stage direction as

" . . .forceful and fearless as a young Amazon,
with the courage of belief in herself-- the audacity

¹⁶Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," pp. 129-30.

¹⁷Crothers, "The Producing Playwright," p. 34.

¹⁸Crothers, "The Construction of a Play," pp. 123-4.

and innocence of youth which has never known anything but freedom-- the lovableness of a big nature and sunniness of an undying sense of humor. What she wears is very far from the fashion, but has charm and individuality and leaves her as free and unconscious of her strength and beauty as an animal.¹⁹

The description, romantically idealized and extravagant, has the recognizable features of almost all future Crothers leading female characters. Rhy's independence of spirit is demonstrated from the beginning by her refusal to capitulate to quick profit and sell the seemingly worthless family claim, while her sense of perspective and of pride are made evident when she says to her brother: "It doesn't hurt any to be poor. . . It's something inside of you that counts."²⁰ And this same independence and good-natured tough-mindedness show in her relationship to the other characters, for instance, when she mocks the secretive wheelings and dealings of some mine-selling negotiations by saying:

Oh, you men amuse me. You're all afraid to take a long breath for fear somebody will find it out. Now when I sell my mine, I'm going to do it at high noon, in the middle of the street-- so everyone in camp will know all about it.²¹

This is her style of flirtatious banter, too, of course, and yet when her rich suitor says, "I should like to see you in the right frame," she answers: "I don't care to be in a frame, thank you . . . I prefer my freedom."²² There really is a natural evolution and "inevitability" to Rhy's independent character, and a healthy

¹⁹Rachel Crothers, The Three of Us (New York: Samuel French, 1916), p. 11.

²⁰Ibid., p. 13.

²¹Ibid., p. 45.

²²Ibid., p. 42.

sense of self-worth. At the climax of the play when marriage is offered as a solution to protect her "honor and good name," Rhy bursts forth at both men who are hounding her (one from love and concern, one from self-interest):

Don't you dare to speak of my honor and my good name!
[To Berresford] Don't you dare to say you'll 'take care of it'. My honor! Do you think it's in your hands? It's in my own and I'll take care of it and of everyone who belongs to me. I don't need you-- either of you. Love-- protection-- trust! Why, I have to fight you both. Don't talk to me about whom I'm going to marry. That's a very little thing. Something else comes first!"²³

Rhy's independence and sense of justice, though painted in broad strokes, can be attributed at least in part to her nurture in the "wide open spaces," to the city-country conflict that was to appear over and over in Crothers' plays. Usually it is represented as New York against the hinterlands. Either way, it implies, as in Seneca, the corruption -- or at least the moral fiber-weakening -- of city life, as opposed to the freshness and wholsomeness of a country viewpoint. Crothers makes use of this belief in The Three of Us,²⁴ and yet it is clear -- and was subsequently to be clearer -- that the fascination of the city (invariably New York) was always present. The first example of Crothers' "New York woman" appears in The Three of Us in the person of Mrs. Tweed Bix, "clever, practical and ambitious."²⁵

²³Ibid., p. 81.

²⁴Abrahamson, p. 258.

²⁵The Three of Us, p. 20.

Nevertheless, compared with Rhy, she is a dependent woman as opposed to an independent one -- dependent upon apperances as well as upon a husband, however ne'er-do-well he may be; a conservative type as opposed to a free spirit; an artificial product of a fashionable world to which Rhy is the natural contrast. The values of the two women meet only at the ubiquitously feminine level of loving beautiful objects and clothes. A good example of the means by which "Bixie" tries to woo Rhy into selling her mine and going to the "real world" to "live," takes place at the dinner party in Act II when Rhy is wearing an unaccustomed silk dress, and Bixie says:

You feel as if you'd come into your own. . .and it brings out all the silk that's in you. There's a lot of it too. I've always said that. I only want to make you see where you belong. . .and oh-oh-Rhy . . .New York,. . .home,. . .you don't know what it means!

But significance for Rhy, as has been shown, lies in her integrity of spirit and freedom of action, together with a real though hard-won love on the open spaces of a golden West.

Love is not merely sexual and romantic in this, or indeed in most other plays of Crothers. Eros and Agape usually go together in her balanced view of life. Our heroine is capable of friendship and loyalty to Bixie, to Berresford before he betrays her trust, to the faithful family retainer, Maggie. She is capable of self-sacrifice in devoting herself to the upbringing of her two young brothers, and her love of children and her maternal instinct are well-evidenced by these attitudes toward her siblings

to whom she stands in loco parentis. These elements of friendship, self-sacrifice, and love of children are continuing motifs which can be heard sounding through the major portion of Crothers' plays, while the social demands, in this case the double standard of sexual morality, will continue to be grappled with, by women in particular. The woman as a consistently dominant character and her emergence as a full, head-on force to be reckoned with mark this play as special. Rhy McChesney is the first important Crothers heroine.

Apart from her convincing character portrayals, Crothers' language impressed her contemporaries, Bronson Howard ("American's first truly professional dramatist")²⁶ wrote of her dialogue:

You may search the history of the drama in any language for more exquisite dialogue-- flowing more perfectly and continuously from the beginning to the end of the play-- than that to be found in The Three of Us. This dialogue is unexcelled for the accurate expression of the purpose for which it is used. It is simply a stroke of genius!²⁷

In addition to the excellence and naturalness of its dialogue, the play has a tight construction and a variety and distinctiveness of characterization that make The Three of Us stand out, both in Crothers' chronology and in its time.

The time of the play is 1906, a year of several other Broadway hits, among them two outstanding successes of that season,

²⁶Abrahamson, p. 172.

²⁷Ibid.

namely William Vaughan Moody's The Great Divide and The New York Idea by Langdon Mitchell. These plays have a similarity (in the latter, only in the concept of New York, perhaps) to The Three of Us which suggests that all three playwrights had a definite sense of what the Broadway audience of their time wanted -- a point to which we will return. There is an almost uncanny likeness in the settings of The Three of Us and The Great Divide, and there are also resemblances between the independent spirits of Rhy and of Ruth Jordan, the latter play's heroine. The mysticism of a Moody, a poet as well as a playwright, made the "Divide" symbolic in many ways: The differing physical aspects of East and West; the love-hate relationship of the conventionalized Easterner to the free-wheeling, chance-taking Westerner; and the dichotomy in the human heart between the measured, rational acquiescence of the East and the unbridled possibility of the West. Such an approach was foreign to Crothers, the eminently "practical, practicing dramatist."²⁸ There is a hint of O'Neill's dark, brooding, tormented men (although with the saving grace of hope in Moody) in the diffidence of Ruth Jordan's Western husband as there is in the accompanying New England dampness. Rhy and Ruth are the dominant characters in their plays; both are strong-minded and strong-willed; but there is a freshness and a joie de vivre about Rhy's personality that make Ruth seem doubly gloomy and even a bit wooden. In The Three of Us the

²⁸Abrahamson, p. 50.

double standard is attacked; in The Great Divide the conflict is in a nature divided against itself, A "lady" competing with an elemental woman (the fact of the hero as woman seems incidental here) really is the issue. There are humor and snappy dialogue to ornament the drama -- occasionally the melodrama -- of The Three of Us; in the The Great Divide we have an idea hammered at us through much heavy and even turgid symbolism. Of the two, The Three of Us seems to hold up better.

Langdon Mitchell's The New York Idea, another hit of that year, is designated "a comedy" -- though perhaps "tragicomedy" would be more accurate -- and this sets it apart from the others. The title comes from two lines in Act III: "Marry for whim and leave the rest to the divorce court-- that's the New York idea of marriage." Here divorce is treated in a casual way, obviously daring and sophisticated for the America of 1906, but like Rhy's virginity in The Three of Us, divorce is only theoretically tampered with. All comes right in the end -- and without divorce.²⁹ The only comparison between the two Crothers and Mitchell plays under discussion here, apart from their success with the New York audience, lies in the treatment of some of the women characters, and in the character of the judge's vain and sophisticatedly shallow wife, one does see a resemblance to Crothers' "Bixie," But, upon closer inspection, Bixie, for all of her posing, is seen

²⁹Crothers was to treat the subject of divorce with serious intent in some of her later "problem comedies" as Gagey designates them. (Revolution in American Drama, p. 188.)

to be made of less flimsy stuff. Actually, all the women in Mitchell's social comedy are stereotypes, for example, the dithering society ladies and the beautiful, "fast" post-debutante. Crothers was to use the high society milieu, although it usually turned out to be upper-middle class, in several of her later plays, but in each case to point up a didactic purpose, fortunately not too didactically, as was proven by their considerable success. Since Moody and Mitchell were already seasoned and popular dramatists, it is all the more impressive that with 227 performances to her play's credit,³⁰ the young Crothers was running neck-and-neck with them in the 1906 Broadway races, and was even pulling somewhat ahead.

A Man's World, produced at New York's Comedy Theatre, on February 8, 1910, was Crothers' next success, one which made a stronger impression on critics and audiences than The Three of Us had done. It has been said that this woman "was in the forefront of those striving to create a modern American drama. . ."³¹ and that, as Gagey suggests, "the themes with which she has chosen to deal on the stage were a part of the 'revolution in American life and letters.'"³² Accordingly, we find A Man's World a revolutionary blast at her current target, the double standard of sexual morality. We also find a more dramatic, yet natural evolution of her quintessential "liberated" heroine. Frank Ware

³⁰Abrahamson, p. 300.

³¹Gagey, pp. 194-5.

³²Ibid.

(the man's name³³ is significant, as is the man's quasi-life-style) is an up-and-coming novelist, a financially independent -- that is to say, a self-supporting -- woman (in itself an anomaly) who has the inner freedom and integrity to put aside her one real love for the sake of principle. A daring theme, with an equally daring unhappy ending,³⁴ is executed with style and grace and dramatic power.

The plot is a complex one with many subtleties of character relationship. The world of the play is a New York brownstone filled with struggling artists, an updated and Americanized "vie Bohème" -- Americanized precisely because international -- and we find a potpourri of varying degrees of talent and achievement. The poor young musician (Fritz the German); the poor young painter (Emile the Frenchman); the poor young poet and playwright (Wells, the all-American type); the struggling "Italian" singer (Lione, the exotic American); and the would-be painter of miniatures (Clara, the misfit American). However, this "Bohème" includes both men and women as artists. On another and higher level of success but still in the same milieu are Malcolm Gaskell, a journalist and the hero-villain of the piece, and Frank Ware herself, the gifted and already noted novelist and independent "new

³³Like George Eliot, Frank Ware undoubtedly felt she would only be taken seriously as a writer and only be able to write as she pleased under the pseudonym of a man.

³⁴An exception to Crothers' very audience-- pleasing later plays, usually comedies.

woman.'" Frank adopted a child when she lived in Paris with her father, and saw the young mother die giving birth to her illegitimate son, "Kiddie," now seven years old.³⁵ After her father's death a few years later, Frank, who had taken charge of the baby from the beginning, brought him back to New York where she has since been occupied as a full-time novelist and semi-social worker -- apparently her novels are based on social ills and the need for reform--as well as a full-time mother. She is adored by almost all of her fellow-artist/housemates and envied by at least one, Lione, on the grounds of rivalry and jealousy. Frank falls deeply in love against her will with Gaskell: "Love is such a sad, mad, awful thing.. It is the greatest danger in the world -- isn't it - the love of men and women. If we could only get along without it."³⁶ As has been said, the unconventional unhappy ending of the refusal of this one and only love of her warm and giving nature comes about inevitably, following Crothers' dictum, because it arises from her "first principles." She cannot marry a man whose own unquestioning attitude of the double standard -- it's all right, it's acceptable because "I've lived a man's life"³⁷ -- differs so totally from her own commitment to the single standard of equality. This she is working out for herself both in her career and in the bringing up of "her" child. A bold theme, this, even an advanced one.

³⁵Gaskell, who turns out to be the child's father, reveals at the end of the play that the girl had left him, not the reverse, because she didn't want such a free-wheeling life, and that he knew nothing about having fathered her son.

³⁶Rachel Crothers, A Man's World (Boston: Badger, 1915), p.90.

³⁷Ibid., p. 116.

Frank Ware is a really independent heroine, and not only for her time. Rhy McChesney in The Three of Us was independent in mind and heart, but still observed society's strictures, emotional and economic. In Frank Ware we have a woman who earns her own living, and who, although unmarried, is bringing up a child whom she loves as her own. Scorning the gossip about whether he's really hers, she has an emotional independence like Rhy's but far more unconventional attitudes to life and in being capable of earning her own living, as well as in being an artist. There is the same, open, generous nature in Frank as in Rhy (she is described as "strong, free, unafraid, with the glowing charm of a woman at the height of her development"),³⁸ and we are quickly introduced to the full scope of her personality and accomplishment.

In Act I, her circle of admirers -- Fritz, Emile, Wells -- are reading a review of her latest book in the paper which is interesting for her novel's subject matter and for the comments on the position of women:

'The Beaten Path' is the strongest thing that Frank Ware has ever done. Her first work attracted wide attention when we tho't Frank Ware was a man, but now that we know she is a woman, we are more than ever impressed by the strength and scope of her work. She has laid her scenes this time on the East side in the wretched poverty of the tenement houses and the marvel is that any woman could see and know so much and depict crime and degradation so boldly. Her great cry is for woman-- to make them better by making them freer. It is decidedly the most striking book of the year.³⁹

³⁸Ibid., p. 18.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 12-13.

Frank's straightforwardness, her confidence in herself, her concern for social welfare, and her artistic flowering all seem to have had their origins in her experiences in Paris. (Crothers' uses this familiar sign of the liberated spirit long before the literary and artistic American expatriation of the 20s and 30s.) She doesn't take her talent too seriously, however, and she's definitely a pragmatist: "It's only genius that forgets money. Only the glory of creating that compensates for being hungry. . .no -- no -- talent wants three meals a day -- genius can live in spite of none."⁴⁰ Living alone with her writer-father abroad for so long has made her

a natural woman -- because I've been a free one. [My father] took me with him every possible place. . . I didn't need much protection. Dad wanted me to see-to know -- to touch all kinds of life -- and I surely did. He developed all his stories by telling them aloud to me. He used to walk up and down the little library and talk out his characters. So I began to balance men and women early -- and the more I knew -- the more I tho't women had the worst of it. ⁴¹

The experience of a nurtured -- what today is called "cultural" -- independence sets Frank above and apart. She is an unusual person, not merely an unusual woman.

Her sexuality is not concealed, but Crothers manages to make her seem liberated without the need to flaunt it. It wouldn't occur to Frank Ware to go to bed with a man merely to prove she felt free to do so, and it is evident she reserves the right to

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 27.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 34-5.

do exactly as she chooses in this as in all things. When questioned about her midnight forays, although they are perfectly innocent and have to do with her collecting material for a book, she retorts: "You don't suppose I'm going to give up all my chances of seeing and knowing and understanding just because a few silly people are talking about me. . .I'm not going to spend my life explaining."⁴² No, Frank is a thorough-going romantic, even though she is also capable of real love -- "the kind of love that comes once." It is her tragedy that she gives that love to Gaskell to whom her principles forbid her to give herself. (These principles encompass the stand she's taken against the afore-mentioned double standard as well as the mutual recognition of responsibility and sharing. . .a most modern approach.) The passion between them is vivid and believable and ignites in the final moments of the play. Gaskell has all the hallmarks of an assertive man whom an assertive woman could love and look up to; he is a prototypical Hemingway hero. The heartbreak rings true when she has to renounce him if she is to respect herself. The other men in the house are all in love with her to one degree or another, but they also like her because she has that combination -- rare in any age -- of being both a feminine woman and a whole human being, one who is capable of friendship and true kindness.

Frank's kindness is not limited to her hangers-on. She contrives to have Fritz's "genius-like" violin playing heard

⁴²Ibid., p. 34.

before an influential audience. She also proves generous to those in need around her, helping the "fallen women" on the East Side by talking to them and writing about them to her fellow artists and friends. Her attitude to the pathetic Clara is a good case in point. Frank donates her furniture and her clothes to Clara's exhibition of miniatures. The effort -- as all of Clara's efforts -- comes to naught, and the poor woman, a wispy and defeated unmarried lady nearing forty with enough talent, perhaps, to sustain herself but not enough independence and self-confidence to get by on her own in a tough, competitive world, is devastated. Her own words plaintively and succinctly sum up the position of women like herself:

Yes, I am too discouraged. I've tried just as hard as I can for ten years -- and scrimped and saved and taken snubs and pretended I was ambitious and didn't care for anything but my work, and look at me -- don't even know how I am going to pay my next month's rent. I'm so sick and tired of it all I don't know what to do. I'd marry any man that asked me. . . I've tried -- God knows I've tried -- and what is the use? What under heaven do I get out of it? If I were a man -- the most insignificant little runt of a man -- I could persuade some woman to marry me -- and could have a home and children and hustle for my living and life would mean something. . .⁴³

Frank is most sympathetic; she doesn't expect her own grit from others and makes a remarkably modern statement on the theme of the "liberated woman," When Clara, in the same burst of insight into her plight, says: "I've been too terribly respectable and

⁴³Ibid., pp. 85-7.

conventional all my life to succeed. If I were like you -- you're so strong and independent -- you believe in women taking care of themselves," Frank replies: "I believe in women doing the thing they're most fitted for," and she adds: "You should have married, Clara. . .and been taken care of all your life."⁴⁴ She then offers Clara a way out of her hopelessness by helping the "unfortunate women" with rehabilitative art work. This will give Clara a purpose in life and the suggestion is hungrily and touchingly accepted.

Lione, the singer, is a personality somewhere between Frank and Clara. She is obviously more likely to succeed than is Clara, probably in show business thanks to her beauty and glamour, but she lacks Frank's emotional independence, and one is made to feel that if Fritz, the object of her adoration, would ask her to, she would give up all personal ambition for him. While none of the three is a conventional, dependent woman of that period (nor, indeed, of ensuing eras), only Frank is a true "original. Her "great heart ~~and~~ great nature"⁴⁵ are unusual in any age as is her integrity at any price. In this integrity lies her self-sacrifice. After all, she would not have been asked to sacrifice her adopted son, who, as it turns out, is Gaskell's natural one, to have her happiness; nor would she have been required to give up her career. She would have had to renounce her belief that

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 86.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 16.

a woman should not have to give so much more than a man in order to live with a modicum of happiness.⁴⁶ We can find evidence in the play that Frank didn't really want this love, or indeed any. Not only is there the strong hint of Oedipal attachment to her father, but she quite openly expresses her fears of commitment. As she says to Gaskell in Act III: ". . .When love began to crowd in -- to overpower me -- I was afraid. It seemed almost like being a traitor to myself." But this fear does not seem to be a conscious issue here. The ending tells us that her principles will outweigh the clamors of her heart.

The child here is more of a symbol than a real person,⁴⁷ and he is the only character not realized even on the written page, a token of "women's suffering through men," of the flaw between men and women when equality does not exist. In The Three of Us, Rhy had two young brothers to care for; here, Frank has an adopted child. . .all of them at one remove from the woman's own. For Frank, Kiddie is an excuse or justification or, at least, a compensation for her choice. Though her tenets are fierce so is her maternal love, and although Freud would have noticed the displacement of love, there is a personal tie in the relationship ("all in all to one another") of Frank and the boy.

When it comes right down to it, it's financial dependence that undergirds the structure of the double standard and it's

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁷This can be said of Gaskell too, as Quinn has ably pointed out in A History of the American Drama, p. 52.

financial independence that can destroy it. This is so in this play and obviously at this point in Crothers' thinking. In A Man's World as in The Three of Us there is an underlying trust that is asked for, but in the later play the request goes deeper. What is asked is not to merely acknowledge that appearances do not matter, but rather that truth -- the truth of what lies between men and women -- does matter, and that without the humanizing and de-emphasizing of human sexuality, one of the sexes, women, will remain dehumanized and degraded.

This is a more dimensional play than The Three of Us and a more realistic one. The ending of renunciation goes "beyond the love idea."⁴⁸ There is more than a trace of bitterness in Crothers' dramatizing of injustice toward women. Further she understood long before the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s as well as before their earlier political emancipation, that women can be liberated only if men are; if they are not put on pedestals on the one hand nor treated as inferiors on the other. Crothers knew feminine psychology,⁴⁹ but she also discerned the complexity of human relationships as well as the individualities of human beings that society tries to press into stereotypic roles, too often with stultifying results. The dialogue of which Bronson Howard spoke so glowingly in The Three of Us shines here; it is honest, natural and effective. Crothers has followed her own advice: "Speech. . . must come fresh and impulsively from the

⁴⁸A Man's World, p. 14.

⁴⁹Quinn, A History of the American Drama, p. 52.

characters because they can't help saying these things, and the things that only they would say, and in the way only they would say them."⁵⁰ With the presentation of A Man's World in early 1910, Crothers burst into still fuller bloom upon the American dramatic landscape.

Of the contemporaneously successful plays, William Vaughan Moody's The Faith Healer appeared shortly before A Man's World in 1909, and is more symbolic and certainly more mystical than was The Great Divide of 1906. Again, as in Crothers play The Three of Us, there is a Western setting, and in his new play, Moody combines two separate strains, self-dependence and the search for meaning with the redemptive power of love. The women here are strong, Western, almost pioneer types, and the heroine, Rhoda, is not altogether unlike Rhy or Frank in the sense that she knows her own mind and acts upon it. Still, she is portrayed as an ideal, surrounded with a shroud of the mysterious and by an aura of loftiness and high purpose, rather than as a flesh and blood woman who is in and of this earth. The only other comparison that could be made between Rhoda and the intellectually brilliant, buoyantly alive and very modern Frank Ware, lies in the ability of each to love deeply and the strength of each to renounce what she deems antithetical to her perception of truth. Another success of the season was The Easiest Way by Eugene Walter. Here is a drama that has moments of genuine pathos despite its stereotypic

⁵⁰Crothers, "The Construction of a Play", p. 129.

situation and dialogue on the subject of the woman "gone wrong." But the story of a woman who has been disappointed in love and therefore chooses the "easiest way" to survive is of necessity a comment on the choice -- or lack of choice -- women have when their one solution, love and marriage, fails them. A rather heavy-handed, although extremely popular piece, The Easiest Way parallels A Man's World's realistic setting and characters. It also has a link with Frank Ware's stand for financial independence and equality of opportunity and treatment for women on all counts.

The critics were, as has been noted, enthusiastic about Crothers' two plays. The New York Times of October 18, 1906, said about The Three of Us: "She [Crothers] has the inevitable visit to the young man's rooms. . . But she manages to give it a bit of a new twist. [The whole situation] leads directly to a fresh and interesting scene in which the young woman, for once, dominates the situation." And The New York Times of October 21, 1906, had this to say: "Miss Crothers' characters are sane, reasonable, possible creatures of flesh and blood." James Corbin in The New York Sun for October 18, 1906, writes of the picture given of "the heartrending but always courageous struggle of an American girl against the houndings of sex and environment."

The reviews of A Man's World were almost fulsome in their acclamation; the new play was not only timely and entertaining, it seemed, but thought-provoking. In The New York Times of February 13, 1910, Adolph Klauser wrote an article entitled: "Drama, Moral, and the Point of View." The subtitle read: "Rachel

Crothers' Latest Play Again Proves that the Playhouse May Deliver a Good Lesson Without too much Tediousness and Preaching." He goes on to say:

A Man's World will compare most favorably with the best works of the best American playwrights up to date [sic]. . .it deals with a real issue between real men and women. . .Miss Crothers has selected a theme involving a great moral question, has handled it without morbidness or mawkishness, and with a very evident indication of intelligent thought upon it. A Man's World is, in fact, a fine thing to have accomplished.

Collier's Magazine of March 19, 1910, remarked: "'The Social Revolution', wrote Henrik Ibsen, 'which is impending in Europe, is chiefly concerned with the future of the workers and the women. It is for this I hope and wait, and for this I shall labor with all my power!'" The reviewer continues:

Numerous are those who have prophesied that the great factor in the evolution of society must be the ascent of woman. She will not ascend, however, without forcing men to make the climb along with her.⁵¹ Woman has in the past had to live up to standards fixed by herself, and also to standards fixed by men. Men in the future will have to live up not only to standards of their own but to standards also held out to them by women. All who have the opportunity we advise to see Rachel Crothers' play A Man's World. It is one of the shadows which an approaching order casts ahead. It reflects, with truth and conviction, some of the social ideals up to which awakening woman is determined man shall live.

A major new talent had clearly appeared in these first two productions. Crothers' strength, which lay chiefly in her recognition and skillful rendition of the comparative condition, what

⁵¹Another prophetic voice of the exact direction the Woman's Movement has currently taken.

was to be later called her "sanity in art,"⁵² was already very much in evidence. The sanity and balance were to remain, although a detachment eventually set in after her great burst of enthusiasm in The Three of Us and the more tempered, more mature views presented in A Man's World; the change, however, was not to be completely apparent till after the war when she took up the comic vein. Crothers was not to live up to the dramatic promise of A Man's World, but she had begun to take an active part in trying to free her audiences from the prevalent idea that ". . .this is a man's world. Women'll never change anything."⁵³

⁵²"Rachel Crothers," 20th Century Authors: A Biographical Directory of Modern Literature, eds. Kunitz-Heycraft (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1942), p. 334.

⁵³A Man's World, p. 40.

CHAPTER 4

Two Maverick Plays

The next two Crothers plays to be considered are mavericks in the sense that they are not readily categorizable as are the others. Neither Old Lady 31, 1916¹, nor He and She (produced outside of New York in 1912 under the title The Herfords and on Broadway in 1920) has the flavor of the war decade in which they were presented. No martial note, no trumpet of universal discord is heard in them. The trauma of World War I and the subsequent breakdown of the old order which would dominate the arts for the Nineteen-Twenties are not even foreshadowed here and for the simplest of reasons: Both works antedate 1914. Old Lady 31 is a gentle story of love, while He and She, with its seemingly modern career-marriage conflict, ends on the conventional note of the heroine's surrendering her essentially spectacular career to familial harmony. Although He and She was given the later Broadway production of the two plays, it was written in 1911 and therefore ought to be dealt with first, had not Old Lady 31 been "suggested"² by an even earlier work.

¹Based on a 1909 novel entitled Old Lady Number 31 by Louise Forsslund.

²Under the title of the play, it says "suggested by the novel of Louise Forsslund."

Crothers was asked to adapt this novel, and to stage it, and agreed to do so because it appealed to her.³ It shares the dominant theme in all of Crothers original work, namely love; in this case, love unmitigated, uncomplicated, pure. The story of an impoverished old couple who have to separate after a lifetime together because of their impecuniousness, he to the Poor Farm, she to the Old Ladies Home, is a touching one. Their separation is avoided when the old man becomes "Old Lady 31" at the Home. A description of the novel will show what Crothers had to work with and a comparison of the two will give some idea of her strengths and weaknesses. . .the excellent dialogue, for example, as opposed to the addition of a sentimentalizing subplot.

Louise Forsslund's⁴ study of love in old age, is a spoof of people's need for approval, for keeping up appearances -- for others as well as for themselves -- and of the foibles of human nature. The setting is an old-age home and the enduring marital romance of Angie and Abraham Rose, the protagonists, as well as the ongoing unresolved one of Blossy and Sam (she an inmate of the Home, he her perennial suitor) are handled with tenderness and respect. There are high humor and brisk dialogue in the novel, as well as the drama, as the thirty old ladies of varying shapes and dispositions flutter around Captain Rose, their "Old Lady Number 31." "Verily. . .as Blossy had avowed from the first, they

³The New York Times, November 5, 1916, p. 11.

⁴The pseudonym of Marie Louise Foster, a turn of the century American writer.

had been in sore need of the masculine presence."⁵ The novel makes more of the setting of the Home and the interrelationship of its characters where the old ladies vie with each other in doing things for Abe than does the play, which, quite properly, because more dramatically, focuses on the old married couple who are still lovers.

Crothers has telescoped the story in some respects and expanded it in others. The relationship between Blossy and Sam, for instance, is dwelt upon much less in the play than in the novel, while the subplot of the book is superseded in the drama by an affair of Crothers' own invention between the young lovers, John and Mary.⁶ These two are frequent visitors to the Home, she being the daughter of one of the directors, he a poor young man who does odd jobs but who dreams of making his name as an architect. Their financial troubles parallel those of Angie and Abe; so do their love and mutual commitment. The resolution (some old, seemingly worthless stock which Abe has hung on to suddenly pays off and the old couple is not only solvent but rich) takes a more sentimental turn in the play than in the novel and is, therefore, less effective. Crothers has the old couple "adopt" John and Mary and give them their start; in the original, Abe and Angie "adopt" the entire Old Ladies Home and elect to remain

⁵Louise Forsslund (pseud.), Old Lady Number 31 (The Century Company, N.Y., 1909), p. 85.

⁶A contemporary view of the subplot is found, for example, in The Nation for November 16, 1916 (Vol. CIII-No.2681), where the critic wrote that it is "...an artistic fault of the play...the bringing in of a very forced young romance. This may be necessary to accentuate Angie's love story, but it is clumsily done."

there themselves. The dialect is broad in the book and the drama wisely modifies this. For instance, near the beginning of the novel when the old couple have auctioned off their possessions to scrape together the small amount of money needed for her to be admitted to the Home, Angy [sic] says:

Thet air tew cents was fur the flour-sifter, an' it was wuth double and tribble fer it's been a good friend ter me fer nigh on ter eight year.⁷

The comparable speech in the play is as follows:

...As 'tis, everything was bought by somebody as needed it, and got good value. My tea-strainer that went for the extry three cents over the hundred was the biggest bargain of all. But the strainer won't be no good to me now and the three cents will. I kin keep that for my own pocket money.⁸

The dialect is modernized and clarified, and yet Crothers sets the time in 1860.⁹ The novel doesn't specify any exact date, but by its mention of telephones indicates the first decade of the 20th century.¹⁰ Also, the book takes place on Long Island,¹¹ while there is an unmistakable New England flavor in the world of Crothers' Angie and Abe, comprised as it is of the bevy of crusty old ladies, salt air and the everlasting hills. The critics

⁷Forsslund, p. 8.

⁸Rachel Crothers, Old Lady 31 (New York: Samuel French, 1916), pp. 111-112.

⁹As Abrahamson has pointed out, this is the only Crothers play to be set in the past. She was very up-to-the-moment in the externals at least of all her own plays, and audience-identification was one of the reasons for her success.

¹⁰There is an odd anachronism in the play too when, in Act II, there is a mention of Lincoln having died some time before.

¹¹A pleasing moment in the novel occurs when Abe and Sam are out on a "spree" and the town's newspaper editor runs into them and wants to publicize the outing of the two old men under the title of "Long Island and Longevity".

hailed the charm and moving qualities of Old Lady 31 as they would an original work, and gave full credit to Crothers as if there were no question of adaptation. She had made the story her own.

The play takes the essential story of the novel but adjusts it to Crothers' own angle of vision. Most specifically, this is seen in the ending where she does an aria da capo in the persons of young Mary and John. Clearly they will take up the legacy of the lifelong devotion of Angie and Abe. In between, the focus of the drama is on the relationships in the Old Ladies Home itself. The surprise ending of the worthless stock materializing as gold now seems less melodramatic since we as audience have come to appreciate the recipients and find ourselves wishing that life would more often imitate art.¹²

"An alert small woman. . .with a face which has not lost its sweetness,"¹³ Angie Rose has many of the attributes of the essential Crothers heroine. Old lady that she is, and simple in her particular mid-nineteenth century circumstances,¹⁴ she displays an independence of spirit that has nothing to do with those strivings for personal fulfillment that color A Man's World and He and She. She epitomizes the strong woman, the best of the "old fashioned" breed, the helpmeet full of love, self-sacrifice,

¹²The New York Times for October 31, 1916, called it "... a homely, gently pathetic, shrewdly humorous little play, wherein the smiles and tears come so close together that it deserves to be called the rainbow comedy of the season."

¹³Old Lady 31, p. 110.

¹⁴It is significant that Crothers placed this story in an already comparatively remote time where "current" conflicts were not as yet an issue.

understanding and acceptance of her man and his foibles. At the beginning of the play, it is Angie's bravery over their impending separation and her refusal to impute any responsibility for failure in their lives to Abe's mistakes, which exemplify her unreproachful spirit.

You might a giv' me all the riches in the world an' still we might a bin separated further'n we'll ever be now. I'd rather be saying goodbye for the poor farm an' loving you, Abe, than sittin' with you in luxury an' not caring whether you was sittin' with me or not. Ef I kin say that, after all these years, we got somethin' priceless -- ain't we -- that can never be took away from us... 15

And on a reminiscent note of complete acceptance, she adds:

You brought me here a bride-- an' carried me over that door sill. I used to think little feet would be pattering over it and stumblin' through the flowers as the years came along-- but it wasn't to be. All I kin say is -- I wouldn't change an hour we've spent here-- not one. 16

A sense of wholesomeness, of essential decency and goodness prevails here, as does the sense of love unadulterated and abiding. These come through, as do humor, sentiment and a folksiness that could be sentimental but which isn't, a quality which Crothers understood and found dramatically viable. There is further evidence of unquestioning acceptance and unwavering faith in the love with which Angie tells Abe, after he berates himself for having brought them to this pass of having to end their days apart and at the hands of charity:

¹⁵Old Lady 31, p. 111.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 115.

You're the same man I married an' loved an' honored all these years an' I ruther be stand-in' here with you now, turned out, than anybody else on earth. What makes you act like an ordinary man an' talk about money? You're my man-- an' you're jest the way I want you...¹⁷

It is Angie who isn't ordinary and the picture doesn't cloy; every expression furthers the theme of the value and omnipresent miracle of love.

The world of the play, in which there is no social conflict, is in the Old Ladies Home physically and lies within the context of an older time and a deeper faith spiritually. When Abe rails against having to accept their fate, Angie replies: "Why, Abe dear, you ain't got the right idea about it all. You're bitter-like and resentin' it-- stid o'lookin' at it as one of the strange ways of Providence you don't understand."¹⁸ It is a play of character rather than of plot, and the types are well-drawn. Apart from Angie, the mother-wife who loves unconditionally (not unlike Ibsen's Solveig in Peer Gynt), Crothers sharpens the types that the inmates of the Home represent. First, there is Abigail, "the matron of the Home, generously large in body and heart, a mother to all the other poor outcasts;"¹⁹ then we have Sarah Jane, "tall, and square and spare,"²⁰ the prototypical spinster, bony of body and flinty of spirit; her contempt for men rises from the defensiveness of a woman who has never been sought out. We meet Nancy, "small and quick and sharp,"²¹ who enjoys digging at

¹⁷Ibid., p. 114.
¹⁸Ibid., p. 113.
¹⁹Ibid., p. 120.
²⁰Ibid., p. 119.
²¹Ibid., p. 118.

Sarah Jane and whose pathetic refrain is "I've had many a chance and refused 'em all."²² Mrs. Homans, "a widow in respectable widow's weeds. . .and [with] most impressive dignity,"²³ is the local snob, putting on airs and feeling herself particularly out of place and put upon as the widow of a successful doctor. Finally, there is Blossy, the belle of the Home, ". . . the spoiled darling of the group, a faded rose with much of the charm and coquetry of her youth still left. . .she flirts and flutters with unconscious coyness."²⁴ Blossy cannot live without male admiration and has kept Sam Darby dangling for thirty years, but Blossy also has the generous idea of having Abe become their 31st "old lady" so that he and Angie won't have to separate. (Apparently in this small and stable community most of these people have known one another from youth.) These ladies belong to their time and place and yet they have distinct personalities. Sarah Jane, for example, hard-working and independent, is here only because she has no one to "do" for; Mrs. Homan's step-children have reduced her to this pass, and her sense of apartness and injury makes her constantly unhappy, but it's made clear she would complain anywhere; Blossy makes the best and most attractive use of her circumstances as indeed she would anywhere. (Her room, for instance, is full of touches of the comforts of her past.) In short, independence in this play is only available in the riches

²²Ibid., p. 119.

²³Ibid., p. 118.

²⁴Ibid., p. 124.

of spirit and heart; financially, everyone is hamstrung and therefore totally dependent.²⁵ For example, the young lovers, John and Mary, must keep their love secret because her parents disapprove of his poverty which, to date, is not much less than that of the inmates of the Home.

Into this lonely all-female world comes Captain Abe and cuts a dashing figure while providing a needed "masculine presence." Each woman tries to do more for him than the others by giving him extra things to eat, knitting or crocheting him gifts, and so on. Blossy seems so taken with him that the others feel that Angie should be jealous. The truth is that Blossy only wants his advice in the matter of her long-time suitor, Sam Darby. And that advice is sound. Complaining to Abe that she can't make up her mind about Sam, that his sloppy ways irritate her, she says: "Forever is an awful long time to live with a man's faults...if men only knew what nice little ways meant to a woman!"²⁶ And Abe replies: "That's what a man's got a right to expect in a woman, but a woman ought to know enough to look for more important things in a man."²⁷ This was good counsel in 1860, and Blossy finally leaves the Home to marry Sam after that faithful hanger-on finally informs her that he intends to "quit" courting her. After this interest is removed, Abe takes to his bed under the proliferating barrage of attentions to which he is subjected by the hungry

²⁵The theme of "honorable poverty" in Yankee small towns is time-honored dramatically according to I.H. Herron in The Small Town in American Drama (Southern Methodist University Press, 1969), p. 62.

²⁶Old Lady 31, p. 142.

²⁷Ibid.

hearts of the old ladies. (As he later says to Sam: "Women's all right in their own way but when it comes to nothin' but women night and day, it's kinda belittlin'. It don't keep a man up to the times like. Kinda takes away his ambition an' ..."²⁸ Sam finishes his sentence for him as Hal does Hotspur's. Here, "for worms, brave Percy," becomes a gentler kind of obliteration: "An' makes a mother's boy o' him."²⁹) Female domination is understood and even enjoyed so long as it remains unobtrusive And always there's the undergirding of making one's man feel superior, in Angie's case with total sincerity. For example, she says to him at the end of Act I on their way to the Home: "I'll lean on you. You won't even have no chance to forget you're a man."

Crothers' sense of balance, of "sanity in art," pervades this play, as does her deftness of touch which lends distinction to the characters, and which brings out the full flavor of its wholesomeness and the wry edges of its humor. Examples of this humor can be seen in Mike, the misogynystic handyman who occasionally and disapprovingly puts in an appearance, or in some of the ensuing dialogue between Angie and Abe where a nurturing attitude on her side intersperses the humor. Abe is taken sick and, as has been mentioned, becomes sicker with overcare. He says to his wife: "Oh mother. I'm afraid I'm goin' to die. There don't seem to be nothin' else to do,"³⁰ and Angie answers: "That's jest it."

²⁸Ibid., p. 184.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 178.

Ef you had somethin' to do you'd be all right. Would you like to play a game o'checkers, father?"³¹ When he rejects the idea as not being "divertin'" she observes: "Well, there ain't nothin' so terrible divertin' 'bout nothin' less you help it along some..."³² Then Blossy and Sam come to visit to Angie's intense relief ("An angel from heaven couldn't be so welcome!")³³ and her understanding of Abe's need for masculine companionship is expressed to Sam: "You take keer o' Abe, Cap'n. He's been needin' somethin' spicy like you the worst way."³⁴ A whole philosophy of human relations and practical wisdom -- "wisdom for life's journey" -- is the macrocosm that is the play itself.

Much of this philosophy is seen in dialogues or scenes already cited; more is displayed in the running commentary of the continuity of what life essentially is all about, most vividly stated in the subplot. The young lovers, who are the focus of the sub-plot, are Crothers' own addition, and they seem a concession to the audience's expectation of love and romance as prerogatives of the young; they are really unnecessary. The romance of Angie and Abe -- to say nothing of that of Blossy and Sam -- can stand on its own. Nevertheless, this subplot moves contrapuntally to Abe and Angie's "theme". In Act III, for example, when John tells Angie of his plan to go away to Boston and make something of himself so that Mary's family will accept him, Angie says:

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 179.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 181.

Boston! Think of it! That's an awful big place. I've never bin there, but I've seen pictures. The street's full o'people you never seen -- don't know 'em an' don't care. Just no neighbors or friendliness at all. Oh, if I could only speak words that would give you the wisdom to know. But you're beginnin' and I'm endin'. And that's what life is, ain't it, the findin' out. You've got to come along the long road yourself...³⁵

And this folk wisdom about the meaning of life is interlaced with practical acumen:

...Let me tell you one thing, boy, just one. Put a little by as you go -- if it's ever so little. Oh, the power that's in the pennies if they're only yours! Keep the rainy day ahead of you, and the little house that's goin' to be yours -- safe an' tight, that no law nor debt kin take away. And when you're old-- well-- put a little by -- put a little by.³⁶

The importance of economic independence, and not only for women on their own, is stressed here, but the clearest advice that Angie can give (it is she, the mother figure, who is the strong one of the couple) is that love is enough, and this motif is both avowed and implicit. "What you are speaks so loudly I can hardly hear what you say," said another New Englander, and Emerson's aphorism applies to Angie Rose. Her unaffected conviction that love is the most important thing in the world rings true. When the old lady tells Mary that she knows she loves John because "I seen it in your faces. 'Tain't like no other look on earth,"³⁷

³⁵Ibid., p. 173.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 173-4.

³⁷Ibid., p. 154.

and that "sometimes I think the dreamin' is more important than the facts...You dream high for him³⁸ and keep your faith,"³⁹ she is laying down her rules for a happy life. Her advice is to the young people, but later when Abe disappears for several days (he'd gone off on a "spree" with Sam), old Angie shows how she puts her advice into practice; how her faith in her man and in love is unchanging: "...Oh Abe, I could tramp the roads with you. We've go nothin' left but love. Don't you know it's the only thing worth savin'? It's all there is. It's all there is."⁴⁰ And in the final speech of the play, when the surprise lucky ending of worthless stock paying off materializes, Angie reiterates to Mary: "...I'd like to put your hand in John's and see you start off together. An' if in the end he's still beside you-- if his hand still clings to yours--I'll ask nothin' more for you... Love-- love-- love. That's what we both see."⁴¹

The children in the play are symbolic. Having none of their own, Angie and Abe can look upon their young counterparts as their children and their nearest hope for immortality. The men in the play are the other "children" as well as the subordinate characters. We have Angie as the strong singular heroine here, and the ladies of the Home as the strong collective heroine. It is woman who dominates and guides, though gently and gladly,

³⁸Here again, the dreams are always for "us" and for "him." Not till He and She do we again come to the notion of personally fulfilling dreams for "her."

³⁹Old Lady 31, p. 154.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 186.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 195.

giving her man the illusion of being in charge according to custom. There are digs at the infantilism which infects many males of the species but they are humorous and unbarbed, while the import of the whole piece has to do with some of the reality of the human condition toward the end of the road and, again, on the existence of the kind of love that makes it all worthwhile. Other themes such as friendship and self-sacrifice among the ladies are present here but all subserve the force of love. The message of both the book and of the play is one of "...Love, Love triumphant, which cannot age, which over the years and over death itself always hath the victory."⁴² That this rather relentless message is conveyed in the drama in heartwarming and delightful but not overwhelming ways, is a tribute to the playwright's skill and shrewd understanding of the needs and responses of her audience.

Other Broadway hits of the 1916-17 season, on the eve of America's entry into the war included such light and flimsy fare as A.E. Thomas's Come Out of the Kitchen and Claire Kummer's Good Gracious Annabelle. A different kind of humor was exhibited in both these plays than the old-fashioned values, sentiment and sweetness-in-retrospect of Old Lady 31, to be sure. A fun-hungry, even a farcical spirit, characterized the New York audience. Indeed, "the theatre season of 1916-17 was a victim of world depression no less certainly than was that of 1931-32...Most of those foreign playwrights upon whom dependence had previously been

⁴²Forsslund, p. 88.

placed by American producers were...engaged in such...work as precluded the possibility of their turning out anything in the way of actable drama."⁴³ Therefore native playwrights, Rachel Crothers among them, had less competition from abroad, along with the light comedy and farce of the Thomas and Kummer productions.

Come Out of the Kitchen, which opened in November of 1916, was an adaptation of a story of the same name by Alice Duer Miller (adaptations were proliferating during that theatrical season) and could be classified as a melodramatic contemporary comedy. It takes place in the Daingerfield mansion in Virginia which has fallen on hard times. The son and daughter in order to help preserve the family home, the parents being away for the purpose of the father's undergoing a very expensive operation, accept the offer of a "rich Yankee" to buy the place. Olivia, the Daingerfield daughter and the heroine of the piece, has the idea of pretending to be a house servant together with her brother. The complications that ensue are predictable. Inevitably, she and the rich Yankee fall in love, and all ends as it should when true identities are revealed. It's a mild comedy of disguises, light fun and romantic, with none of the surprises or twists that a bona fide farce deals in. The women in the play are all stereotypical and Olivia's only claim to independence in a Crothers sense is her stubbornness of spirit, her ingenuity and

⁴³Burns Mantle and Garrison P. Sherwood (eds.), The Best Plays of 1909-1919 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1933), p. 287.

strongmindedness. Indeed, a not too far-fetched comparison of the best of the old-fashioned type of woman, one with spirit and strength as well as essential acquiescence to the male, can be noted between Olivia and Angie Rose.⁴⁴

The pretense of being servants is much more cleverly and artfully carried out in Claire Kummer's well-paced play, Good Gracious Annabelle. Here, unlike Come Out of the Kitchen, the dialogue is sparkling and quick-witted, and Mrs. Kummer has been credited "with the establishment of a new type of American comedy, compounded of mature banter and sophistication that was later to flourish among the wisecrackers."⁴⁵ Opening in October of 1916, exactly one day before Old Lady 31 and designated "a romantic farce comedy," it was a great success, paralleling that of the Crothers vehicle. Annabelle Leigh, a lady "who has a husband somewhere" is the carefree, seemingly fuzzy heroine who always manages to fall on her feet, while the other female types in the play are styled "an artist in distress," and "a poor girl at the mercy of her rich parents." The snappy "up-to-date" and rapid-fire dialogue enhance the "smart-set" image soon to emerge in the post World War I era. Scatter-brained and charming, but with native know-how, Annabelle is the farthest cry imaginable from Angie Rose and her ilk. She is a "free" young woman who satirizes the emerging "new woman," and, with a change of clothes,

⁴⁴Crothers' skill, however, in not making Angie Rose sentimental cannot be said for Thomas's Olivia Daingerfield. This is a flaw in the latter, notwithstanding its purely comic intent.

⁴⁵Claire Kummer, "Good Gracious Annabelle," The Best Plays of 1909-1919, p. 282.

she could be the quintessential flapper, though an unjaded one. As a transition between the Angie Roses and, on the next rung, the Olivias, and the brash flapper so soon to make her appearance, Annabelle is a silly-wise girl-woman who asks for male protection mainly because it's what she's been brought up to believe in:

ANNABELLE Mr. Rawson, do you think a woman has a right to ask a thing of a man that if she were a man she would feel that she could?

RAWSON Do you mean, do I believe in votes for women?

ANNABELLE No, I didn't, but, of course, that would be part of it-- free speech and the vote would make women less timid, I suppose.⁴⁶

The combination of Annabelle's basic shrewdness and innocently sophisticated air herald the arrival of the hard-boiled sophisticate whose world-weariness would come to dominate the American theatrical scene, both in comedy and drama.⁴⁷

A connection can be made in all three of these plays in the convention of the basically old-fashioned woman who is only apparently subservient to male domination, no matter how different the characters, the styles of the plays or the intentions of the playwrights who-- since Alice Duer Miller's story is involved-- are women themselves. (The tongue-in-cheek contention in all three is that women are superior.) Crothers' success with the

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 293.

⁴⁷Examples of the beginning of this type can be seen in Crothers' own Nice People (1921) and in later development in many Noël Coward plays.

gentle comedy of Old Lady 31 showed the appeal of the already remote values of the past. The war abroad and the forward-march of suffrage and other woman-directed causes at home made a seeming simplicity of relationship, as in the Crothers play, something nostalgic to be yearned for.

Crothers' He and She, a play about a woman's dilemma between a successful home life and a successful career, was produced in New York in 1920, but had an earlier show in 1912 in Boston under the title of The Herfords. It is obvious why it failed. The hits of that season included such sentimental comedies as J. Hartley Manners' Peg O' My Heart and such romantic dramas as Lewis N. Parker's Disraeli. The modern conflict of a woman pulled between work and love was too rare to have any widespread appeal. The natural progress of Ibsen's Nora after she slammed the door on Helmer's doll's house might -- were she at all gifted or ambitious enough -- have led to such a dilemma as Ann Herford faced in The Herfords; the audience of 1912, however was evidently not prepared to deal with such a realistic possibility. The critic for the Boston Evening Transcript for January 25, 1912, calls this work by "the only prominent woman playwright in America who has any definite notions about the world in general" both "undramatic" and "a drama of discussion." By 1920, however, with the war over, suffrage just achieved, and women having demonstrated their abilities in wartime, the play was re-titled He and She and had Rachel Crothers herself in the leading role; it fared much better than before. (Not only did

Crothers star in the production, but staged it as was her wont, with able scenic assistance from the not-yet-famous Norman Bel Geddes.)

He and She opened at the Little Theatre in New York on February 12, 1920 to wide critical and popular interest, if not to the commercial success her less essentially serious plays would enjoy. "He and She represents the drama of married life in which the relations of husband and wife are modified by the rival claims of professional jealousies,"⁴⁸ and as such can be said to represent a new thesis in drama. It is a play where three different types of women and their attitudes toward domesticity as opposed to a career are set forth and worked out in dramatic form. The three plots are skilfully intertwined and make the work "one of the most striking of the plays which deal with the general question of women's rights and responsibilities of which its author has stood for some time as a representative in drama."⁴⁹

Again, the main story of He and She is the conflict stirred up by the career rivalry between Tom and Ann Herford, both gifted sculptors and the parents of a teen-age daughter. Ann is shown to have balanced family and art thus far very well. Both have sent drawings to an important and prestigious national competition in which the winner will be commissioned to sculpt a frieze for a major building and also be awarded an enormous cash prize.

⁴⁸Quinn, Representative American Plays, p. 893.

⁴⁹Ibid.

The showdown comes when Ann wins the competition. A crisis ensues, and she is given a painful choice. To accept the prize, and thereby enter the ranks of the first-rate, is tantamount to losing her real companionship with her husband because she is now publicly acknowledged to be more gifted than he. Even more painful is the idea that she has almost ruined her child's life through her neglect because of her concentration on her art. (The wildly improbable planned elopement of the daughter with her boarding school chauffeur is intended to show the result of Ann's failure to be a full-time mother as well as to indicate her adolescent's need of maternal guidance.) The alternative is to reject the prize and all its implications and to devote herself totally to her daughter and her "family duty," (Crothers apparently sees no middle ground.) She chooses the latter, although with great agony of spirit, and in the world of 1920 not much less than that of 1912, this decision was more understandable and realistic than the other would have been. Even an exceptional woman, the playwright is saying, must put family responsibilities first if she has undertaken them; she is also unquestioningly implying that if career sacrifices are called for, the woman must be the one to make them.

The play is far from simple-minded. It tries to deal honestly with the strong conflicts and pulls between men and women in a transitional age. For instance, in Act I, Tom is represented as an advocate for equality of the sexes in work

during the following exchange between himself and his more conventional assistant, Keith, who also loves a career woman:

KEITH Have you ever been sorry Mrs. Herford is a sculptor⁵⁰ -- instead of just your wife?

TOM Not for a minute.

KEITH I've been thinking a lot about it lately.

TOM About you and Ruth, you mean?

KEITH Yes. She'll marry me in the fall if I let her keep on working.

TOM And?

KEITH Well--I--Hang it all. I don't want her to...

TOM But she wants to keep on, doesn't she? ...you're not bitten with that bug, I hope. 'I want my girl by my own fireside to live for me alone'...

KEITH I want a home, I want children...

TOM Of course, but that doesn't mean she'll have to give up her profession forever.

KEITH Oh, I'm strong for women doing anything they want to do -- in general -- but when it's the girl you love and want to marry, it's different.

TOM It ought not to be.⁵¹

There is an ironic foreshadowing of the dénouement here in Tom's "liberated" response which has not yet had to stand up to a real challenge, and which is based on his experience of his own wife, a companion in work as well as love. Ann carries forward the "independent heroine"⁵² type that Crothers first

⁵⁰It's interesting to see that Crothers avoids the conventional term, "sculptress," To call a woman a sculptor was a most advanced appellation.

⁵¹Rachel Crothers, "He and She," Representative American Plays, pp. 897-8.

⁵²Abrahamson's appellation.

introduced on Broadway with Rhy McChesney in The Three of Us. Since then she's developed through succeeding heroines including Frank Ware in A Man's World. In Act I of He and She, Ann Herford is described as being 38 and "intensely feminine" with "a strong vibrating personality which radiates warmth and vitality. She wears a long linen working smock...her sleeves are rolled up and her general appearance shows that she is at work..." This description demonstrates a maturing on the part of Crothers. No longer is there the necessity of inundating us with all of Ann's inherent virtues, charms, capabilities and physical perfections as there seemed to be in the cases of Frank and Rhy. Ann Herford's way of life is not based on any pronunciamientos like Rhy's, nor any choice of principle over emotion like Frank's; neither is it in the harmony she has been able to maintain between her happy marriage and her satisfying work. The fact that she sees no conflict between her career and her personal life gives the play a contemporary viewpoint. Still, she does share the instilled ideas of her era, because while she has faith in her own work and talent (in Act I she says to Ruth: "It can't be as good as it seems to me"), she still feels herself to be a "weak woman," and that only Tom's execution of her ideas is fitting for such an extraordinary competition. (Later, in Act I, Daisy, Tom's sister, says: "Ann's criticism is wonderful, of course, but still Tom is the artist.") Near the end of Act I, after Ann had offered Tom her own sketches to send in as his because she thinks what

he himself has done is not up to this superior standard and he has refused ("...I've done the best that's in me, I tell you"),⁵³ she makes the apparently dumbfounding decision to send in her own work in her own right. Interestingly, she assumes no possibility of success, but modestly, if a bit defiantly, asserts that "I don't mind failure. I only want it to stand its little chance with the rest. I love it. It means more to me than I can possibly...why shouldn't I? I want to."⁵⁴ Tom's cavalier assent ("Why not? It's your own affair. Go ahead."⁵⁵), though patronizing and with no belief that she might distinguish herself, wins her ardent gratitude. As the act ends, the fact is underscored that Tom's artistic ego has never yet been threatened by his wife.⁵⁶ Ann's ecstatic "Oh, Tom -- thank you. "You're splendid,"⁵⁷ provides the final clue to the slightly inferior, and therefore acceptable, relation of wife-artist to husband-artist.

Ann, although the heroine and the personification of balance between personal life and personal achievement, does not represent the true career woman of He and She. That position is held by Ruth Creel, the fiancée of Tom's assistant, Keith, whose "mid-Victorian ideas"⁵⁸ make a contrast to Tom's enlightened ones. It is Ruth who -- taken out of the context of this play -- could be a transplant to contemporary drama. She is a "modern" type

⁵³He and She, p. 906.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 910.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶He and She, p. 940.

⁵⁷His tolerance toward a woman's use of her talent is more surface than originally indicated, and yet his attitude is made sympathetic and understandable in the face of all prevailing standards

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 905.

par excellence, and is the only woman in the piece described obliquely. When Dr. Remington, Ann's father, comes to visit in Act I, he says: "...here's that pretty little Ruth thing-- knowing so much it makes my head ache,"⁵⁹ while in Act II she's a bit enviously termed "skinny," (Evidently such slimness was most desirable, even though less consciously than in later eras.) Ann, with her artist's eye, puts this more elegantly: "...When I look at Ruth, I think the most alluring charm a woman can have is beautiful bones without a superfluous ounce of flesh on them."⁶⁰ Surely this is the ideal Hollywood image, not the "big woman"-cum-Gibson Girl type that was so desirable at the time He and She was written.

Apart from her physical appearance, Ruth's attitudes, opinions and ambitions abet the extraordinarily modern impression she creates. Even her profession, that of a women's magazine editor, is more typical of the present than of that period. In Act II, when Tom's sister Daisy,⁶¹ in a conversation about whether or not people should have children,⁶² says that she thinks if you don't, "you might as well be a man's mistress and be done with it."⁶³ Ruth replies to this, "half-serious-- half-joking": "That's the ideal relationship for a man and a woman. Each to keep his independence in absolutely every way-- and live together because they charm each other. But somehow we don't seem to be

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 903.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 912.

⁶¹The prototype of the conventional girl who only works, if she does at all, until she can find someone to marry and take care of her.

⁶²Still another advanced notion is touched on here.

⁶³"He and She", p. 911.

able to make it respectable."⁶⁴ Crothers saw that there was nothing new in this point of view. When Daisy retorts: "I suppose that's very clever and modern," Ruth answers: "Oh, no -- it's as old as the everlasting hills. The trouble is children are apt to set in and mess things up. It's hard on them." And Daisy's reply -- "So far as I can see most everything that's modern is hard on children"⁶⁵ -- completes the prophetic quality of the interchange.

The reason it's clear that marriage wouldn't work between Keith and Ruth -- he of the "anti-deluvian [sic] and prehistoric"⁶⁶ domestic views, she of the liberated ones -- is the gulf between their separate understandings of what marriage means. Ruth pleads for an equal partnership that Keith has neither the need nor the desire to cope with. When she says "...it must be fifty-fifty..."⁶⁷ and that "you think housekeeping is making a home -- and the two things aren't the same at all -- at all, at all."⁶⁸ his response is predictable: "They can't be separated."⁶⁹ A cry for real partnership rings in her retort:

...love makes a home -- not tables and chairs.
We can afford more if I work, too. We can pay
someone to do the stuff you think I ought to do.
And you'll go on climbing up in your work and I'll
go on in mine and we'll both grow to something and
be somebody and have something to give each other.
It will be fair -- we'll be pulling together -- pals
and lovers like Tom and Ann. That's why they're so
ideally happy.⁷⁰

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 902.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 903.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

Unlike Tom and Ann, Keith and Ruth are incompatible in spirit (in Act I, Keith, speaking of Ann, says: "She does beautiful work for a woman...") and the logic of their breakup is dramatically sound. The choice of lonely success for Ruth as opposed to intolerable domesticity is the only possible one in these circumstances; the same can be said of the inevitability of Keith's turning to the willing Daisy for consolation and a truer mating.

Daisy -- "strong, wholesome, handsome, with the charm of health and freshness"⁷¹—is the old-fashioned though spirited girl. She's destined to make a Keith happy because her primary aim in life is to please a man and experience the safety and security that the proverbial hearth affords.⁷² A strong believer in male dominance in a marriage. (In Act III, Daisy says: "I tell you it is not possible for a man and a woman to love each other and live together and be happy unless the man is it."), Daisy's work as a stenographer in her brother's home is a matter of pride in being self-supporting until her personal life is settled. (In Act I, Dr. Remington says to her gently: "...I wager you say in your prayers every night:—Oh, Lord, deliver me from this job and get me a good husband!") Also, she's spirited enough not to want to be a burden to her family, because she feels she may never have the chance to marry, that she's not attractive to men.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 899,

⁷²It's a question of choice all around here, a stand that present day feminists would heartily approve.

To begin with, she's hopelessly in love with Keith and would ask for nothing better than to "do" for him, as when she sews the button on his jacket⁷³--a job that Ruth is either unwilling or unable to do. (Later, of course, it's indicated that it will work out just as she most fervently desires.) Sincerely and without malice -- Daisy's unaffected goodness is her most attractive characteristic -- she points out Ruth's nature to which his love and desire have blinded him: "...not the lamp light and the needle for Ruth. Keith, don't ask her to give up her work--don't you see, she's more clever in her way than you are in yours. She'll go farther, and if you make her stop, she'll hate you someday because she'll think you've kept her back. That's a hard thing to say--but it's the truth."⁷⁴ When Keith ripostes, suggesting that women who like to cosset a man are a thing of the past, Daisy under the cover of sociological comment can tell him: "Oh no, they're not. They're lying around thick. The trouble is-- a woman can't ask. Even if a man is--just at her hand--and she knows she could make him happy--she can't tell him--she can't open his eyes--she has to hide what might make things right for both of them. Because she's a woman."⁷⁵ Luckily for Daisy and her needs, Keith eventually recognizes her as the best choice for him and, as with the major couple in the play, perhaps it is Keith who's more fortunate in his partner than is Daisy in hers. The three women here are depicted as wiser, more

⁷³"He and She", pp. 915-16.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 916.

⁷⁵Ibid.

discerning and more mature than their masculine counterparts (with the single exception of Dr. Remington), and used as a metaphor for urban American society in the century's second decade, the points are well made.

The last female on the roster of He and She is Ann's and Tom's daughter, Millicent. However, since hers is an unformed character showing all the notions and fads which filled the head of an unexceptional upper-middle class finishing school girl just before World War I, she will be commented upon when the topic of children is mentioned. Meanwhile, the men in this play, Tom, Keith and Dr. Remington, Ann's father, deserve to be discussed a bit further. . . especially in their relationships to women. The varieties of antagonism between the sexes, subtle and explicit, are dealt with at some length. Tom as has been noted, is seemingly broad-minded about women's equality. For example, when Dr. Remington teases him that "if you don't look out you'll be so mixed up you'll be upstairs keeping house and Ann will be downstairs keeping shop,"⁷⁶ Tom replies: "I don't know how I'd keep house, but Ann could keep shop all right."⁷⁷ Tom is also full of wife-liberating advice for Keith, and yet the Keith who wants a wife who will want only to be at home and take care of him is simply given as the more obvious and conventional personification of the male psyche. Tom shows he's like all the rest when Ann has won the competition and wants to use the money

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 904.

⁷⁷Ibid.

to help him. At her offer, his grudging pride in her achievement, understandable as it is since her work was chosen over his, gives way to masculine displacement (displacement in the sense of masking his anger in self-righteousness.) He tells her to give it up since it's become all-important to her, and she balks:

Tom, if you're just a little hurt-just a little jealous because I won...that's natural-I can understand that ...But, oh, Tom, the other-- to ask me to give it all up. I could never forgive that. Take it back, Tom, take it back.⁷⁸

She would never have believed this of him. His response tells the truth about his deepest feelings: "Good God, Ann, can't you see? You're a woman and I'm a man. You're not free in the same way..." And he adds: "If you won't stop because I ask it --I say you must."⁷⁹ She strongly protests this proof of her second-class citizenship, but this "must" carries the day when it comes from her guilt over Millicent's problems and from her realization of all that will result from her acceptance. To do him justice, Tom had honestly believed that he thought of his wife as an equal, although since it was he who had taught her his craft, it had never occurred to his masculine ego that Ann might be the more gifted of the two. No, he was benevolently proud of his protégée, but, on a seriously competitive level, his avowed principles forsook him.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 921.

⁷⁹Ibid.

The character of the wise Dr. Remington is an interesting one, and it's not difficult to see how Ann's uniqueness has been helped by his tolerance.⁸⁰ His description -- "...keen humor and kindliness are combined with an understanding and wisdom which make him a very strong and loveable [sic] man..."⁸¹ -- gives us the sense of tempered authority that carries weight both with the other characters and with the audience. His language is lively, and his forthright opinions and ability to see both sides of a question are succinctly expressed. For example, when Keith asks the doctor what he thinks of women having a career after marriage he is told: "Oh, I'm not so moth-eaten as I look. In fact, I'm a damned sight more advanced than you women are. You're still yelling about your right to be anything on land or sea you want to...We gave you that long ago."⁸² Here he's being, however, patronizingly, for the liberation of women. When Ruth -- the career woman -- sarcastically counters: "Why talk about it then? What else is there to it?"⁸³ Remington makes a realistic point, this time against equality for the female majority: "Put this in your pipe. The more women make good -- the more they come into the vital machinery of running the world, the more they complicate their own lives and the more tragedies they lay up for themselves."⁸⁴ He sums up the dilemma -- "What

⁸⁰This father-daughter syndrome is also found in A Man's World and it would be easy to ascribe an autobiographical touch here. Interestingly, it was the playwright's mother who had the stronger influence on her.

⁸¹"He and She", p. 903.

⁸²Ibid., p. 905.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

everybody says is true. There's the rub"⁸⁵ -- and emphasizes that "the tragedy of choice" lies between "the two sides of [woman's] own nature."⁸⁶ The doctor's appreciation of the complexity of the issue makes him worth listening to and adds to the play's quality of authenticity.

When Ann painfully resolves the conflict engendered by her winning the competition, Crothers is taking the stand that while men and women may strive equally, children mustn't be made to suffer. The structure of the play puts us at a remove from the child,⁸⁷ Millicent, since, although she flits in and out, her real base is a boarding school. It would not be an exxageration to say that a continuing sense of non-familiarity with children is present in Crothers' works, and their dialogue is always less natural than that of the adults. The damage that might arise from a woman's neglect of the needs of her offspring for the sake of a meaningful work is dealt with one-sidedly in He and She. That a father might inflict damage in the same way is not even considered by Crothers, and all the responsibility for a child's physical and emotional welfare is placed on a mother's shoulders unequivocally.

Millicent is "16 --pretty--eager--full of vitality and will --half-child, half-woman..."⁸⁸ Ann's lack of "understanding" in Millicent's eyes is illustrated by the mother's refusal to let her have a spur-of-the-moment party because of her, Ann's, work

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Rhy McChesney had younger brothers as child substitutes in The Three of Us, and Frank Ware's boy was adopted in A Man's World as has been discussed in the previous chapter.

⁸⁸"He and She", p. 900.

pressures. The girl's escapade of engaging herself to the school chauffeur and her subsequent running away from the school are given as proof of her loneliness and need of her mother's guidance; again, her father's involvement is not even touched upon: "He [the chauffeur] knew how lonely I was...and you wouldn't let me come home...I wanted to be with you."⁸⁹

While this may be an overly simplistic acceptance of Millicent's needs on the part of her mother (it certainly is a stilted confrontation), there is enough truth in what she says to make Ann's sacrifice a credible one. And this becomes even more realistic when it's seen that Ann's long-standing though unacknowledged guilt at having shunted her daughter aside in order to be freer to concentrate on her art, inexorably comes to light. (To do justice to the playwright's dramatic acumen, Ann doesn't let Millicent see her actions as a sacrifice; she is tactful enough, and knowledgeable enough about human nature and its backfiring reactions, to make the daughter think that their going on a trip together is for Ann's sake -- that it is Ann who needs her.) Some critics and audience members felt that Ann's maternal choice made for a too conventional ending (perhaps they were made uncomfortable by being confronted with the flaw in society which necessitated such a choice.) Still, if Ann's character and background are understood, it is not really surprising. She was, after all, brought up by Dr. Remington who, although understanding the argu-

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 926-7.

ments and being proud of his daughter's gifts, would always opt for "love and children -- the greatest thing on earth,"⁹⁰ and who says sincerely: "...I'd rather see [Ann] happy-as a woman -- than the greatest artist in the world."⁹¹ On the contrary, there is a ring of truth that another dénouement -- in 1920 as in 1912 -- would have belied.⁹² Once again it is the woman who pays.

Some of the men behave like children. Keith is portrayed not merely as conventional but as incontrovertibly adolescent. He wants things as he wants them and is unable to cope with equal needs on the part of a woman. By stressing that his expectations are taken for granted and will undoubtedly be speedily actualized, Crothers is saying that the Keiths of this world to a greater extent, and the Toms to a lesser, still prevail; that the built-in unfairness of the family structure will destroy a woman's achievement and possibilities if she tries to combine them with a family life. Only a Ruth Creel -- or a Rachel Crothers -- who decides not to marry at all or, if she does, not to have children, may have a chance as a woman at equal worldly success with a man. Crothers does not really preach in this play, although she's accused of doing so by some critics, nor does she look down on one type of woman as opposed to another. It is for choice (again, the most up-to-date argument of the current Women's Liberation movement) that Crothers pleads "for all women,"⁹³ the "tragedy of choice"⁹⁴ that was greater in 1920 than, fortunately, it is in the present day.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 922.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 923.

⁹²Letters to Crothers will be cited in Chapter 7 that show both appreciation and disapproval of Ann's choice.

⁹³ "He and She", p. 928. ⁹⁴Ibid., p. 905

1920 was a year of many other impressive plays. He and She was a mixed succès-d'estime at best; one of Crothers' rare non-hits. O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon won the Pulitzer Prize, and the 1920-21 season was a distinguished one. A look at two outstanding contemporaneous plays, which have a certain relevance to He and She, will help enhance one's understanding of the appeal it had for that audience which appreciated its earnestness and its message.

Miss Lulu Bett by Zona Gale, designated "An American Comedy of Manners," opened toward the end of the season in December of 1920. and was staged by Brock Pemberton. A really fine play, it was adapted by Gale from her novel of the same name. It became the Pulitzer Prize winner for 1921.

Here is a terse, realistic, provincial drama, as opposed to the slightly slick, sophisticated milieu of He and She. Their inner strength is the basic point of communality between the repressed, suppressed Lulu and the liberated Ann; that and the quality of imagination; Lulu's in her dreams, Ann's in her work. Gale has given us the reality and emptiness of "preposterous lives. . .characters who talk as people really talk and who therefore are dull." Here we have "an old lady who is not sweet and a child who is not cute..."⁹⁵ This glimpse of a life in which the heroine lives as a poor relation and is made to feel it has⁹⁶ little in common with Crothers' more comfortable, civilized and,

⁹⁵Zona Gale, Miss Lulu Bett (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1921), "Forward" p. xiii.

⁹⁶Here all the centuries of servitude on the part of the poor female relation in the extended family circle continue in the 20th century, at least in such provincial places as Gale depicts, both in life and literature.

yes, artificial world. A parallel can be drawn, though, if only for the reason that Lulu Bett is an example of an able woman trapped into a meaningless life just because she is a woman; she can't go off and seek the things she wants from the world, not in her time and her small-town milieu, at any rate. Ann Herford, and the other female characters in He and She as well, are forced into molds purely because they are women, although two of them have ideas and possibilities far greater than Lulu Bett could ever envisage. Lulu's entrapment is based on her economic dependence on her sister and brother-in-law, and again we have the echo of Frank Ware's plea that women's greater economic independence is the key to their liberation. When Lulu, who has the courage, finally breaks away, saying in Act III: "Goodbye, all of you-- I'm going I don't know where, to work at I don't know what. But I'm going from choice," the familiar figure of Nora Helmer is sighted.⁹⁷ In He and She, Ann's decision to choose domestic harmony at her personal expense is at least predicated on her having had the chance to do otherwise. Again, the issue of choice is the glaring one.

Choice, too, is the theme underlying the lighter play that opened shortly before He and She (in 1919) and to which many critics compared it, namely, The Famous Mrs. Fair by James Forbes. Lightweight, yes, "but it too, has the advantage of soundly-

⁹⁷Not that Lulu's experience has had any touch of being infantilized; it's just that the line of descent is unmistakable.

fashioned foundations of character, and that building [sic] human quality that differentiates the real from the superficial and artificial drama."⁹⁸ The play is about a woman whose experiences as an ambulance driver and a leader in World War I (where she was called "fearless" and was awarded the Croix de Guerre) have superceded her former domestic contentments. The parallel with He and She is more evident in the externals of both these plays, and in their depicting of a new breed of women than was the case with Miss Lulu Bett. Mrs. Fair, like Ann, comes from an upper middle-class environment and is already liberated when the play begins. Like Ann, too, she is an exception. She falls between Ann's recognition and Lulu's suppression, though, in that she's talented but without a goal to pursue or a career to strive for. It is the war that has galvanized her. The male chauvinist attitudes on the part of Mr. Fair and their son upon her return from France when she wants to continue working and traveling are not unlike some of the male attitudes in He and She, namely that "woman's place is in the home." (Since she had been away for so long, their feelings are understandable on a human and a temporary basis.) The two pieces have similar endings; each of the mothers realizes that her adolescent daughter has suffered from her involvement with her work and, in Mrs. Fair's case, from her prolonged absence from home,⁹⁹ to the apparent neglect of their children's emotional needs. In both

⁹⁸Burns Mantle, (ed.), The Best Plays of 1919-1920 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.), "Introduction," p. v.

⁹⁹In He and She, it's the daughter who's enforcedly away from home.

cases, priorities are straightened out and Mrs. Fair also turns her back on worldly success and, with great guilt, returns to try to make up for the damage her outside interests have caused.

The critics remained kind to Crothers with Old Lady 31. New York Vogue (undated) called it "the best American play of the current year [1916] and one of the best plays of recent seasons." Frank Crane in The Globe and Commercial Advertiser (undated but 1916) spoke of the play as "wholesome...warm, human, genuine...What a relief from the everlasting flapper!...Me for the grandmothers! They are as well-loved and as interesting as the giggling misses." May Mackenzie in the New York City Review (undated but 1916) praised the play saying: "The real thing always hits us 'hardboiled New Yorkers'. Hits us hard and surer than it hits the mushier group. Old Lady 31 is an exceptionally done page of real thing in a brand new model." It's the compassionate quality in Old Lady 31 that is invariably touched on. The New York Times for October 31, 1916, said: "None of the other plays in town is quite like it and few of them are half so pleasing. Rachel Crothers has imparted a warm humanity that is one of the most precious of all theatrical properties." The Nation¹⁰⁰ stated that "it is in the drawing of the character of Angie and of the spinster types that Miss Crothers scores," while Channing Pollock summed up Crothers' effect on the 1916 audience: "In perception of the nuances of life and delicate expression of them, none of our dramatists quite equals Miss Crothers."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰For November 16, 1916, Vol. - CIII - No. 2681.

¹⁰¹Green Book Magazine, undated except as 1916, in Scrapbook, p. 107. MCNY.

The reviews of He and She in 1920 dealt with the unusual addition of Crothers-as-star, as well as with her usual functions of playwright, director and producer. The play was called "...an eloquent sermon for another sphere for women,"¹⁰² and her performance as Ann was basically considered "sincere and convincing"¹⁰³. However, such an eminent critic as Alexander Woolcott, in The New York Times for February 13, 1920, said that her acting caused much in her rôle to be lost because of her "obvious inexperience." (On the other hand, he praised her performance as well, calling it "...so full of understanding and so free from theatricalized tricks.") He added that here "Miss Crothers rehearses the tragedy of the new woman, with her longing for a creative career and the obligations of her home warring within her." Moreover, he felt that the characters are less real than "embodied points of view."

Be that as it may, the ontological view certainly seems to be stated in both Old Lady 31 and He and She. The positions of men and women are clearly, even happily, defined in the former; in the latter they're challenged, although Crothers acknowledges the dilemma and invokes irony when she has Remington say: "...the development of women hasn't changed the basic laws of creation... Sex is still the strongest force in the world. And no matter how far she goes she doesn't change the fundamental law of her own ...mechanism."¹⁰⁴ By the end of the First World War, only a few

¹⁰²The New York American, February 13, 1920.

¹⁰³The New York Telegram, February 13, 1920.

¹⁰⁴He and She, p. 905.

women could defy these "laws" of their nature, and those who did would do so only by denying them. Still, progress had been made and Kenneth Macgowan could write: "He and She will delight that shrinking body of persons who would like to keep woman in her proper hemisphere. The rest must respect it."¹⁰⁵ To respect does not mean to agree.

Women had come a long way, and now the "tragedy of choice"¹⁰⁶ would become more of a reality to be faced. In the continuing saga of human relations, however, one thing assuredly had not changed: The simple truth remains, in Crothers' words, that "there's only one thing funnier than women--men!"¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵The New York Globe, February 13, 1920.

¹⁰⁶He and She, p. 905.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 916.

CHAPTER 5

Three Plays of the Nineteen-Twenties

The post-war era of the 1920s has probably had more written about it than any other American epoch up until World War II -- with the notable exception of that of the Civil War-- and for very good reason. No decade till then had been so marked by the multiplicity of change that distinguished "the roaring 20s." The decade began with ideals and the sense of new corners turned (both the Women's Suffrage and Prohibition Amendments, for example, had been passed in 1920),

But then, abruptly, the impulse to make over the nation and the world was discovered to have faded away. A people who had had enough of high causes and noble sacrifices to hold them for a long time decided to take things easy, to enjoy themselves; and although there remained many American idealists who could not abandon their quest, they found that they, too, were tired as well as outnumbered. The revolt of the American conscience was over.¹

The kinds of change that rose to the surface after the battering of traditional values by the rough seas of recent world events and thrust them sharply into focus, were iconoclastic, definite breakdowns of manners and morals. There was more freedom, especially for women, in dress and makeup, language, openness of drinking and smoking, and, perhaps most importantly, in

¹Frederick Lewis Allen, The Big Change (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), p. 105.

the relations between the sexes, for it was an age when "sex was in the limelight."² By the end of the decade, which was also characterizable by the greater equality of women now more firmly established by suffrage, and by the emergence of such "forces [as] prohibition, the automobile, the confession and sex magazines and the movies"³...a single standard had been established and that a low one."⁴ The double standard would continue to exist de facto, however, for a very long time to come, as Crothers' plays will demonstrate.

Rachel Crothers' plays of the 1920s that deal with these issues are Nice People (1921), Mary the Third (1923), and Let Us Be Gay (1929). In varying degrees they all touch on such timely matters as the "new morality" already mentioned, with its greater frankness in speech, behavior, drink and dress; its expanded sexual freedom; its view of the traditional type of marriage and the family as a declining institution; divorce; and the "generation gap" Presented at the Klaw Theatre in New York on March 3, 1921 under Crothers' direction, Nice People became a hit and was listed in Burns Mantle's Ten Best Plays of 1920-1921, together with such disparate works as Frank Craven's The First Year and O'Neill's The Emperor Jones.

"How did I come to write the play Nice People? If I had not written it somebody else would; it was in the air..." These are Crothers' own words in an interview in the New York Herald,

²Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday (New York: Harper & Row, 1931), p. 120.

³Ibid., p. 99.

⁴Ibid., p. 116.

April 24, 1921. Asserting that the play "will help mend modern morals... [that] modern girls will see the folly of extravagant dress, too much freedom and [an] aimless existence..." she goes on to decry "the commonness of the current manners of young women and men; the lack of a tone-- not merely a high moral tone but a decent one..." which she so literally exemplifies in Nice People. She adds: "...the subject simply had to be put on the stage." As Frederick Lewis Allen puts it, politically, "the compulsion for unity was gone and division was taking its place ... [so was] the compulsion for idealism...gone and realism was in the ascendant."⁵ Crothers was clearly sensitive to this impulse, and, with Nice People, "put the flapper on the stage where she was the youngest, greenest example of emerging womanhood."⁶ The "nice girls," smoking, drinking, dancing "indecently" and unchaperoned, as well as "joyriding with men at four in the morning,"⁷ were exactly the types Crothers depicted in this early look at the flapper phenomenon.

The upper-class milieu was to become the setting of most of her social comedies for the two succeeding decades. In Nice People, Crothers paints a scene of urban splendor:

The Gloucester Apartment in Park Avenue, New York City [has] walls...hung in very old silk...At back is a fireplace...[There are] two long windows hung with velvet curtains which melt into the walls in color...a grand piano...Over the mantel-piece hangs a large picture of three nude figures

⁵Ibid., p. 25.

⁶Mildred Adams, "Rachel Crothers, Playmaker," The Woman's Journal, (May, 1931), p. 39.

⁷Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 90.

of girls running, with cloud-like draperies which also have the tone of the walls. The furniture is upholstered in an old brocade of ashes of roses...⁸

The ambiance of riches, culture and tradition is contrasted with the "modern" attitudes of the spoiled young idlers who inhabit it. These epitomize the up-to-date in dress, language, vices and values.

A thoroughly modern girl, Teddy Gloucester, runs around with a fast crowd-- the "Beautiful People" of that era-- which thinks only of instant gratification, pleasure and the next novelty. She and her peers think of themselves as free, sophisticated and happy, and are off to another of their eternal parties when Teddy's Aunt Margaret, who has come to live with them, expresses dismay over their lives. Teddy is confronted by the double standard for men and women when, because of a storm, she finds herself stranded overnight in her own country cottage with one of her young men, Scotty Wilbur. (She had wanted to frighten her father by staying out most of the night since he had dared to tell her not to come home too late, but her plan had backfired.) When they become aware of their plight, and before Scotty conveniently falls asleep for the night in a drunken stupor, he proposes marriage. He protests that it is for love, but at least, it will save her reputation. Teddy refuses, knowing that she doesn't really love him and that certainly a major part of his avowed love for her is based on her great wealth. At twenty,

⁸Rachel Crothers, Nice People (New York: Brentano's, 1921), p. 83.

for all her worldly-wise quasi-cynicism, she is still girlish and hopeful that marriage means to really love and be loved. (At this juncture, in 1921, the "easy out" for marriage was still pretty much in the lip-service stage in all strata of society.)

A young stranger, Billy Wade, who represents "true" values and the salt-of-the-earth quality lacking in the boys of Teddy's circle, comes into the cottage out of the storm, as well as out-of-the-blue. He is Teddy's alibi that "nothing happened" between the comatose Scotty and herself during that long rainy night. Billy has gone off (to reappear later) when Teddy's father and her friends hear the story from her lips and, predictably, they don't believe her. In anger, she decides to live in the cottage for the summer, and to do some farming the company of Billy Wade, who has returned and corroborated her story. It should be noted that this idyll takes place under the happy chaperonage of her wise Aunt Margaret who represents the best and most wholesome aspects of traditional society, and who sees in her niece's action the possibility of her redemption. Ultimately, Teddy and Billy announce their marriage plans and refuse her father's money, even after father and daughter reconcile. So life-in-a-cottage for the now impoverished young heiress and the determined, idealistic young man starts on more solid ground, presumably, than that which idle luxury would have provided.

If the précis description makes the play sound contrived, Crothers' well-paced dialogue and her ear for what is "in the

air" is always present. In addition, the liveliness of the story and her drawing of the women characters elevate this actable play to an often believable and mostly enjoyable theatrical experience. Irony, a quality that grows in Crothers' work, as the comedic approach and the deftness of the repartée show, merges with the didactic and serious tone reminiscent of such earlier vehicles as A Man's World (1910) or Ourselves (1913). The title, itself, is ironic; "[Nice people!] What are their parents thinking of?..."⁹ Is this the way "nice people" behave?

In Act I, we are presented with a situation in which all aspects of the general dissoluteness are laid out -- in "the harshness of their gaiety"¹⁰--for all to see. For Aunt Margaret, the sister of Teddy's dead mother, who, having lost her only son in the war, has come to live with the Gloucesters in order to try to guide her niece into a suitable marriage, the new modes of behavior are shocking and outrage her sense of justice. ("...It's all chaos and waste and degeneracy. And my boy -- lying out there in France! And this is all it was for! He went so gladly. He gave himself for something greater than himself -- to save civilization. Oh, the farce of it! The hideous, horrible useless sacrifice!")¹¹ These young people, all in their early twenties, are spoiled and empty. In a confrontation with Margaret, Hubert Gloucester, Teddy's father, tries to defend them by saying

⁹Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁰Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 357.

¹¹Nice People, p. 102.

this is the typical rebellion of all youth ("there never was a generation that grew up that didn't think the next one coming on was going to the dogs")¹² but the older woman totally disagrees. Here is something else, she insists-- "there's something far more serious in it than merely the difference between two generations."¹³

She proceeds to set forth all the evils she sees, saying: "It's appalling--simply appalling...all of it--everything,"¹⁴ and her list is long: The language, which she doesn't explicitly comment on, but clearly thinks forthright, is spiced with a few "hells" and "damns," but here Crothers lets the young people off by implying that they are too upper-crust to be verbally vulgar; the bad manners; "Nothing's done that's too much trouble -- you can count on that";¹⁵ the "nudity": They "go about half naked";¹⁶ the drinking:¹⁷ "Your house is a bar. It pours out-- at all hours";¹⁸ the smoking: "These decliate young girls are... dependent upon their cigarettes to quiet their nerves...";¹⁹ the casual petting (real sexual promiscuity is not seriously considered here): "Who are these boys who are making love to her -- running about with her alone?"²⁰ The extravagance: "[How could] you give that child eighty dollars to throw away in an evening?"²¹

¹²Ibid., p. 100.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁷Crothers got on this bandwagon early. Prohibition had just taken hold, yet she speaks of the guzzling that already -- in 1920 -- was going on as a reaction to it among the rich and apparently among the young.

¹⁸Nice People, p. 101.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid. p. 102.

²¹Ibid., p. 101.

The father counters such criticism of his daughter by responding that the peer pressure is great ("it's not her fault, they all do it"),²² and that he's lax because he trusts her: "I'm doing all I can to make her happy. She's a nice girl and she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself."²³ Margaret, however, cuts through to the heart of the matter when she says: "I'm not talking about superficial fashions and manners. The vital things of character don't belong to anybody's day -- they're eternal and fundamental and I see [Teddy] without them."²⁴ This succinct scene is set forth as a summary of the whole problem that the play presents and Margaret, functioning as the raisonneur, recognizes that the way Teddy lives is the "very essence of this thing that's in the air"²⁵ and is reacting to "the emptiness -- the soul-lessness of it all!"²⁶ Both the actions and reactions, though, are predictable.

"Nice People" by the standards of its time is nothing like as forthright a play as A Man's World was in 1909. It is true that once again Miss Crothers has a significant theme; the conflict between the new moral standards of a postwar, jazz and booze-intoxicated younger generation and an older, more rigid code of behavior. She went even further, to examine the older generation's responsibility for the younger's warped sense of values."²⁷ If Aunt Margaret represents conservative values, Hubert Gloucester's laissez-faire attitude goes beyond the stereotype of the blindly

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p. 102.

²⁴Ibid., p. 100.

²⁵Ibid., p. 103.

²⁶Ibid., p. 101.

²⁷Flexner, p. 241.

indulgent father when it's made clear that he feels some guilt about guiding his daughter more carefully when he himself has a lower-class mistress of whom Teddy disapproves. On the other hand, Margaret's old-fashioned approach and her ideas of "good form," such as her distress over the girls' "nakedness" or the "wearing of pearls that no young girl should ever wear,"²⁸ are taken out of the realm of surface values by her understandable bitterness over the "waste" of her son's sacrifice, as well as by the truth of many of her assertions. Teddy and her friends, the older woman feels, are being "killed and thrown away"²⁹ by the lives they lead and she sees a blight on the future because of it. Part of this blight would be excessive materialism and Teddy's circle is made up of thorough-going materialists, the old ideals having been smashed and nothing new having crystallized. A closer look will show more incisively the superficial attitudes from which the aunt recoils, as, for example, when one of the flappers says to one of her boyfriends: "I think it would be awful to have your personality hurt by anything so disgusting as no money."³⁰

Eileen and Hallie³¹ are different degrees of the modern girl. Eileen, "...dark and piquant, frankly impertinent and very wholesomely lovable,"³² is evidently only a flapper on the surface, a follower who has enough "soul" to be redeemable. Hallie,

²⁸Nice People, p. 101.

²⁹Ibid., p. 103.

³⁰Ibid., p. 152.

³¹Played originally by Katherine Cornell and Tallulah Bankhead respectively.

³²Nice People, p. 83.

on the other hand, "...brilliantly blonde, half-reclining on the couch. ...sipping her Scotch with a slow and self-centered enjoyment [which is] indicative of her general psychology,"³³ is the up-to-date Jezebel, the quintessential jet-setter, the perennial heartless archetypal bitch. Teddy -- "slender and vibrating, pretty, intelligent and high keyed, alertly and intensely interested in herself and the art of extracting from life all which she considers her due...[having] a very radiant charm and vivid responsiveness"³⁴--falls somewhere between Eileen and Hallie in the beginning, but her description is intended to convey her as superior to both in spirit and in her capacity to take hold of life. (We are even given an indication of an intellectual agility and knowledge her friends don't possess when, for example, she quips in Shakespearean quotation: "For this relief, much thanks,"³⁵ in response to her father's adding extravagantly to her allowance.) Our curiosity is aroused about Teddy whose entrance is delayed (a device Crothers often used successfully, notably, later on, in Susan and God), and our interest in her is further buoyed by our uncertainty as to her real character all the way through the first act. Still we recognize the Crothers' heroine in Teddy from the outset, even in her flapper guise, as one in whom hope is invested.

³³Ibid., pp. 83-4.

³⁴Ibid., p. 85.

³⁵Ibid., p. 98.

With Nice People, Crothers set the tone for a number of plays in which women, young and later not so young, competing for men, rise to heights of bitchiness and invective not to be exceeded till Clare Boothe's The Women epitomized the trend in the mid-1930s. The character of Hallie in the play under discussion most typifies this attitude:

HALLIE ...Any girl who has as much money as you have, Teddy, must expect somebody to say that every man who looks at her wants her money.

TEDDY I don't know that I have so much more than you have, for instance.

HALLIE But you look as though you had, honey. You have so many cars and things, you know. Three of your own, isn't it? And your pearls are marvelous--simply marvelous. No wonder Scotty wants you.³⁶

The girls' relationships to each other are represented as operating on a completely superficial level, real friendship being no more than party-deep. Superficiality is present in all aspects of their lives, for their prime objective is to have a good time. Crothers implies that this is understandable because if "...in a sense disillusionment...was the keynote of the nineteen-twenties,"³⁷ then life was a dubious business at best; if certainties had been swept away, fun might as well be the important thing.

The essential hallmark of the Crothers' heroine, together with spirit, pride and independence, is her individuality (Rhy McChesney and Frank Ware are good examples), and Teddy, despite

³⁶Ibid., p. 89.

³⁷Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 238.

all her acquiescence to the mores of her circle, shows signs of being more original than her friends. For instance, when work is impugned by them as being crassly commercial and something to be shied away from, she intuitively feels the underlying fears involved: "...What are you afraid of? I think the most vulgar second rate thing in the world is to be afraid. Anything can be made chic and frightfully individual -- if one just does, you know."³⁸ In advocating the joy of doing something for its own sake she is anomalous in her circle, as well as in her defiance of its circumscriptions: "...Do everything right before everybody's eyes -- and dare them to talk..."³⁹ Her independence of spirit is also shown in her realization that there is something better in life than a smart, loveless marriage as her final choice in that area demonstrates, and ultimately it is she who personifies the "disillusionment with [her generation's] rebellion [and who comes to] distrust the new freedom no less than [she had] the old certainties..."⁴⁰

At the beginning of the play, as we have seen, all the latest trends and fads -- as well as seeming change of values -- are present in Teddy no less than in her fellows and the undercurrent of sex, which is mostly talk here, underlies it all. There are attempts at provocative repartee:

³⁸Nice People, p. 87.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Walter Lippman, "A Preface to Morals," quoted in F.L. Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 240.

EILEEN I don't mind anything as long as I'm in your arms. We've just been saying how dangerous you're, Trevor.

TREVOR I might fool you some of these days.

EILEEN Well, why don't you?⁴¹

There is a modern approach to honorable intentions, or, rather, to their lack.

SCOTTY [I would always be happy] if you were along.

TEDDY Every girl you know thinks you mean that.

SCOTTY And you know I do.

TEDDY I know you don't...That's why it's all right with us.⁴²

There are suggestions of the latest styles of dancing being overtly sexual:

HALLIE I adore the way [Scotty] holds me. Just as though he were going to crush me.

TEDDY But he never does.

HALLIE Not while we're dancing. I adore a man who is absolutely mad about me and yet who controls himself in that perfectly marvelous way.

TEDDY Oh, I don't know. I'm not so keen about so much self-control.⁴³

The implication, then, that current male-female relationships tend to be superficial and casual socially and sexually, without deeper commitment necessary as formerly, is emphasized by the tentativeness of their conversations with and attitudes toward each other. Real feeling never seems to be present. For example, when Ollie,

⁴¹Nice People, p. 92.

⁴²Ibid., p. 94.

⁴³Ibid., p. 91.

one of the young men concerned, says to Teddy: "...I've always been crazy about you, Teddy. You did care a little, didn't you? Don't you any more?" and she answers: "Yes I do. Of course I do. You're a dear,"⁴⁴ it's all lukewarm and a little flat. Crothers was being corroborative of the idea -- which she never really came to grips with -- that "the moment love becomes casual, it becomes commonplace as well."⁴⁵ The impasse between the generations is also touched on in sexual terms. When Hubert, goaded into unaccustomed authority by Margaret's outrage over the freedoms he allows his daughter, tries to stop Teddy from going out to an all-night haunt and on to breakfast in a now familiar pattern, she throws his lower-class mistress in his face:

HUBERT ...There are plenty of other things to do
 for amusement.

TEDDY I think I must be the judge of what I find
 amusing. I like this.

HUBERT Then your judgment is not to be trusted.

TEDDY ...I don't know that yours is, father. You
 do a great many things that I don't like.
 Mrs. Allister, for instance, is far from
 what I call good taste and yet you seem to
 find her extremely amusing.

.....

HUBERT You don't treat me with any respect.

TEDDY I didn't know you wanted me to.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁵Lippmann, p. 240.

⁴⁶Nice People, p. 106.

This dramatic moment of confrontation would have been unthinkable in the context presented, and without serious consequence, between parent and child before the war.

It has already been indicated that the ties of the young women to one another in this play are not those of friendship but of convenience. . .the prototypical female relationship of the ages, centering around competition for men. On the other hand, greater honesty between the sexes had grown out of the greater freedom of this postwar period, and was more and more in evidence. Although superficiality remains in this as in all other areas of the relationships in Teddy's and Scotty's circle, the semi-symbolic storm and enforced overnight stay together in the Gloucester cottage in Westchester, offers a framework for the candor between the two young people as well as for the showing of the double standard's unabated strength. When Scotty suggests marrying Teddy because her reputation will be ruined otherwise, she refuses and then asks if he would marry her without her money. The ingenuousness of his reply somewhat mitigates its content: "What's the use talking moonshine? We know each other too well. I couldn't marry anybody on earth without money."⁴⁷ (To do Crothers' credit, the portrayal of Scotty as an unabashed fortune-hunter gives him more dimension than the other young men of their acquaintance.)

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 117.

In the matter of the double standard, it is only Teddy's reputation that will be tarnished: "Men," as Teddy bitterly points out, "can do anything."⁴⁸ It is ironic that in Nice People Crothers merely dramatizes this fact without attacking it. Even Teddy, while protesting that she's done "nothing wrong" agrees that her escapade was a "perfectly idiotic thing"⁴⁹ to do and regrets it, but the point is far less strongly made-- and somehow seems more accepted-- than it was in The Three of Us back in 1906! In effect, the repercussions over a well-bred girl staying alone with a man under the same roof overnight were no less in 1921 than they had been at the turn of the century. Although progress in any sense of true equality in sexual mores, then, was tentative, in this play, the consequences for Teddy -- a choice between marriage to the particular man or social ostracism -- prove to be a blessing in disguise.

Billy Wade, who represents the bridge connecting the sound values of the past with the less hidebound spirit of the present, wanders into the cottage, seeking shelter from the storm. "...Young and strong,"⁵⁰ he also epitomizes the "city-country" conflict, already noted as a feature of Crothers' plays to date. The stage is now set in more ways than one. The cottage scene is portrayed as one of quiet brightness, its simplicity in sharp contrast to the Park Avenue opulence formerly described,

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 157.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 134.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 118.

and the struggle between the "wicked" city and the "healthy" country is set into motion. Billy is presented as the best of the "country" type and Teddy's attraction to him is based on just those lacks she had felt in Scotty and the others. Their initial conversation is more substantive and honest than talks with Scotty ever were. Billy's views on marriage, for instance, don't gibe with the "let's-give-it-a-whirl" attitude of the young sophisticates she's used to: "They're making a circus out of some things," he says. "The casual way they get engaged and unengaged-- for instance-- makes my hair stand on end...The chasing's fun enough, but why get caught till you're sure you want to stay caught forever-- till the whole game's over?"⁵¹ And Teddy's defensive response betrays her own fears, as well as the hidden cravings of her generation, for more than the emotional cul-de-sacs they live in. She blurts out to Billy: "Nobody ever finds what he wants, anyway. And I think it's better to keep our dreams shut up tight and never let 'em out-- so we won't be disappointed."⁵²

The conflict here, as throughout the play in one way or another, lies in taking the risk that real commitments imply as opposed to opting for up-to-date "modish" behavior and its ensuing emptiness. Teddy's decision to remain in the cottage after her father doesn't believe her story ("If you don't know that

⁵¹Ibid., p. 124.

⁵²Ibid., p. 125.

I'm not lying I don't care what you think")⁵³ is the making of her. She learns -- in Aunt Margaret's now serene presence and under the friendship-love and tutelage of Billy -- what a healthy, useful life can mean and how much better it makes her feel, both physically and morally. No longer smoking, drinking, petting, gossiping, throwing out money and staying up all night running from one party to another, Teddy now eats healthily, gets up early, and falls 'into bed happy, tired out from fresh air and a sense of well-being. The unmistakable message is that her new happiness stems from a more wholesome spirit.

Billy's distaste for the shallowness and the wasteful, selfishly idle city life led by Teddy and her set is made totally manifest when he quits his munificent \$10,000-a-year New York job on principle. He bears out Crothers' ideal of the importance of character which she was later to personify more credibly because less sentimentally in such types as Charles Lingard in As Husbands Go. Billy Wade is the representative of the "natural man" as opposed to the artificial specimens found in Teddy's milieu. The best way of coming to grips with life and values is at issue here, and like Molière's Alceste, who took himself off to the "country" (a metaphor for the faubourgs of Paris) to avoid that metropolis' artificiality and corruption, Billy turns his back on his remunerative job and the glitter and temptations of New York and seeks the "simple life" in the surrounding countryside.

⁵³Ibid., p. 131.

It is a sentimental ending but not a simplistic one because, although Teddy and Billy know they love one another, he refuses to marry her since he doesn't want to deprive her of the rich life to which she is accustomed and which he doesn't want to share. In a climactic show of spirit, Teddy decides to chuck her whole inheritance (which her now-reconciled father wants them both to enjoy) and she proposes to Billy. His worth is underscored by Aunt Margaret who enthusiastically exclaims to Teddy's father: "You ask him, too -- Hubert. Do all you can to hold him."⁵⁴ Apparently such a young man is a rara avis in the shallowly sophisticated Park Avenue milieu of 1921, and he symbolizes the resurgence of truer values, however sugar-coated they may be. The happy ending, rather didactically contrived, doesn't ring as true as the more realistic conclusions of Crothers' serious plays (A Man's World or He and She, for example), but after all this is a comedy of "flaming youth," with the natural dialogue that was always Crothers' strong suit, and with ironic overtones. Thus, although the play does end on the note of a return to more solid foundations on the part of the younger generation, the playwright never departs from reality so totally as to neglect to indicate an ambiguousness as to whether Teddy will really be able to adjust to struggle and "love in a cottage." And it must be remembered that, in 1921, the greater freedom of the average modern girl -- with or without wealth -- was still seen as gains to be banked for her greater happiness in marriage when she finally settled down to conventional family life.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 187.

Other hit plays of the 1920-1921 season included Frank Craven's The First Year and Susan Glaspell's The Inheritors. Despite the topical subject of Nice People, it was The First Year which won plaudits as "the best American comedy yet written,"⁵⁵ and as "the outstanding comedy success of this particular season."⁵⁶ Here was pure entertainment with no didactic base, unlike Crothers' offering, and this factor undoubtedly contributed to its resounding popularity. The First Year is an uncomplicated and amusing look at middle-class -- and middle-American -- family life, focussing on a young couple's first year of marriage, with which audiences at large could identify. The "smart set" had no influence here nor, indeed, did any sort of sybaritic existence. People worked for a living and thought of practical things, and this play was aptly described as "one of those true, homely little comedies which are a perfect blend of character, keenly observed, and the human comedy situation... [is] overlaid with a suggestion of farce."⁵⁷ In 1921, the general commercial audience was more likely to adhere to these homely and familiar concepts than to the trendy and exotic flash of a phenomenon such as the flapper which had not yet really taken hold or of the rarefied setting in which Crothers, for one, had presented her.

In these two plays, which mesh only in their type of happy endings, we have a case of contrast rather than comparison.

⁵⁵Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1920-1921 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1921), p. 5.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁷Ibid.

We meet Grace Livingston (at twenty, she is the same age as Teddy Gloucester) trying to decide which "small-town suitor"⁵⁸ to marry, the adventurous one or the steady, stay-at-home kind. She marries the latter (security needs prevailing) and their "first year," with its realities of housekeeping, minor frictions and adjustments, sets in. Seemingly nothing could be farther from the world of the wealthy and glamorous Teddy except for her yearning for something more meaningful than she has known. The conclusion is that she needs exactly what the heroine of The First Year does, namely a conventionally wholesome family life which is still given as the sine qua non of female happiness and the best possible premise for the male-female relationship.

The "heroine of spirit" -- which Teddy gave inklings of becoming at the beginning of Nice People -- is still the great exception despite the proliferation of female freedom; it is Grace Livingston who still represents the current norm, and even the Teddy Gloucesters follow. There is a temptation to equate the presumed results (we never see them actualized) of Teddy's and Billy's marriage with that of Grace's and Tommy's in The First Year, but just as we never believed that the latter union would not last, we are not at all sure that the former will. When their unborn baby is given as the unquestioning reason for bringing Craven's temporarily estranged young couple together (Tommy's slightly bewildered reaction is "I hope he likes us!"),

⁵⁸Ibid.

we sense a solidity of base and an authenticity that the ending of Nice People does not have. Indeed, were it not for its moral tone and intent, as well as for the sentimentality of its conclusion, some of the brittle aspects of a Noël Coward comedy would be more noticeable in the Crothers vehicle. Maybe it is precisely the fusion of elements that are essentially incongruous that doesn't let Nice People come off as well as it otherwise might.

Another play of 1921 with which it is interesting to contrast Nice People is The Inheritors by a fellow mid-Westerner and female author, Susan Glaspell.⁵⁹ Here we have an intense drama instead of a comedy and one which is concerned with the effects of war no less than Nice People, but in a very different mode. The Crothers play deals with the dissolution of manners and morals, The Inheritors directly with "the decline of faith in the twentieth century and [its] effect on contemporary life."⁶⁰ In short, Glaspell gives us an early look at the breakdown of the American Dream, and indeed it is almost prescient in terms of the McCarthy era and its suppressions. The heroine, Madeline, must struggle against turning a blind eye toward infringement of human rights when she sees fellow students at a small mid-Western college imprisoned for their political opinions. (Here too, the rumbles of involvement as opposed to uninvolved which were to burst forth in the 1960s are present.) She has inherited

⁵⁹As was Zona Gale in re: Miss Lulu Bett discussed in Chapter 4.

⁶⁰Arthur E. Waterman, Susan Glaspell (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 76.

the "dream of possibility,"⁶¹ and epitomizes the best of the old values.

Madeline has more in common with the slightly austere and principled Aunt Margaret in Nice People than with her contemporary, Teddy; nevertheless, the serious note that Crothers sounds in her comedy is that the precepts that Teddy has inherited are also sound, and that, less lofty and lonely than Madeline, she has a better chance to live out that heritage. A theatrical season of variety and contrast had come to a close and Crothers' early experimentation with the flapper phenomenon and the influence it exerted would be felt on and off the stage.

If Nice People was essentially the play dealing with the frivolities and emptiness of the devil-may-care postwar generation, Mary the Third was Crothers' contribution to youth's search for meaning that had been lost as well as to a closer look at the "generation gap." Once again Crothers is concerned with "the shifting moral code, [which in this play centers] specifically [on] the question of divorce. . . [and] she shows the antagonism between youth experimenting with freedom in the search for more stable relationships, and an older generation trying to conceal its bankruptcy from its children."⁶²

Mary the Third, a comedy, was produced by Lee Shubert under Crothers' direction, and opened at the Thirty-ninth Street

⁶¹Ibid., p. 78.

⁶²Flexner, p. 244.

Theatre in New York on February 5, 1923. The play was a hit and gave the author her second inclusion in Mantle's "Best Plays" of the season. The plot deals with three successive generations of women of one family, their similarities and differences in their expectations of marriage, and, in the "present" of the play, with the question of divorce. The idea of marriage as a workable institution wins out, and the youngest Mary ("the Third") sets out on her marital road with no less expectation of happiness and fulfillment than had her grandmother. Only the realizations of the pitfalls are more overt and more realistic, and the greater acceptance of the possibility of terminating an unhappy union gives a comforting "out" should it prove advisable. Cleverly structured into a prologue and three acts, Mary the Third, then, is about the machinations and marital aspirations of three generations: Mary the First, Mary the Second and Mary the Third. Each generation has its fashions, its artifices, its styles of flirtation, but the belief that marriage must last forever no matter what, that love in marriage will remain a certainty, is a naivete confined to the older two. In the third Mary, another version of the modern flapper, new answers to old questions arise. Here we have "as intimate a study of the sophisticated flapper and her troublesome complexes as [we did in] Nice People. . .but it is more serious and less extreme both in its criticism and its theatrical artifices."⁶³ In other words, it is a better play.

⁶³Burns Mantle, (ed.), The Best Plays of 1922-1923 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923) p. 383.

The story begins in 1870, at a dance, when Mary the First

A girl of twenty...dressed in an evening gown of the period...Her arms, bosom and shoulders are bare--but the fashion of her hair is demure and maidenly...She is soft and pretty and flower-like. Her voice is sweet. Her movements are graceful and coy and mincing... 64

is found sitting on "an old mahogany sofa, upholstered in black hair cloth"⁶⁵...the only furniture in the room."⁶⁶ William, her former beau, comes looking for her, and the stylized quality of their relationship is recognized at once when Mary, asking how he had known she was there, gets the simple response: "You told me you would be."⁶⁷ She heatedly remonstrates with simulated outrage: "I didn't! The idea of you thinking such a thing!"⁶⁸ William, simple, direct and honest, is no match for Mary who's full of guile and wiles, girlish but capriciously knowing. Although it was she who had jilted him for Hiram who had more money, and although he is now engaged to Lucy, William has just come into an inheritance and Mary is determined to have her first choice at any cost since she can now afford to! Sweetly bitchy, she undermines Lucy, her friend and William's new fiancée ("...under her sweet little purring ways, she's very, very strong and stubborn and always gets what she wants...")⁶⁹ Inadvertently, Mary is describing herself, of course, and Crothers demonstrates more subtle irony here than heretofore when she shows that age-old craftiness on which woman's essential dependence had always made

⁶⁴Rachel Crothers, Mary the Third (Boston: W.H. Baker, 1924), p. 3.

⁶⁵This is the first non-fully representational set in a Crothers play.

⁶⁶Mary the Third, p. 3.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 5.

her rely. And so Mary pries William loose from his new attachment, making him think, true to stereotype, that it's his idea all the while. Under the mid-Victorian curls, ribbons and lace and a cloying sweetness that masks a will of iron, Hiram and Lucy are out on their ears; Mary the First's eye is on the main chance. When William impassionedly suggests elopement (the idea had been planted by Mary), saying: "...We can't let life treat us like this. We've got to take hold of things. Nothing can stop us. This is meant to be..."⁷⁰ Mary responds in her calculatedly teasing way:

Then it would be wrong to let anything separate us. It's stronger than we are, William. Eternal and beautiful like the stars. But, oh, I can't do it, William. Never, never in this world can I do it. I'm not sure that it would be right. I'll be behind the oak tree. It's bigger than the maple.⁷¹

And the vignette ends on a note we can hear through time and through irony, echoing from the past down the generations to come:

MARY	...Will you love me forever?
WILLIAM	Forever and ever.
MARY	In this world and the next?
WILLIAM	Longer than eternity.
MARY	There never has been a love as great as this. I feel it. I know it. Oh, William, I love you so! I love you! ⁷²

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 8.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., p. 9.

The methods of getting a man so pithily set forth in the prologue are modified in Act I when Mary's daughter, Mary the Second, is also at a dance, paralleling the one just described. Again, two rival suitors vie for Mary's hand (however inversely that was indicated before, there were two young men in the picture), but the time is now 1897 and fashions in clothes and music have changed. There's more slang now ("He's got cheek asking you [to dance]. He must think he's a young masher...")⁷³ as well as greater frankness of expression between young men and women. For example, when the more esthetic beau, Richard, speaks of their souls being "like one soul," Mary replies: "Yes, but our dispositions aren't..."⁷⁴ The wiles are less wily, but the conception of marriage as an ideal and as an over-romanticized lifetime way-station seems very much the same as in the previous generation. (A symbolically unifying element here is the old horsehair sofa which continues as the seat of courtship in its varying modes which, somehow, always seem to yield the same results.) Robert and Richard, who personify the pragmatic man who intends to get ahead in the world and the idealistic dreamer respectively, are the opposite sides of a coin. The suitors of this second Mary ("...the perfect Gibson type--in dress and hair and figure")⁷⁵ appeal to different sides of the girl's nature which are in conflict, thus impeding her choice. When the idealist, Richard, says that "...commonplace things...don't

⁷³Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 12.

matter,"⁷⁶ Mary, her female pragmatism aroused, declares:
"But I believe they do matter. I wonder which matters the most?"⁷⁷ When she chides her down-to-earth admirer, Robert, for being too materialistic, he doesn't understand, and this too frustrates her:

MARY You don't think much about--

ROBERT About what?

MARY Oh, about things that aren't just things.

ROBERT What?

MARY You see, you don't even know what I'm talking about.⁷⁸

He does understand, however, how to reach her, and he promises to "give you anything on earth and the moon and the stars thrown in. Honest, Mary, no man ever loved a girl the way I love you. And I'll never change. That's the point."⁷⁹ It is this last that sways Mary. As did her mother (and her mother's mother's mother before her), she will marry on the basis that this love will last, presumably unchanging, forever "...and we must make it the most wonderful love that was ever in the world."⁸⁰ Only in such an ambiance can the choice be justified and that "getting married is forever and ever and ever"⁸¹ be dealt with.

In 1870, William "chased his Mary till she caught him;" in 1897, Robert swept his Mary (basically no less practical than her mother) off her feet and out of his rival's arms by

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 13

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 15.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 16.

⁸¹Ibid.

promising her undying love. In 1922, when we meet Mary the Third, Robert and Mary's daughter and the granddaughter of Mary the First, the world is a different place. If, as mentioned earlier, "Nice People put the flapper on the stage where she was the youngest, greenest example of emerging womanhood,⁸²... Mary the Third was the intellectual flapper caught at the moment when she was putting her theories of freedom into practice."⁸³ It should be noted that unlike the milieu of the extremely rich and privileged with which Nice People was concerned, Mary the Third is definitely middle-class, in economics as in values. Things that Hubert Gloucester would have attributed to high spirits before Aunt Margaret made him view them in another light -- drinking, smoking, cavorting till all hours -- would have been untenable to Robert Hollister, Mary the Third's father. Of course, by 1923, many of the vices of the young and idle rich, had seeped down to the middle class and were seen as a common phenomenon.

The 1922(sic) setting is "the conventional room of conventional success,"⁸⁴ but unmistakably middle-class success. "[A] certain amount of beauty and comfort [has been] produced by money rather than individual taste."⁸⁵ The furniture, "a mixture of old and new,"⁸⁶ as are the three generations who live with it,

⁸²Adams, "Rachel Crothers, Playmaker", p. 39.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Mary the Third, p. 19.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

has the old sofa, now covered in chintz, as the link to the courting customs of the past. Our first 1920s glimpse of the first two Marys, grown old and middle-aged respectively, is also our first glimpse of the proverbial generation gap. Mother (Mary the Second) has come in from a bridge game feeling dispirited, and we see her personality as a reflective, introverted one. (Perhaps her demeanor is intended to convey what her life has done to her.) She is confronted by Granny (Mary the First) who is as sharp-tongued, alert and zestful as she was when we met her as a girl displaying a steel will in velvet casing. Commenting on Mother's air of boredom, Granny says: "When I was your age I never missed a party. Euchre was a much better game than bridge too. Much more sociable. You could talk all you wanted to, and I usually took the prize."⁸⁷ Mother's retort -- "I'll bet you did..."⁸⁸ -- gives a good sense of the ongoing conflict between the two women. The pervasive tension breaks out into what we recognize to be a never-ending argument as Granny, unrelenting, goes on to criticize her daughter's lack of control over young Mary. It is clear that Mother's permissiveness and Father's sternness ("...He's tried to put a stop to almost everything...she does...")⁸⁹ is always a bone of contention between Marys One and Two.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 20.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 51.

Granny echoes Margaret Rainsford in her diatribe against the moral laxity of the young, while Mother, at this juncture, parallels Hubert Gloucester in being the one blamed as well as in defending the particular youngster in question. Even the cataloguing of the "shocking" doings of the younger generation is reminiscent of a similar scene in Nice People. "You're certainly not bringing your children up the way I brought you up,"⁹⁰ Granny expostulates, and proceeds to catechize Mary the Third's loose ways: Gambling: "Everybody else does,"⁹¹ says Mother; smoking: Granny is amazed that Mary "hasn't set the house afire long ago,"⁹² and there is a touch of continuity slipped into this generational dispute by having Granny remark that one of the "abominable" cigarettes had burnt a hole in the famous sofa on which "all sorts of things have happened..."⁹³ petting: "...Here's Mary abusing [the sofa]. Sitting on it morning, noon and night with boys --- boys -- boys. Do you know how many boys she has sat on it with?"⁹⁴

It is the general lack of moral tone that is at issue here as it was in Nice People. "...You're getting more like everybody else -- callous -- just callous,"⁹⁵ Granny scolds Mother. "You let things slip and you're not holding up strict enough standards to your children."⁹⁶ Granny's criticisms are made more

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 20.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 21-2.

⁹³Ibid., p. 22.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁹⁶Ibid.

naturally than those of Aunt Margaret in Nice People, and the excellent dialogue once again saves them from excessive didacticism. Touches of humor help too; for instance, among the constant generational confrontations in Mary the Third, we find one between Granny and young Mary on the subject of the latter's "nakedness." She retorts to the old lady's outrage: "I think it's much better to show my back than the way you used to show your front."⁹⁷ Such badinage makes the moral we are always made conscious of more palatable and more theatrically viable. Mother's low-keyed responses to Granny's taunts are significant; "I expect you were a much better mother than I am, dear."⁹⁸ She seems defeated and even uninterested in guiding her children (there is a son too) as Granny directs, but as the act progresses we realize that she is bewildered by the "quiet desperation" of her life.

A further indication of the distance in understanding between these two women is seen in their views of marriage. Granny's original attitude is unswerving: You marry as well as you can and you live with it; Mother has come to think there must be something more. When Granny says of Robert, her son-in-law: "...As men go, he's a very fine man. You're a very fortunate woman,"⁹⁹ Mother, having a sense of her own emptiness, replies: "As women go, I suppose I am."¹⁰⁰ And, when she is accused of

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 46.
⁹⁸Ibid., p. 24.
⁹⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰⁰Ibid.

not appreciating her husband who has put her into such a beautiful home, bitterness emerges: "I've spent my life appreciating Robert,"¹⁰¹ and as for the house, "...he certainly did put me in it."¹⁰² But Granny doesn't understand, and doesn't want to:

...You're a happy woman. If you're not, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. When I was your age, it was the fashion to be happy. Women loved their husbands and appreciated their blessings. Or if they didn't they didn't air it from the house-tops. ¹⁰³

Mother, representing the halfway stage between the old-fashioned way and the realization that wider horizons are possible (to say nothing of her being angry with herself for her own passivity and ineffectuality), retorts: "No-- they just lied and covered things up."¹⁰⁴ She wants better things for her daughter than "...the hateful ugliness of -- respectable -- every day life."¹⁰⁵ Granny "took"¹⁰⁶ the man she wanted; Mother "was taken"¹⁰⁷ by the one who wanted her the most. For the young Mary things will be different: "[She] won't be taken -- and she won't take... [She will have] something that comes..."¹⁰⁸ Although this exchange is couched essentially in romantic terms, its real impact is that of a feminist statement, since female submission is the underlying problem.

Into this impasse, Mary the Third makes her entrance and she is described as a prototypical flapper, both in looks and

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

attitude: "[She] is twenty -- slender and straight as a boy. She wears a slip of a frock -- which leaves her free - and she vibrates with vitality and eagerness-- rather dynamically interested in her own affairs. She pitches her hat into a chair as she comes in."¹⁰⁹ (We recognize a sister-under-the-skin, though not too far under, of Teddy Gloucester here.) This very up-to-date girl sets forth a very up-to-date idea. She, two young men who are in love with her, and another girl and her boyfriend, all propose to go away on a camping trip together where they can be free and natural and really get to know each other ("...all of us...are in love with some of the others-- and we're going to take this way of finding out-- just what kind of love it is, and what we're going to do with it...")¹¹⁰ "Free love" is implied, although Mary says: "We aren't going away just so we can sleep together. We could stay right at home and do that, let me tell you."¹¹¹ The generation gap widens as Granny's shock and dismay and Mother's consternation express themselves ("...Decent people don't do these things"),¹¹² but the confrontation between Mary and Mother after Granny leaves in a huff is more basic: It devolves on the fundamental issue of their difference in approach to the accepted structure of male-female relationships and to the proper basis for marriage itself. Mary,

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 28.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 31.

in her youthful self-assertiveness, opts for "experience-- constructive experience..."¹¹³ and tells her mother that "...you don't know what you might have been...if you'd lived with a lot of men..."¹¹⁴ She feels free to tell her parent (and this speaks very well for their well-conceived and genuinely loving mother-daughter relationship as opposed to Mother's and Granny's constant irritations with each other) that "I don't know that I could live all my life with one man-- however much I loved him..."¹¹⁵ She continues, oblivious of the irony of her words, about "...you and Father [being] satisfied with each other because you've never had anything else..."¹¹⁶ The play between Mother's silent dissatisfaction and Mary's assumption of the soundness of her parents' marriage, is one of the best, because one of the most ironic, creations of Crothers' dramatic imagination. Here are rumblings -- of the smouldering volcano of Mother's and Father's lacks toward each other's needs on the one hand, and of Mary's eagerness to "experiment" with life, whatever dangers may loom, on the other.

We don't have to look far to perceive the similarity of young Mary's two boyfriends to her mother's suitors; Crothers points it out. "Lynn is the prototype of Robert Hollister -- Hal of Richard, seen in the prologue."¹¹⁷ Just as Mary's beaux had seemed very open and uninhibited compared with Granny's, so

¹¹³Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Ibid., pp. 31-2.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 33.

the honesty and frankness of the relationships between Mary and these two young men far outstrips that of the previous generation. Their enthusiasm -- in varying degrees -- about their projected excursion into the unknown territory of "living together" is clearly meant to be seen as naive in its assumptions. Mary says:

It's so simple— so absolutely simple— merely to go off and live naturally and freely for two weeks -- doing a thing we know at the bottom of our souls is right, and knowing perfectly well the whole town is going to explode with horror. Then we'll march back again with our heads well up and prove that we're finer and more intelligent people than we were before we went away. I think it's big -- you know. ¹¹⁸

In their modern guise, Lynn and Hal have the parallel reactions to Mary's idea to those of Robert and Richard. Lynn is practical: "...What if it never was understood and accepted. It would be terribly hard on you two girls."¹¹⁹ -- shades of the double standard once again -- while Hal is grandiose: "...Wreckage of the individual doesn't count in the world's work."¹²⁰ Perhaps the most advanced aspect of this glimpse of some seemingly new relation between the sexes is that a young man, Hal in this case, can say to this Mary: "...Whatever happens...you can count on me and my love -- and above all on my friendship."¹²¹ This "no strings attached" attitude toward the proposed experiment strikes a brave new note -- although a link to the past is perpetuated when both Hal and Lynn make their individual declarations to

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 35-6.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 36.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 37.

Mary on Granny's and Mother's sofa -- but it is a note on which Crothers reneges, as will be seen.

There are differing points of view on the central theme at work here. Granny argues that morality today is no less stringent than it has always been, no matter what fads may come and go: "...Right and wrong haven't changed a bit and no amount of angling and twisting and dodging can get away from facts."¹²² Mother, who could and did compromise with her lot in life because anything else was unknown and therefore unattainable, says ruefully: "...I'm not sure [what] is my real self..."¹²³ and it is apparent she had had no means of finding out. Young Mary feels there's more -- she's certain there must be -- that always with "growth and freedom"¹²⁴ there must be a "great love that embraces everything -- that envelops and sweeps one away -- so there's no doubt about anything."¹²⁵ Since we know Mary to be sincere, it is interesting to note that the young Granny's realism that always underlay her conventionally romantic attitudes has changed course and has burst into the full flower of romanticism in her granddaughter. There is irony in this because with a more casual approach to sex in the air, the very opposite would seem to be indicated. The inherent human longing for something not only perfect but permanent is what hasn't changed and indeed, because

¹²²Ibid., p. 43.

¹²³Ibid., p. 14.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 39.

¹²⁵Ibid.

seeming more elusive, has intensified, Crothers implies; in fact, she seems to deem it irrepressible. The excessive romanticism aside, though Mary shows her modernity when, for example, she makes clear to Lynn that she would rather have him be the father of her children than anyone else,¹²⁶ but that that isn't the only factor in marrying to be considered. Her strivings are wider in scope, on one level, at least, and she senses more ultimate meanings to life, lamely describing them as "beautiful -- mystic -- far away things....,"¹²⁷ things that she has been unconsciously influenced to look for in the marital state, in the promise of a man and a woman who love each other. She never questions the possibility that this component of spiritual and intellectual longing might be more answerable by personal achievement than by love; that would be left to the understanding of a subsequent generation of women.

Robert, the father, coming home to dinner, complains about the bills and tells his wife she should be more economical, all of which serves as preamble to his comments on the state of the world, in which his generation's conservative viewpoints are well encapsulated: "The whole country's going to collapse if we don't look out -- with this reckless extravagance. Everybody's living beyond their income-- everybody. Same wild looseness there is in every direction. There's a general lowering of standards and ideals that is undermining society and civilization."¹²⁸

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 49.

One aspect of "going to the dogs" is the fast living that fast cars had begun to symbolize. For example, we see Mary and her friends a little later on mindlessly speeding on the road "to life": "...See the stars. We are going up-- up-- right into them. This is life! Go on..."¹²⁹ But Crothers does not have the courage of her characters' convictions, and her not choosing to come to grips with the problem of "experimentation" that she propounded, can be traced to her "ambivalence toward the contrived stance of the [free-thinking] young women"¹³⁰ of the flapper period. Mary and the others return from the edge of an adventure that would have ruined the reputations of both girls involved no less than did the accidental and innocent overnight escapade in Nice People, which had insured Teddy Gloucester's social disgrace only two years before. But for all Crothers' technical brilliance and theatrical savoir faire, the turnabout doesn't come off well. It is not that the reason given for the volte face, namely that Mary loves her mother too much to betray the trust that is implicit between them, is untenable in itself; rather it is that the argument propounded for the proposed experiment does not prepare us for such ground-shifting. Rather lamely, then, Mary having faked an appendicitis attack in order to save face in changing her mind, the young people return. They come to her house in the wee hours of the same morning, all reacting to

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 53.

¹³⁰Cynthia S. Matlock, "American Women Playwrights as Mediators of the 'Woman Problem,'" unpublished paper (Dept. of English, University of Pittsburgh), given at the University of Chicago, August, 1976.

the situation in accordance with their personalities; some are glad, some sorry that it didn't work out. (Lynn, the kindred spirit to Mary's father, for example, feels that much grief and pain has been avoided all around.) And now the point of the play becomes clear in a devastating scene built around a subject which, to date, had been skirted: The subject of divorce. (Divorce, it should be reasserted, was another of the great changes on the American scene in the early 1920s.)

In Nice People, the idea of acceptable divorce was mentioned but only vaguely. In Mary the Third, the "new frankness"¹³¹ already abounding in books and the theatre had taken hold, giving Crothers, for one, the chance to make her corrective comments on the upheavals taking place. Mary and Bobby (her younger brother who has come to her aid by trying to help her conceal the suitcase which would have betrayed her intention) hide themselves when they hear their parents coming, so that Mary's near-defection can be covered up. Hidden, they are privy to a harrowing scene which reveals the truth of the failure of their parents' marriage. There is irony in Mary's having told her brother that she really came back "in the same old flat way"¹³² because of their mother and father. "...They're narrow and old-fashioned, but they're good...home and family...are the most important things in the world to them. After all we're awfully lucky to have such parents.

¹³¹Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 113.

¹³²Mary the Third, p. 67.

Lots of them are running around on the loose, you know."¹³³ And then comes the confrontation in which years of control and of sloughing things off go by the board. Father, who takes on dimension for the first time in the play, remonstrates with Mother about her lack of authority over Mary. When she comes back at him with accusations of lacking control over Bobby, the response that she gets shows the double standard as new-minted seeming as ever ("...he's a boy. He's got to have experience. It wouldn't hurt him to go off on a spurt like this.")¹³⁴ And from the mutual barbs about the handling of the children, they come down to the nitty-gritty of themselves and their own relationship and life together. We are given here an honest, painful and believable dialogue between two people who have not been able to communicate for many, many years. The following exchange is a representative one:

MOTHER ...Did we have [any] years that were worth
 anything?

FATHER Are you blaming me?

MOTHER At the end of five [years] we were a failure
 -- jogging along -- letting out the worst
 side of ourselves for the other to live with.

FATHER You're saying a lot of wild things. You haven't
 had one of these spells for years.

MOTHER No -- because I've just about given up trying
 to tell the truth to you about anything.

FATHER That's so all right. You certainly are not any
 too keen about telling the truth.

MOTHER Because you can't stand it. Your nature can't
 stand the truth.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 70.

FATHER Oh don't excuse your lies and deceit and weakness by my nature.

MOTHER Don't think I wouldn't be glad to be honest -- to honestly be myself. You think I'm weak. Well, you couldn't stand my strength.

FATHER What?

MOTHER We can't speak the truth to each other. We haven't anything to speak it with.

FATHER I'm flabbergasted at you. You seem to have lost what sense you did have. You disappoint me terribly.

MOTHER Of course I do. Don't you think you disappoint me?

FATHER You haven't come along the way I thought you were going to. I can't count on you. You aren't there. Sometimes I think you aren't the woman I married at all.

MOTHER And sometimes I think you're a man I couldn't have married. Sometimes I loathe everything you think and say and do...¹³⁵

The implicit comment on the open wound of what is clearly a conventional marriage is an appalling one, and when Mary and Bobby come out of hiding after the parents have left the room, they are shattered.

The next day before the parents are confronted with all their children have overheard, they try to gloss over their quarrel and this hypocritical response devastates the youngsters even more:

MOTHER ...You don't understand...Your Father and I were only excited. I honor and respect your father above everything on earth.

¹³⁵Ibid., pp. 72-3.

FATHER Your Mother and I have had a lifetime of devotion -- with the highest ideals of married life. We didn't think we'd live to see our own children desecrate [by their wild actions] all that we've lived for.¹³⁶

What has been laid bare is very hard to face for the whole family (the parents are just as bewildered as the children) and Mary's response ("...We heard. We know. You told each other the truth. What's the good of trying to plaster it over for us?")¹³⁷ forces the reality of what has occurred to be faced. It is the children who tell their parents that they ought to get a divorce, that it is "immoral" to continue living together feeling as they do. Here the gap between the generations shows most clearly. Mary's solution is divorce, although Mother's lack of any ability to support herself would certainly stand in the way of her really making an independent life -- as indeed it would with Mary herself, who, at twenty-two, has not been brought up to be economically self-sufficient.¹³⁸ Granny's solution is to stay and utilize the ancient female ploy of game-playing, of letting a man think he's having his own way while "managing" him. Mother is caught in the middle -- "It's not marriage that is wrong but what people do with it"¹³⁹ -- and, having caught fire from the suggestion that changing her emotionally barren status quo is possible, that there's no necessity to bear "...the ugliness-- and meanness-- the cruelty and pettiness...",¹⁴⁰ she is determined to leave.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 77.

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸Matlock, p. 12.

¹³⁹Donald Koster, The Theme of Divorce in American Drama 1871-1939 (published PhD. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1942), p. 85.

¹⁴⁰Mary the Third, p. 101.

No less than Nora she wants to see what is really possible for her individually as well as for both of them collectively. Although the parents' problem is left thus ambiguous, it is clear that Father will bring Mother back (he says so and we believe him given all the circumstances) and that marriage will go on as a viable if difficult institution. Mary and Lynn, about to enter marriage (her choice has Freudian overtones in that Lynn is the boyfriend most like her father), can do so with the comforting caveat that it mustn't be "forever and ever." The broader understanding and tolerance that has occurred through the experience of the past is shown in the young people's realization that marriage must be made "honest and decent and fair -- and [that] if we have made a mistake we'll quit." ¹⁴¹ But Crothers shows her sense of irony and her understanding of human nature when she has her young couple, having comforted themselves with their "advanced" ideas, plight their troth just as did the generations before them:

MARY ...There can't be any doubt about a love as great as ours, can there, dear? =

LYNN You bet there can't.

.....

MARY ...I adore the way your hair grows at the side, dearest.

LYNN Your eyes are the most beautiful things in the world. They have in them everything I want.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 104.

MARY I love you.

LYNN I love you.

MARY And we must make it the most wonderful love
 that was ever in the world.¹⁴²

Here is aria da capo with, thus far, merely the shadow of difference. The progress of women in terms of the old and restrictive moral code is seen precisely in the changing attitudes to such taboos as divorce exemplified in varying degrees in the three Crothers plays under discussion. Again, in Nice People, it is only talked about as an alternative "if things don't work out." However, here, the ultra-rich aristocratic setting, devoid of economic problems ("independence" means inherited wealth and a private income), makes divorce just another modern and sophisticated fad to toy with. In Mary the Third, as we have seen, divorce is talked about as a real and positive solution to a bad situation, not only as a theoretical "out" of marital misery. Crothers has not come to grips with its actuality in this play either, even though a temporary separation between Mother and Father is forthcoming and we are told of the experiences of Letitia, Mary the Third's friend, a rather brittle and forlorn little flapper, whose loose ways are attributed to having had her fathers changed so often. It is in Let Us Be Gay that Crothers incorporates both adultery and divorce, coming to the conclusion that the latter is no real solution to the problems of marriage when two people really love one another.¹⁴³ Before introducing

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁴³Koster, p. 87.

the 1929 comedy, however, one or two successes contemporaneous with Mary the Third should be noted.

Jesse Lynch Williams' Why Not? (1922) -- it was his comedy Why Marry? that won the first Pulitzer Prize in 1918 -- is a satire on divorce, or, rather, on the antiquated divorce laws that make a mockery of real feelings, namely that one shouldn't have to commit adultery in order to be made free to follow one's honorable intentions. If you've made a marital mistake, undo it -- "why not?" -- and this premise is dramatized in comedic, almost farcical, fashion.

Two couples, each of whom had loved the other's mate in the past, meet after many years and, living in totally different strata of society, want to exchange partners. The tongue-in-cheek handling of the situation and the witty dialogue play up a serious motif. The spouses of each couple confess that they have never loved each other and, once this has been admitted, a way out is readied, since it is marriage not based on love which is seen as the true immorality. (In Mary the Third, Crothers makes the same point but in deadly earnest.) The two women in Why Not?, Evadne and Mary, are different types; one is rich, poetic and romantic, the other is practical, down-to-earth in her approach to life. Each is eminently more suited to the other's husband than to her own, and in the end there is an "ideal divorce"¹⁴⁴ with the child of each marriage now having

¹⁴⁴Jesse Lynch Williams, "Why Not?" The Best Plays of 1922-1923, Burns Mantle, ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923), p. 203.

four parents, in effect, since the couples remain fast friends, to the scandal of the world-at-large. Granted the farcical aspects of the play and the non-dimensional quality of the characters (there is no point in comparing the women to Crothers' as they are not fleshed out), the piece nevertheless comes to grips with the triumph of "human nature versus human institutions"¹⁴⁵ in a way that, to date, Crothers had never grappled with.

Another hit of the same season was You and I, a comedy by Philip Barry, who often got his dramatic hands on what was "in the air" even before Crothers did. A good example of this is Paris Bound (1927) his "divorce play," which antedated Crothers' Let Us Be Gay by two seasons. In 1922, however, You and I showed a different aspect of the "generation gap" than Mary the Third. Here we meet two couples comprising young parents -- Nancy and Maitland White -- their son Ricky and his fiancée, Ronny. The conflict is represented as one of choice between early settling down for love with all the responsibilities and sacrifices for a man that that entails and the deferring of family life -- again by a man -- while he gives himself over totally to the fulfillment of his dreams and ambitions. (After all, as Barry makes clear, when the "you" supersedes the "I" in a marriage, the other kind of dedication can't exist. It is evident that the man is the focal point¹⁴⁶ with this playwright, while the "woman behind him"

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁴⁶An exception to this would be made in Barry's The Philadelphia Story (1939) where the heroine, Tracy Lord, was the pivotal character.

makes things smooth and possible.)

The Whites had married young, and the father became a successful advertising executive having a family to support, and therefore had never gone abroad to study and try to fulfill his dream of becoming an artist. Now in middle age, he's beginning to feel the "might-have-been" syndrome. The son, Ricky, is on his way to Paris to study architecture at the Beaux Arts for several years, but cancels his plans because he has just engaged himself to Ronny and will therefore have to find a job and "settle down." Apparently there's no money for her to go with him, they don't want to wait for years and, in 1922, there's no thought of her getting a job for the time being. Maitland White stands for the consequences of frustration in terms of one's fulfillment. He is portrayed as a man in his forties who is restless and dissatisfied (what in later days would come to be called a "mid-life crisis ") and he attributes this feeling to his original choice. His wife, Nancy, encourages him to take a year off and try his luck at painting full-time, even though it will mean cutting back on their standard of living. For Nancy, the "you" seems to supersede the "I" with no problems; she has no ambition beyond the satisfaction of being an ideal wife, mother and companion. When Ronny, the fiancée, realizes what Ricky will be giving up by marrying her, she nobly tells him she doesn't love him enough to marry him after all, so as to goad him into pursuing his goals. In the end, it all works out

happily, of course. Money is found to send both young people to Paris where they presumably will be lucky enough to have it both ways, fulfilled love and the boy's fulfilled ambition, as the father could not. Thus there is some progress to be seen here, generationally speaking, and as Margaret Rainsford said of Teddy's set in Nice People, Ricky and Ronny are "the cream of their astonishing generation."¹⁴⁷ Unlike most of the "nice people," though, you feel that something substantive will come of Ricky's and Ronny's lives.

It is the women in You and I who come out as the stronger characters, but who show no real individual progress; love and her husband's fulfillment are the only watchwords for Ronny as they had been for Nancy, and it is clear that Barry is not concerned with them as people. Even though they have spirit, they are not achievers, and perhaps we can infer that another attitude to life lies in the future -- that Ronny's granddaughter or even daughter may be the one to approach her own destiny in a more multi-faceted way.

There can be no doubt that the increasing independence of women¹⁴⁸ gave impetus to the more open climate for divorce that the 1920s provided. In 1928 and 1929, magazines were full of articles on the subject,¹⁴⁹ and -- with the backing of such acclaimed antecedents as Barry's Paris Bound (1927) and Williams'

¹⁴⁷Philip Barry, "You and I," Best Plays of 1922-1923, p. 76.

¹⁴⁸Koster, p. 8.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 9.

Why Marry? (1917) and Why Not? (1922), to say nothing of Mitchell's The New York Idea (1906) -- Crothers presented the New York stage with a "delightful social comedy"¹⁵⁰ in Let Us Be Gay. Opening at the Little Theatre on February 21, 1929, it ushered in a change in Crothers' approach; "the sharp criticism of the double standard of morality which she uttered in A Man's World in 1909 [gave] place to the mellower philosophy of Let Us Be Gay..."¹⁵¹ Staged and directed by Crothers, as always, and with the popular Francine Larrimore in the starring role of Kitty Brown (she had made her reputation as Teddy Gloucester, the flaming "golden girl", in Nice People in 1921), Let Us Be Gay was a look at the current social scene in terms of the problems caused by infidelity -- to which divorce was the most modern answer -- presented in a manner that "proved affecting and absorbing to her feminine audience."¹⁵²

As Abrahamson has pointed out, Crothers' plays are basically set in three places: "The family home, a boarding house, a weekend house-party."¹⁵³ In the case of Let Us Be Gay, it is the house-party, and the story is that of Kitty and Bob Brown, a young couple very much in love, who divorce when he has been "momentarily" unfaithful to her and over his protests that things are "as they have always been and that, to him, as to her

¹⁵⁰Arthur Hobson Quinn (ed.), A History of the American Drama (rev. ed: New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1936), p. 250.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Gagey, p. 193.

¹⁵³Abrahamson, p. 127.

their love has been a perfect thing, untouched and untouchable."¹⁵⁴ The act of unfaithfulness, however, has ruined their marriage for Kitty, and, taking their two children, she leaves him. A few years later, after a Paris divorce¹⁵⁵ and the implication of a "gallant" career on Kitty's part, the two meet again unexpectedly at a Westchester houseparty. The hostess, Mrs. Boucicault, has invited Kitty to "vamp" the man with whom her young granddaughter, Deirdre is infatuated, and who turns out to be Bob! At Kitty's request they pretend to be strangers, and after many complications and often amusing reverberations, the young Browns decide to remarry because they really love each other, but this time on a more realistic basis.

In greater detail, Let Us Be Gay begins with a prologue in which we find a charming young California couple, Kitty and Bob Brown, breaking up. As has been said, Bob has been unfaithful to his wife ("small -- delicate -- vivid")¹⁵⁶ Although he assures her it "meant nothing," she is hurt and shaken to her core and tells him that she's taking the children and leaving him. When he protests this as "cruel and unusual punishment," and says that "you still don't know the actual honest to God truth about the man and woman business. If you did understand you'd forgive me. You'd say forget it old man, and let's go on."¹⁵⁷ What he fails to grasp is that Kitty has been brought

¹⁵⁴Rachel Crothers, 'Let Us Be Gay (New York: Samuel French, 1929), "The Story of the Play."

¹⁵⁵Paris was the fashionable place in the 1920s to obtain a "quickie", no-questions asked, divorce.

¹⁵⁶Let Us Be Gay, p. 3.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 8.

up to believe that such things can't happen in a good marriage, that her reaction -- predictably -- is that "if you're like this nothing in the world is what I thought it was. I can't believe in anything or anybody -- ever - - again."¹⁵⁸ She has painfully lost her illusions about a perfect relationship and, in her pride and outrage, will settle for nothing less. When the door bangs on the prologue there is no doubt that divorce is about to be committed.

It is now three years later and the scene shifts to the elegant Westchester mansion in which the rest of the action takes place. The modernity of the setting can be best understood by the understatement of its description: "The room has an air of great comfort and luxury and smartness -- achieved with supreme simplicity."¹⁵⁹ Clearly Crothers had kept up with the times in all respects, a factor which helped to move along her plot by means of her meticulously appropriate backgrounds. In this case, the Boucicault estate provides the elegant grounds and appointments among which the rich and privileged move easily, well served by the lower orders, and facing life's problems in an aura of luxurious well-being.

The mistress of the house is Mrs. Boucicault (familiarily known as "Bouci"), a minor comic masterpiece, and vaguely reminiscent of that other New York society lady of 1906, "Bixie" (Mrs.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 15.

Tweed Bix), in The Three of Us. Her character -- "a real achievement"¹⁶⁰ -- gives spice and humor to the play as well as a thread of generational continuity, of coming to grips with life's emotional vicissitudes (practical problems are not an issue here) and of coming through with gusto. She is described as "seventy-six -- half Victorian -- half ultra-modern -- an enormous amount of dominating personality radiating from her hardness and her insatiable thirst for life..."¹⁶¹ Her own words best encapsulate her forthright understanding of the "man-woman business" better than would a paraphrase: "...I'd like to live another fifty years -- without the bother of living -- to see this thing through. I've watched a long procession of men, women and morals through three generations. I'm seventy-six, and I don't know anything."¹⁶²

The plot turns on the pivot of the long arm of coincidence, Bob being the man Bouci's granddaughter fancies, and Kitty the young divorcée invited to distract him. (Kitty's reaction to his identity, having wrung a promise of secrecy on the subject from him, is a bit too cavalier: "I think it's all a very amusing situation myself. For goodness sake, let's be gay about it.")¹⁶³ There are several other guests invited for the weekend, and two of them being men-about town, Townley Town and Wallace Grainger, who fall for Kitty; it has been made clear from the outset that Bob is still in love with her. The varying relationships in the

¹⁶⁰Quinn, A History of the American Theatre, p. 250.

¹⁶¹Let Us Be Gay, p. 17.

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 60.

play are set forth with skill and in smart, snappy, entertaining dialogue. Here, for example, in an interchange between Bouci and Kitty:

MRS. BOUCICAULT When are you going to marry again?

KITTY Never.

MRS. BOUCICAULT What are you going to do then -- if you don't marry -- live in what we used to call -- sin?

KITTY My one little talent -- clothes -- is beginning to make money -- and when I'm paying my own bills-- men may come and men may go.

MRS. BOUCICAULT Are you implying that up to this point there haven't been any -- either coming-- or going?

KITTY Now, Boucicault, that's clumsy. I'm surprised at you.¹⁶⁴

The point of economic independence being a freeing factor from male domination is made here, but it seems to be made pro forma rather than out of conviction. And later, when Kitty rattles off: "There's something about one's own money -- making it and spending it -- that has -- I know now how a man feels-- only-- he takes it for granted -- and it's a new thrill to me,¹⁶⁵ we see it as a gesture toward being liberated on all levels, not as serious economic striving. In this walk of life, any un-attractive aspects of working for a living -- on the part of men or women -- are successfully obviated.

Under the cynical, rather world-weary guidance of Mrs. Boucicault (whose standards are still conventionally old-fashioned

¹⁶⁴Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., p. 96.

where her granddaughter is concerned) the guests fall into definite groupings. The main couple are Kitty and Bob, who it becomes increasingly evident, have felt each other's loss over the past three years. Bob seems at totally loose ends both emotionally and in career terms (we never know what he does); indeed, we know little more about him than Bouci who categorizes him as "...one of those stray dogs I get interested in...[that he] seems to be rather humble as men go -- and [that he has] a fair amount of money..."¹⁶⁶ Kitty, whose claims to having led a dissolute life don't quite ring true, harps too bitterly and too constantly on the disastrousness of the marital state to be believable. For example, when the granddaughter, Deidre's marriage to young Bruce is discussed (which her infatuation for Bob seems in danger of subverting), and the "good lines" of the "dear quaint little" local church are mentioned, Kitty interjects: "Well, at least that's something. Good lines in a church are a much better reason than most people have for getting married."¹⁶⁷ Other comments are excessively bitter -- of course, she "doth protest too much" -- excoriating marriage as a farce ("I'm not looking for anything. I know better"¹⁶⁸ or "...I used to think [marriage] was everything and found [it was] nothing"),¹⁶⁹ and others akin to these, sprinkled throughout the play, underline Crothers' point of what over-idealization of marriage can do to a woman.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., p.132.

Taboos against divorce in terms of children (and previously Crothers had only toyed with the idea vis-à-vis grown children in Mary the Third) seem no longer to be present. Of course, there is implicit mitigation, in external circumstances at least, in Let Us Be Gay, because, once more, the background of wealth obviates having to come to grips with grim realities. Kitty's small children have obviously not had their schooling upset nor any changes made in their material welfare; on this particular weekend they are cozily "in town" with "Nanny." Once more, the reality of the children is glossed over, nor would Crothers really deal with a child's unhappiness until she came to create Blossom Trexel in Susan and God. Taboos against divorce in terms of societal acceptance are also shown to have changed. Crothers has Bouci say:

I always knew my husband wasn't faithful to me, but I lived in hell with him for fifty years because divorce wasn't respectable. My only daughter had three divorces -- which I was tickled to death to see her get -- and here's my grandchild in the middle of this modern moral revolution and I'm helpless -- can't do a thing for her.¹⁷⁰

Several things are encompassed in this statement: That divorce is acceptable, even, on occasion, desirable; that it is not necessarily infidelity but incompatibility that should be the grounds for divorce; that the "modern moral revolution" has already incorporated the phenomenon of divorce -- it is the next changes that aren't yet clear.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., p. 32.

Kitty is the "heroine of spirit" in Let Us Be Gay, and she is the focal point of several flirtations at the houseparty before she and Bob reconcile. The men, other than Bob, seem mature versions of what the young bloods in Nice People might have grown up to be. Bob himself, beside being described in the cast of characters as "tall, refined and handsome," is an unknown quantity as are so many of Crothers' "heroes" to date, with the exception of the comparatively sympathetic Tom Herford in He and She. Townley Town -- "...forty -- tall, plain and charming -- not very vivid -- not very weak-- indestructible in his inscrutable agreeableness..."¹⁷¹ is well named, and his man-about-town world-weariness is a good foil for both Kitty's aliveness and Bob's inherent desirability as a husband. Later in the play on her moonlit bedroom balcony when Kitty is accepting dinner-in-town invitations with the implications of "gay affairs" to follow, Townley, for one, reluctantly leaves after kissing her and telling her he's "mad about her;" nevertheless, we are convinced the avowal is no less trivial on his side than the receiving of it is on hers. Wallace Grainger -- "...about forty. A man with a great deal of manners -- the perfection of which seems to be trying to make up for lost enthusiasms..."¹⁷² is the elegant Madge's enervated lover. He had been "poetically inspired" anew by Kitty but has even dimmer hopes than Townley to succeed with her, and, since Madge is both omnipresent and

¹⁷¹Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁷²Ibid., p. 42.

possessive, he is not presented as being too serious in trying to bring off the conquest himself. The dinner date Grainger makes with Kitty for "tomorrow night" in New York is seen as certain of abrogation by either or both of them. (His "appearance" under her balcony unconsciously sums up his ineffectuality; he is "not seen in the darkness.")¹⁷³ Bob's masculinity, his caring and desire for Kitty as well as the reiteration of what they once had had together, is thrown into stronger and more sympathetic relief by the evident deficiencies of the others. He being superior to the other men portrayed, the reconciliation with Kitty at the end is given plausibility.

The other male-female relationships in the play are worth looking at. Mrs. Boucicault discusses her long-dead husband with a mixture of gallows-humor, undermining and just plain dislike. Commenting on a necklace she wears, Kitty asks where it came from:

MRS. BOUCICAULT A pawn shop probably. It can't be worth much.

KITTY Why not?

MRS. BOUCICAULT Because I know who gave it to me.

KITTY Who did?

MRS. BOUCICAULT My late husband...¹⁷⁴

As mentioned before, she regrets that divorce wasn't comme il faut in her day.

¹⁷³Ibid., p. 134.
¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 81.

Madge Livingston and Wallace Grainger are not-so-young lovers who are an interesting combination of modernity and a certain hypocritical respectability. Although their affair is clearly open and of long-standing (they go about as a couple, and, since Madge's husband is spoken of as being alive, obviously no divorce has taken place), Madge needs to rationalize it as self-sacrificial. We never know why their situation is as it is, and she is very pained at anyone's intimating anything more between Wallace and herself than that of poetic inspiration and "slavish devotion."¹⁷⁵ Mrs. Boucicault, who brooks no nonsense, tells Madge that she is fooling herself if she doesn't recognize Wallace as a failure (what Madge calls an "exquisite spirit", Bouci calls a "burned out" one)¹⁷⁶ and proceeds to inform her that it is she who has "helped to burn him out."¹⁷⁷ Madge, stung, grandly refers to the "tragedy" of her life, but Mrs. Boucicault counters: "I don't see much tragedy in a perfectly good husband with a bank-roll -- on one side of the fence -- and a perfectly good beau on the other."¹⁷⁸ Refusing to grant Wallace the "greatness" with which Madge invests him, she vents her cynical opinions on the subject of male fidelity: "Well-- at least he's been devoted to one woman for ten years. That's a much more unusual thing for a man to do than to write a great book. Let's give him credit for that."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁷⁶Ibid.

¹⁷⁷Ibid.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

If Madge is the overly romantic and self-deluding woman-of-the-world, Deirdre is the quintessence of the modern girl.¹⁸⁰ Bouci, her grandmother, says of her to Kitty: "She's one of those gorgeous young things that are running around loose now. Lives alone -- is alone -- father one place -- mother another -- knows everything -- everybody-- done everything -- and only twenty years old."¹⁸¹ Kitty's response is a combination of envy of and pity for Deirdre; envy for her youthful sureness and freedom to "try," pity for the inevitable rockiness she sees ahead for her.

This catalogue doesn't mean approval; when it comes to her granddaughter, Mrs. Boucicault's standards are firm: "...She's got to walk up that aisle a perfectly decent girl if I have to lock her up..."¹⁸² Deirdre and Bruce are the "young lovers" of the piece, or would be had the "...tall, dark, exotic...startingly beautiful..."¹⁸³ Deirdre (Crothers' most striking example of the modern girl to date) not developed a full-blown infatuation for Bob Brown and was not perfectly willing, even anxious, to go to bed with him. The affair never comes off, however; so far, in all Crothers' comedies, talk always stops short of action in the case of unmarried girls.

¹⁸⁰Both Madge and Deirdre in their addiction to the dernier cri in fashion of their respective types are minutely described by Crothers. For example, the worldly Madge usually appears in something "diaphanous and trailing;" the modern young Deirdre wears revealing bathing suits and smart sportswear. Both are thereby as confirmed in their characters as are the "tweedy" or the "elegantly shabby" men.

¹⁸¹Let Us Be Gay, p. 28.

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 20.

A difference is evident, though, in that the possibility exists very seriously here as it never did in Nice People or Mary the Third. The reason given for its non-occurrence, namely that Bob really loves Kitty and having found her again isn't interested in anyone else, rings much truer than did Scotty's drunken stupor which conveniently put him out of sexual circulation in Nice People or the not too credible return from flight to "new experience" on the part of Mary and her friends in Mary the Third. In these other plays, Crothers was unwilling to come to grips with issues that changing sexual mores had made realities, but was content to theorize about them. In Let Us Be Gay the realities are present, though circumspectly; Kitty -- always with the license of a divorced woman -- has had affairs, we are told, just as freely as her former husband. It would seem, then, that the double standard had finally been allayed as had the strictures on divorce, but apparently Crothers viewed this change as only a partial solution. Acknowledging that sexual freedom is not only understandable but acceptable in a woman in Kitty's position, the real point that is made is that a marriage of love ought not to be thrown over because of the transgression of one of the partners. This view is dramatized when Kitty realizes in the final confrontation with Bob, "...I've been so gay -- so -- so full of -- so empty"¹⁸⁴ -- that sex isn't the only thing that

¹⁸⁴Ibid., p. 171.

should hold a good marriage together, although the pain that infidelity can cause is certainly stressed.

The other change that is indicated in Let Us Be Gay, and it has an element of contradiction vis-à-vis Crothers' understanding of a good marriage, is that children of divorce ought to be with the parent who has not strayed. For example, when it is clear to Bob that Kitty really has had affairs with other men since their divorce, he tells her she can't keep the children. When she protests, he declares: "I gave them up because you had the things that made it right for them to be with you...the things that are right."¹⁸⁵ Still the double standard given from another angle of the male viewpoint; still the notion that a woman ought to have "finer instincts" and be better than a man is present. The problem is obviated in this case since Kitty and Bob reconcile after a scene of his importuning and her refusing. Part of the refusal is hurt, the kind of hurt that led her to make her barbed comments against marriage throughout the play ("...Three is my unlucky number. The third of June was my wedding day, today is the third of August..."),¹⁸⁶ part of it is fear of being vulnerable ("...I'm not going to give you a chance to hurt me again. It's the awfulest hurt in the world, and it would still be there, if I'd let it.")¹⁸⁷ At the very last moment, however, the full realization of her true feelings and needs overwhelms her: "Oh,

¹⁸⁵Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., p. 168.

Bob, I love you so. Take me back."¹⁸⁸ Apart from love, what comes through very clearly is the implicit statement that marriage is still woman's real role and vocation despite all the changes.

There is a lot of excellent dialogue and repartée throughout the piece. Indeed, as with Nice People, there are aspects of Let Us Be Gay that are brittle enough to be reminiscent of Noël Coward, but the undertone of genuine emotion and serious intent gives Crothers' work greater depth and dimension. Such an approach is not endemic to Crothers alone. Among her most successful contemporaries was Philip Barry, whose soft and clever comedies endeared him to the same audience Crothers so pleased. Both Paris Bound and Holiday are essentially contemporaneous with Let Us Be Gay; in the former there are, in both theme and character, similarities while the female types in the latter can be compared with those in Let Us Be Gay.

Although Paris Bound (1927) was a hit of the season preceding that of the Crothers comedy, there are such startling likenesses that we could imagine Crothers to have plagiarized a bit had not the "divorce theme" been so much "in the air." A brief comparison of the two is in order, though, to do her justice, Crothers' condoning of Kitty's affairs in the circumstances shows an acceptance of the single standard -- and a principle adhered to since The Three of Us in some measure at

¹⁸⁸Ibid., p. 172.

least -- that Barry does not share. (The divorced wife in Paris Bound immediately remarries so that the question of interim affairs doesn't have to be dealt with.) "This is a story of a youthful adventure with love and marriage related by those moderately exclusive humans of the upper-middle class about whom this author writes so intimately and so understandingly. It is lightly touched with a marital problem sufficiently common to give it universal significance and sufficiently serious to bring its audience to quick attention."¹⁸⁹ This description of Paris Bound could be just as accurately applied to Let Us Be Gay; even the "country-house-near-New York"cum-wealthy-town house setting is of the same genre.

Paris Bound begins at the wedding of Mary and Jim Hutton in 1922...the same year as the wedding of Kitty and Bob Brown. It is a perfect day and a "perfect love" -- as was Bob's and Kitty's -- and among the guests are Jim's long-divorced parents who haven't seen one another in fifteen years. It seems that Jim Sr. had been unfaithful to the wife he had loved in the same way that Bob had been to Kitty, and that she had divorced him out of the same blind rage and hurt that Kitty had Bob. The essence of marriage, as Barry stated in 1927 and as Crothers reiterated in 1929, is that love should transcend the purely physical, that physical infidelity in and of itself is not reason

¹⁸⁹Burns Mantle (ed.), The Best Plays of 1927-1928 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1928), p. 254.

enough to break up the "sacredness" of marriage. "I may have committed adultery," says James Sr. to his remarried wife Helen White, "but I never committed divorce."¹⁹⁰

The young Huttons, very modern in their outlook, as they think, promise each other that they will accept the other's friends of the opposite sex without jealousy even if an affair should come of such an instance. Five years and two children later, just like Bob and Kitty only considerably richer, Mary finds out that Jim has had an affair with an old girlfriend on a trip abroad on which he went alone. She decides to divorce him in her hurt and toys with the idea of having an affair herself with a young musician she's befriended. Theories being one thing and life another, however, she finally takes her father-in-law's advice not to divorce, not even to mention to Jim that she knows about his dalliance. He manages to convince her -- it isn't too difficult -- that it is she whom he really loves and they go off happily to see their children, safely ensconced in the country, together. Here is a young couple, Barry tells us, who tacitly recognize the value of overlooking where one really loves, and therefore do not wind up "Paris bound." Since no divorce actually takes place here (the parallel with Let Us Be Gay on that level is with Jim's divorced parents), bitterness is not allowed to take root and thus the comedy has less bite

¹⁹⁰Ibid., p. 256.

than that felt in the Crothers vehicle. It should be added that both Kitty and Mary Hutton fall into the category of modern "heroines of spirit" in that it is indicated that their seeming capitulation to the realities of marital infidelity -- Kitty by resuming her marriage, Mary by avoiding the issue -- is based on the possibility of their husbands having to live with similar lapses on their parts.

Another Barry play, and a hit of the same 1928-29 season as Let Us Be Gay (Burns Mantle calls it "a companion piece to Paris Bound")¹⁹¹ was Holiday. Here, divorce was not an issue; rather it could be called a view of life in a rarefied atmosphere of wealth surpassing that of Paris Bound and certainly of any Crothers play. Into this millionaire milieu bounds a bright and charming, but poor though up-and-coming, young man of working-class origins named Johnny Case. Johnny has met and fallen in love with Julia Seton, a beautiful daughter of the high and mighty. There is much spirited and occasionally witty dialogue, especially between Johnny and Linda Seton, Julia's sister, showing them to be kindred spirits and much better suited than he and the mundane, materialistic Julia. Johnny's originality in wanting to taste and experience life while he's young -- and work "later" is understood only by Linda, a maverick in the stuffy Seton halls. It is she who is the "heroine of spirit" here, who wants

¹⁹¹Ibid., p. 120.

to break out of the empty gilded life she has led. She understands, as the conventional Julia does not, that following a star or having a dream, even if it is will-o'-the wisp, is worth pursuing; that perhaps it is more worth pursuing than anything else. Linda's eagerness to try, to see, to know different kinds of reality are spiritually reminiscent of Teddy Gloucester's attempts to come to grips with "real" life in Nice People as well as Mary's desire to "know more" in Mary the Third. Her capacity to love fiercely, her vulnerability and hunger for life and love, are reminiscent of the real Kitty whom we meet both at the beginning and the end of Let Us Be Gay, her persona of superficiality and bitchiness throughout the play having fallen away. There is a sense of independence and a desire for reality, instead of the different kinds of artificiality surrounding them, that link these heroines together. When Linda goes to join Johnny on the ship that will take him off in search of his dreams, we have good hopes of a good life for them; when Kitty and Bob reunite at the end of Let Us Be Gay, we see that the empty quality of their separate voyages has made them understand the value of what they basically have together.

The reviews of these Crothers plays of the 1920s were mixed, although generally and increasingly favorable. About Nice People, in The New York American for March 4, 1921, the eminent dramatic critic Alan Dale wrote (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) that the star, Francine Larrimore, was given all the

"fat lines" and that "Miss Crothers had arranged things so that she should be wilfully accused of naughtiness, whereas she was pure as the undriven snow..." He praised Crothers' "niceness" and commented on "her fine and preachy work," adding that "Miss Crothers evidently believes that girls never leave home, [that] they reform on the verge." Acknowledging the interest aroused at the beginning of the piece, he concluded that the plot didn't hold and that "'Love in Name Only' would have been a more appropriate title for this play."

Taking the vehicle more seriously, Louis V. De Foe in The New York World for the same date spoke of the play's characters as not being overdrawn, and that "the sadness of Miss Crothers' new play...is that it is true...The unrestrained talk, the dancing, the drinking, the smoking, the heedlessness to every delicate propriety of feminine conduct which goes on at the Gloucester apartment are unfortunately too faithful to the life that is being represented to be jocularly dismissed." And he suggests the play would have been more successful if Crothers had "allowed Theodora, her heroine, to plunge straight to the unhappiness which is the logical end of the course she pursues."

Alexander Woollcott, in The New York Times for March 4, 1921, called Nice People a "pointed and genuinely interesting play," and implied that Crothers was among those "well-bred and reasonably observant [women] of 40 or more [who have] been overheard to say: 'I simply can't think what young people are coming

to nowadays. The girls in the best families are behaving to all appearances exactly like the disreputable women in the old melodramas..." Crothers' own words on the subject, however, in an interview she gave to The New York Evening World for April 8, 1921, explained that in her opinion, the "present-day girl...goes far, but seldom too far... She enjoys the freedom she and all her sisters have always longed for." Furthermore, the playwright had great faith in her coming "'out on top....Imagine any girl letting her daughter do the things SHE used to do!'"

In The New York Evening World for May 18, 1923, Marguerite Marshall wrote: "Miss Crothers, as you know, has dramatized the modern girl -- and defended her -- in that successful Broadway comedy Mary the 3rd." She goes on to say that Crothers believes "she [the modern girl] is going to make love stronger and marriage happier because she is going to make it more honest, ridding it of the unfairnesses which used to invest it."

In The New York Times for February 18, 1923, John Corbin called Mary the Third a "bumptious flapper who sets out to reform marriage as an institution, declines upon a project of urging her parents into divorce and ends by a marriage as blindly impulsive as any marriage could be."

In a letter from "A Vassar Girl" printed in The New York Herald Tribune for March 25, 1923, we see some of the play's effect on its youthful public: "Miss Crothers sees through us

very truly; we like to seem wild, but we would really hate to be that way actually."

In The New York American for February 7, 1923, Alan Dale wrote: "She [Crothers] is really...visionary. The young idea, the old idea, the home -- that foundation of all society -- as we are told -- all are in for Crotherization ."

And the critic of The New York Sun for February 7, 1923 said that "Mary the 3rd is a very modern young woman, at least in her state of mind and in her attitude toward life..." and called this "Miss Crothers' finest play." Here she has "grappled with the marriage problem with no little power and effectiveness ...[and] it is an entertaining exposition." Crothers herself commented on the fact that mothers should try to understand their daughters better and be more open with them if past marital mistakes are to be avoided. In an interview in The New York Evening World for February 14, 1923, she said: "'Until a mother can be honest, until she is able to meet her [children] half way, she will not be able to understand the younger generation as it is today...She must put her cards on the table.'"

"Let Us Be Gay won more accolades than did the other two. In The New York Evening World for February 22, 1929, Nice People was recalled as "a merry rush of satire, cigarets[sic], parlor profanity and the new generation...All nicely shaken up..." but uneven. With Let Us Be Gay, "...we were gay for a complete and almost uninterrupted evening."

John Anderson, in The New York Evening Journal for the same date, wrote of Crothers' "superb direction," of her "slightly effervescent comedy." To this critic, "the real humor of Miss Crothers' delicate shadings lay in far slyer pieces of business, in the feline passages where the lady cats clawed each other sleekly through the mascara," as well as in the proof that "the wages of sin is boredom."

Brooks Atkinson in The New York Times for the same date called Crothers "a gallant playwright with an active, sunny mind, while Percy Hammond in The New York Herald Tribune again for that date likened the piece to Barry's Holiday and Paris Bound as "dramas of a similar genre." And Whitney Bolton in The Morning Telegraph for the same date once more called the dialogue "crisp and knowing," stating that "it would not have been possible for a man to write or stage this perky piece, for in it is poured the deepest essence of feminine felinity."

"Most of the sex plays of the twenties were not concerned with such potentially serious matters as illegitimacy and prostitution but rather with changes in manners and morals as they affected the family, the Younger Generation, the new woman, the gigolo, infidelity, divorce. These became the recurrent motifs in a thousand permutations."¹⁹² This general assessment could almost have been applied to Crothers alone as evinced in the

¹⁹²Gagey, p. 187.

three plays discussed in this chapter. Her particular application of the dilemma in question varied from play to play; what remained steadfast was her particular spirit. As Richard Lockridge of The New York Sun wrote of Let Us Be Gay:¹⁹³

Always it is delightful, fresh, unmaudlin...Let us be gay, says the author with gentle gayety; let us be gallant. If our dreams are shattered, perhaps they can be mended so that they are almost as good as new. And who are we to expect the impossible?

¹⁹³Undated but clearly around the play's opening date in February of 1929.

CHAPTER 6

Three Plays of the Nineteen-Thirties

In his "chronicling of a decade" (1929-1939),¹ Frederick Lewis Allen, the eminent social historian demonstrates how, after the racy promise of the '20s, America and the world gave way to economic depression and the "shadow of war."² He traces the collapse of the prosperity of the post-war era and of the economy, leading to the great Depression and its aftermath. It was a decade of unsettling events, ranging from the notorious Lindbergh case to such recovery measures as the New Deal which provided new hope for people who had lost control over their lives. It was an era of greater democratization, too, in many areas such as sports, as well as in the betterment of working conditions³ for those who still had jobs. The assumption of America's unbounded promise, however, that ambition and hard work would undoubtedly lead to success,⁴ had been shaken by the collapse of the economic system. It was a different America that emerged from the struggles of the 1930s and the later experiences of the Second World War.

¹Frederick Lewis Allen, Since Yesterday (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), p. xi.

²Ibid., p. ix.

³Ibid., p. 139.

⁴Ibid., p. 125.

Although there were writers in the '30s who made a great impact on American literature and theatre with works of social consciousness -- such as, John Steinbeck with his Grapes of Wrath, Jack Kirkland with his adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road,⁵ and John Howard Lawson with his plays -- many others wrote as if the events of the 1930s had actually never occurred. Indeed, "many successful practitioners of the craft of writing to sell were quite untouched by [them],"⁶ Rachel Crothers may be counted among the latter, although in her "escapist" comedies of this era she might be said to be dealing, in her fashion, with the ongoing verities of the human heart rather than with the political or sociological events of the day. Conversely, in the 1920s, as has been demonstrated, she was more caught up, dramatically speaking, in the climate of social change.

On March 5, 1931, As Husbands Go, a comedy written and directed by Rachel Crothers, opened at the John Golden Theatre in New York City. A comedy, yes, but, as always with this playwright, a serious one with "some pleasantly subtle propaganda against the more disturbing fads and habits of the day."⁷ In the play, she presents Lucile Lingard, "the wife who falls in love during a trip abroad and returns to a devoted husband who, 'as husbands go,' is one of the best and wisest and most thoughtful

⁵Ibid., p. 204.

⁶Ibid., p. 203.

⁷Richard Dana Skinner, Review of "As Husbands Go," Commonweal (March 18, 1931), pp. 552-3.

to be found in many wide acres."⁸ After much sturm und drang, she decides to remain with him, and the play comes to a bitter-sweet, conventionally happy conclusion.

In the 1920s, Crothers had dealt with the new problems of the flapper and the "anything goes" attitude of the post-war era, with the serious issue of divorce as it relates to a bad marriage and the family, and with the realities of divorce and adultery. In the 1930s, she wrote a series of drawing-room comedies set in a background of wealth and ease. The chic backgrounds are important; the clothes, as always, are elegant and dernier cri, indicating both the standards and the preoccupations of their wearers, while the impeccable décors forward the plot, setting Paris and Dubuque, Iowa in atmospheric contradistinction to one another. Once again, Crothers demonstrates an uncanny instinct for the "in" thing in the subject matter.

As Husbands Go came at the time, in 1931, "when American matrons from the Middle West were making frequent pilgrimages to Europe,"⁹ and the contrast between European sophistication and American provinciality is embodied by Crothers in the personalities and approach of European admirers, and the reactions of the American ladies. In a play like Let Us Be Gay, Paris, divorces and affairs are discussed as having safely occurred in the past; in As Husbands Go, Europe with its "other" views of

⁸Ibid.

⁹Gagey, p. 194.

morality is faced head-on. For since the 1920s, cocktail party chatter had had it that "...America was such a standardized machine ridden and convention ridden place that people with brains and taste naturally preferred the free atmosphere of Europe." ¹⁰

Lucile Lingard -- "...thirty-five -- a very beautiful woman -- slender and delicately lovely...looking extremely smart and distinguished"¹¹ -- the adored and indulged wife of a Dubuque, Iowa businessman, together with her rich widowed friend Emmie Sykes -- "forty-five and very young indeed -- pretty in a round eyed baby sort of way...wearing her new finery"¹² -- has been travelling in Europe. They have been thoroughly enjoying themselves in the company of two attentive swains: The young writer, Ronald Derbyshire -- "...twenty-nine -- a tall, good-looking Englishman -- a writer with one successful novel to his credit ...shy -- sensitive -- impressionable and full of ideals"¹³ -- and the overly-Continentalized Hippolitus Lomi, familiarly known as "Hippie" -- "...small -- dark -- rather Latin in effect -- a mixture of European...backgrounds -- a suave old boy having lived through everything and everybody who has come his way -- and now looking for the next..."¹⁴

¹⁰Allen, Since Yesterday, p. 201.

¹¹Rachel Crothers, As Husbands Go (New York: Samuel French, 1931), p. 3.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

Crothers' "ability to use an old situation in a new way"¹⁵ and her "customary shrewdness"¹⁶ is evident in As Husbands Go. Emmie brings Hippie home to Iowa with her and gradually accustoms her circle, and especially her young daughter, Peggy, to the realization that he isn't just out for her money and that there is happiness ahead for them. Lucile on the other hand, like Teddy Gloucester and Mary the Third "believes in the right to act as she pleases,"¹⁷ but has a problem of conscience because she knows how much her husband loves her; "Charles is so good,"¹⁸ she tells Ronald. Somehow, subconsciously at least, she believes that her feeling for Ronald is based on infatuation and the thrill of novelty rather than love.

There is skillful dialogue, humor and not a little irony present after Ronald follows Lucile to Dubuque to "claim" her. She has been unable to bring herself to tell Charles that she intends to leave him and to "fulfill herself." Present underneath is the feeling that she doesn't really want to change her life, and it is explained that it is Emmie in whom Ronald, like Hippie, is interested. In a rather original scene, the husband, Charles, makes Ronald thoroughly ashamed of his scheming by making it clear that he, Charles, loves Lucile too much ever to stand in the way of her happiness: "...If she finds somebody she wants more than she does me -- I want her to have him."¹⁹

¹⁵Quinn, A History of the American Drama (rev. ed. 1936), p. 250.

¹⁶Gagey, p. 194.

¹⁷Abrahamson, p. 114.

¹⁸As Husbands Go, p. 23.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 126.

Ronald leaves, and Lucile, wanting to unburden herself (she remains self-involved to the end in contrast to her selfless husband), is gently deterred from confessing about her intended elopement. This, Charles does with love and understanding. He leaves her with nothing to regret, and her closing line of the play -- "Hold me-- close!"²⁰ indicates her appreciation of his love and her hope for a better future relationship.

If Let Us Be Gay "reveals even a broader sympathy with the man's point of view in the relationship of marriage than was expressed in He and She,"²¹ this is even more the case in As Husbands Go. Charles Lingard is an improvement over the not-unsympathetic Tom Herford in He and She. It is he, the husband, rather than the wife, who is the one capable of love and self-sacrifice, a phenomenon which occurs again in a later Crothers' play, Susan and God. In choosing a man as the one who is more emotionally giving, Crothers is corroborating her theory, cited in an earlier chapter, that men and women are more alike than different, that devotion is not confined to a woman because of the rôle in life traditionally assigned her. It is the man, too, who has a greater understanding of what underlies the need to travel, to "get away." The following interchange shows this clearly:

CHARLES It's the experience of a man's soul that
 makes a country for him. Isn't it, Emmie?

²⁰Ibid., p. 158.

²¹Quinn, Representative American Plays, p. 895.

EMMIE Oh -- you're just making that up, Charlie.

HIPPIE It is the experience of a man's soul that makes everything for him -- is it not?

CHARLES And if a man sees purple mists in his back yard -- need he travel into the unknown for his soul's sake?

LUCILE It depends upon what his soul demands.

EMMIE Absolutely.

LUCILE You prefer home made things, Charles.

CHARLES Perhaps there's something wrong with me. Perhaps I like what I have too well.²²

The idle, peregrinating American woman depicted is the one who travels to fill some emptiness, to create some aura, some excitement, in her life at the expense, both financially and emotionally, of her generous spouse. Such a concept of female freedom is unthinkable to a European. In the prologue, which takes place in Paris, Emmie says to Hippie: "...That's the worst of coming to Europe-- you have to go home again."²³ He answers:

Poor Europe! It is time for the American woman to go home again. You make us so gay with your pilgrimage to us -- and then you set sail and leave us désolé. Great fleets of you going back to your patient business men! It is so strange that they let you come. If as many women went out of Europe every year and left their men -- there would not be any men for them to come back to...²⁴

Thus is summarized the essential difference between male-female relationships in Europe and those in America.

²²As Husbands Go, p. 63.

²³Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴Ibid.

The male-female relationships in this play are a veritable garden variety. The cocoon of Charles' all-accepting love for Lucile is a paradigm for all the other situations. There is Lucile's and Ronald's romantic infatuation with each other, aided and abetted by Paris cafés and twilights, as well as by the sense of a fleeting rather than of a permanent relationship. Ronald, Lucile's junior by at least ten years, says he wants her to leave her husband and marry him, but somehow there is always the feeling that this will never happen. The autumnal romance between the high-spirited Emmie and the slightly world-weary Hippie comes off non-farcically and ends in a not unrealistic coming together. As Hippie explains to Emmie's hostile young daughter, Peggy, when she accuses him of wanting to marry her mother for her money: "...I have experienced a wide enough variety of life to find a secure and peaceful existence with your mother the greatest novelty of all -- and a perfect finish ...it is because I have lived so much that I know I am deeply fond of her. If I were not -- all the money in the world would not make her desirable to me..."²⁵ Crothers has an interesting way of making her characters have the virtues of their faults. Finally, there is the thorough-going American and "modern" young romance between Peggy and Jake, a teacher of high school Greek, whose poverty and lack of polished manners make Emmie dislike him at first, but whose core of wholesomeness eventually

²⁵Ibid., pp. 101-2.

shines through. We know that he'll make a first-rate husband for the outspoken and spirited Peggy.

Male relationships -- admiration and fellow feeling. -- are dealt with in As Husbands Go for the first and only time in Crothers' work. She brings off the difficult task of making believable Charles' and Ronald's liking and admiration for each other, so that Lucile's and Ronald's unsuitable elopement can, by means of the two men's tacit understanding, be aborted. Charles is that anomaly of the era, a wealthy American businessman who is not a Babbitt, but who likes poetry and beauty, and, aware of his own feelings, has the capacity to bring into focus and harmony his love for his wife and his willingness to acquiesce to her needs. Charles is that rarity of either sex, someone who is capable of really loving another selflessly. In the scene where the two men get drunk together after a day of fishing and talk of Lucile's being in love with "someone else," Ronald says sincerely: "I like you better than any man I ever saw in my life -- or ever hope to see."²⁶ Charles returns the compliment, calling Ronnie "a man's man as well as a woman's man."²⁷ The appreciation and liking for each other has come about by means of their oblique conversation about Lucile in particular and about male-female relations in general. Charles says: "The more you keep on telling a woman she's the most wonderful thing in the world -- the more you believe it yourself."²⁸ The inherent irony in the situation is very well brought out in this scene

²⁶Ibid., p. 130.

²⁷Ibid., p. 121.

²⁸Ibid., p. 129.

helped along by crisp dialogue and by the scene not seeming overly contrived. Perhaps the essential difference in the respective capacities for love in these two men, as well as in the generosity of their appraisals, can be summed up in the following exchanges:

CHARLES I love her. I don't want a woman just because she happens to be married to me -- to miss what would fill out life for her.

RONALD But if she hasn't told you anything -- why not let it alone? Why dig anything up?

CHARLES I don't love her that way. If she finds somebody she wants more than she does me -- I want her to have him.²⁹

And:

CHARLES ...You mustn't disappoint Lucile. She's a marvelous dancer.

RONALD Yes -- but not quite so marvelous as she thinks she is...³⁰

Charles and Hippie, who don't have any special relationship, can be said to be the real men of the world in this play, particularly in their understanding and liking of women. Both are aware of what Charles means when he speaks of "that complex mixed up thing we call a woman's nature,"³¹ and both are sensitive to the fact that "responsiveness -- [is] what a woman wants."³² Charles represents the magnanimous American male at his best, while Hippie representing old-world charm sees his mode of loving

²⁹Ibid., p. 126.

³⁰Ibid., p. 127.

³¹Ibid., p. 121.

³²Ibid., p. 122.

over, after a long and varied Casanova-like career. Both men believe they understand women and women's needs but in their own ways; they are prepared to give the stage to the woman of their choice, when necessary. This is an unconventional approach in an ongoing male-dominated society, but to Crothers, the individual, not the sex, is the issue.

The women's attitudes toward one another are more conventional. Lucile and Emmie are friends, but a man would be more important than their friendship. There is strong indication during the European tour that either would have gone off with an admirer, other things being equal, leaving the other. Travelling together is a matter of convenience, providing a semblance of respectability and safety. The freer atmosphere of the Continent regarding "amours" is apparent to them, and, as Americans, they are both disturbed and titillated by it. In bringing these attitudes out into the open, the two women discover much about themselves. Emmie tells Lucile in Paris: "You're flattered to death that a man does want you to be bad. You bet I am..."³³ Lucile, whose beauty, singing voice and general esprit have all begun to make her feel that perhaps she has been wasted on what she believes is a conventional man and a conventional marriage, still does not consummate the affair with Ronald in Paris. Inhibition, rather than affection for her husband or loyalty to her marriage vows, appears to be the reason. She decides, at

³³Ibid., p. 19.

Ronnie's urging, to go home and tell her husband "directly and honestly. I know I owe it to life to take care of this. I owe it to you [Ronnie]-- I owe it to myself -- I owe it to him -- to be strong -- and honest." ³⁴ One of Ronald's "selling" points, that Lucile ought to have a "chance" in life to express herself is ironical in that Charles would be the first to agree. If she had really wanted or had the necessary talent for a singing career, he would have been most supportive. Nevertheless, despite her mistaken perceptions of him, Lucile is saddened at the prospect of telling Charles about her decision because she is aware of the pain it will cause him.

Emmie, in a different position than Lucile, is tired of her widowhood and loneliness: "...I'm darned sick and tired of just being Peggy's mother..." ³⁵ She's thrilled that Hippie wants her: "...He sees things in me. Things I'd forgotten I had -- have come out..." ³⁶ The liberating influence of Europe -- or the inhibiting one of America -- is stated by Emmie with heartfelt intensity: "...Hippie says I have great individuality of my own -- and real allure. And I have -- too. I can feel it myself -- over here. And I can also feel it freezing up like that -- the minute I get off the boat." ³⁷ Emmie is the realist: "...You can't expect men to be thinking about you every minute -- when you're not around. You're lucky if they think of you when you're with 'em," ³⁸ while Lucile is the egocentric romantic.

³⁴Ibid., p. 23.

³⁵Ibid., p. 19.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., p. 148.

Both women, in capitulating to the spell of Paris, find themselves in an atmosphere in which they recognize their hitherto undefined longings and make an effort to understand and come to terms with them.

Children, as always in Crothers, play a secondary and comparatively awkward role. In this play, Peggy Sykes, Emmie's daughter, is nineteen, a grown young woman capable of making her own decisions. Wilbur Lingard is a nephew newly arrived at the house. Lucile and Charles Lingard's marriage has been childless, more to his sorrow than hers; as has been established, he is the more tender and giving of the two. She observes: "...That's the one thing you've never forgiven me -- not giving you a son -- isn't it?"³⁹ About this she shows no signs of regret. Her recent absence abroad, the latest of many, has left Charles lonely and he has brought his dead brother's twelve-year-old son, Wilbur, to live with them "temporarily" caring for him with all the sensitivity of which his generous nature is capable. When Lucile is greeted with this fait accompli she is resentful, but she soon realizes that the boy has been good for Charles (characteristically, she's oblivious of the boy's needs) and that he will be a comfort to her husband when she leaves him for Ronnie. As always, her motives are self-centered, and we see in her behavior the bud that was to flower in that full-blown egotist, Susan Trexel, in Susan and God. At the end of the play, and only then,

³⁹Ibid., p. 73.

when the marriage survives strictly on the basis of Charles' tact and love, does Lucile, by embracing Wilbur for the first time, tacitly acknowledge that they are now complete as a family.

The other "child" in As Husbands Go is Peggy Sykes. Independent, outspoken, and with a mind of her own, there is a tender side to Peggy unknown to her wealthy, satisfaction-seeking mother. When we first meet Peggy at the Lingards where Charles is overseeing the arrangements for the eagerly-awaited homecoming, it is to him, the family friend, that she displays trust, affection and filial disposition. When she asks Charles what he thinks of Jake, her beau, wondering how her mother will feel about his being a poor high-school teacher, "and you [do] think all there is of him is just right for me -- don't you?"⁴⁰ the older man responds with characteristic quietly-wise humor: "I wouldn't be fool enough to think...any man is right for any woman...What do you take me for?"⁴¹ And Peggy affectionately answers: "A peach. Just a peach!"⁴²

In her bright, sassy way, Peggy is reminiscent of the flappers of the 1920s, except that she isn't trying to prove anything. What they had fought for in terms of greater freedom, she takes for granted, as her uninhibited remarks show. "...If I think Jake's a work of art, what the hell does it matter what anybody else thinks?"⁴³ Or, on another level: "[Do] you think

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 34.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., p. 64.

it would have been all right for them [Lucile and Ronnie] to have an affair right under Charlie's nose so long as they didn't let him find it out?"⁴⁴ What she wants is to settle down with the man she has chosen.

Crothers' approach reflects changes in mores. Divorce is no longer an issue in As Husbands Go. Like the flap of the flapper, so recently manifested, the excitement is over, and the contemplated divorce between Lucile and Charles is perceived as run of the mill. Such a solution for a failed marriage, such as Mother's and Father's in Mary the Third, is no longer startling. Love doesn't necessarily overcome divorce as in Let Us Be Gay. Divorce, as an alternative, is possible and thus more subtle aspects may be revealed, along with attendant ironies. Charles speaking of Emmie's problems with Hippie, is inadvertently commenting on Lucile's involvement. Unanticipated, too, is Ronnie's liking and respect for the man whom he wants to deprive of his wife.

Economic independence, having to earn a living, is not an issue for the women in this play any more than it was in Let Us Be Gay. In that comedy, Kitty Brown wanted to make an effort to be self-sufficient by developing a dress-designing business. Lucile Lingard is no more interested in being independent than in really leaving Charles and the comfort and security he provides, financially and emotionally. Emmie, as a rich widow, is independently

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 141.

wealthy enough to "buy" her happiness with Hippie -- which is the only kind of happiness that concerns her, while Peggy, as we have noted, has no personal ambition as well as no financial need. The cry for greater freedom for women by means of greater economic independence is not furthered by Crothers because of the milieu she chooses, and will continue to choose, to write about.

In As Husbands Go, the "heroine of spirit" is most clearly represented by the lively Peggy who, as a type, continues to reinforce a Crothers' concept that began with Nice People, namely that even a heroine of spirit can unblinkingly opt for a totally dependent and conventional life. As woman's freedom of choice evolves, her choice most often reverts, and the playwright seems to suggest that this should happen to the time-honored relationship of home and family and without the extra dilemma of a career. It is the choice, the having of a choice, that is important. Real freedom resides in greater frankness and outspokenness. This remains the heart of Crothers' "modern" approach to the question.

Crothers' dialogue in this play is excellent: "America's leading lady playwright manages to be smart without being sappy, funny without being flip. All of which, in this age of wise cracks, is distinctly an achievement."⁴⁵ As has been noted, dialogue was always Crothers' strong suit, and it continued to improve from the time of Bronson Howard's fulsome praise back in 1906 with The Three of Us. She can be skillfully oblique in

⁴⁵Adams, p. 40.

this exchange between Lucile and Charles in Act I when the former, ostensibly talking about Emmie, is really talking about herself:

LUCILE ...Charles -- you must be awfully sweet to her now -- kind.

CHARLES What's the matter with her?

LUCILE You don't know Emmie.

CHARLES I've only known her for twenty years.

LUCILE That's just it. You think you know her too well -- to really know her at all.

CHARLES Uh?

LUCILE You're so close to her -- you take her for granted. There's another side to Emmie -- entirely. It's the things we don't understand that are the most important. Try to understand her, Charles.

CHARLES I should have said if there's one thing in life I do understand it's Emmie.

LUCILE You see -- you think she's just what you think she is. There are all sorts of things about her that I didn't know. Depths that you'd never dream of.⁴⁶

She can be ironic, as when Charles comments to Hippie in Act I: "There's something new and shining about Lucile, isn't there? The trip's done her a lot of good -- hasn't it?"⁴⁷ She can make a two-edged point as in the following exchange:

PEGGY (To her mother) Oh -- we realize that we seem very crude and raw to you-- after your long life on the Continent of course.

⁴⁶As Husbands Go, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 55.

.....

EMMIE ...Everything is crude. I kept telling Hippie in Paris how magnificently beautiful America is -- and now that I've been showing it to him -- Well, it just is raw.

LUCILE If they'd only stop building New York and let it get old and mellow and soft and grey like Paris!

EMMIE Absolutely. And as to Chicago -- Well, it's just embarrassing.

PEGGY Look out -- Jake came from Chicago.⁴⁸

She can be incisive as Lucile says, also from Act I:

"...I felt Europe as I never have before...The things that are -- interesting and stimulating -- and satisfying are just there. It's all so effortless -- so simple. Not strained and made and self-conscious as it is over here -- it just is."⁴⁹ Equally incisively, Hippie says to Emmie: "Why do you make yourself so miserable? Why do you feel so guilty when you are happy? That is the most American thing about you."⁵⁰

Always-- she can be humorous. In Act I, when Emmie asks Peggy's boyfriend, Jake, who teaches Greek: "My daughter tells me you're a Greek -- how do you happen to be that?"⁵¹ She is especially impressive on man-woman relationships. "Miss Crothers knows what she knows very well indeed and her very presence conveys that impression,"⁵² writes one interviewer. Her presence is indelibly stamped on the characters in her plays, and it is outstanding in the world of As Husbands Go.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 10.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 56.

⁵²Adams, p. 40.

In this same 1931-32 season, other dramatic impressions were being created as well, among them Brief Moment by S.N. Behrman and The Animal Kingdom by Philip Barry, two of Crothers' most consistently successful contemporaries. Behrman, like Crothers, had his plays referred to as "peculiarly reflective of the times in which we live... [Brief Moment] commands timeliness of theme and a keen observation of the modern generation in motion."⁵³ The story, told without Crothers' perennial gentle moral, concerns a wealthy young man, Roderick Deane, who marries blues singer Abby Fane against the advice of his circle. Abby is street-smart and down-to-earth while Rod is a trifle effete and over-educated; she provides a good balance for him. Francine Larrimore played Abby (it will be remembered that she owed much of her reputation to having acted Crothers' most "flaming" heroines, Teddy in Nice People and Kitty in Let Us Be Gay) and apparently did justice to the play and to its witty and pungent dialogue.

Brief Moment is more open and the characters speak more freely than in any play Crothers had conceived to date. When Abby tells Rod about her past life, she adds: "Not that I'm a virgin or anything like that," and he answers: "Who is?"⁵⁴ There is, overall, a very modern approach to male-female relationships for 1931, untrammelled by the hesitation to deal outright

⁵³Burns Mantle (ed.), The Best Plays of 1931-1932 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1932), pp. viii-ix.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 241.

with overt sexuality that was characteristic of Crothers. Abby says to Rod: "Why do you want to marry me?...If you'd asked me to live with you I'd have said okay. Maybe you'd rather..." and Rod replies "No! I have a feeling that sort of thing is rather complicated."⁵⁵ The marriage is predictably stormy, although he admires her grip on reality which he himself lacks: "I'm unemployed spiritually,"⁵⁶ he tells her. The union breaks up, there is hurt on both sides, and then they come together again, singularly unsentimentally. "We're going to be poor and out of the limelight -- and you're going to like it," Rod informs her. "Oh, Rod, now be reasonable," Abby exhorts. "If you insist on being an idealist you might as well be a successful one..."⁵⁷ and, one feels, with a real chance for happiness this time.

The two women in the play are Abby and Kay Deane, Rod's sister, "an attractive young woman, consciously, happily alive in the spirit of the time."⁵⁸ That description is just about as well as we get to know Kay. As for Abby, she is a bit on the order of the questionable "entertainer-with-a-heart-of-gold," but as she takes her stand both on the marriage and on leaving it, she fleshes out as a "heroine of spirit" as well.

Another hit of the season was Philip Barry's The Animal Kingdom with Leslie Howard in the leading role of Tom Collier. The wealthy Tom marries Cecilia Henry, a Crothers-type society beauty of "twenty-eight, lovely of figure, lovely of face,

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 242.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 266.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 238.

beautifully cared for, beautifully presented,"⁵⁹ believing that she has the stability that he feels he lacks. The milieu, as usual in Barry, Crothers and Behrman, for that matter, bespeaks luxury, and with the exception of an occasional "stock dip" mentioned by a member of the Collier family, there is no sign of the Depression in any of these plays. Daisy, who comes back from Paris, had been Tom's love, but is now only a friend. "She's the best friend I've got," says Tom. "I believe she always will be."⁶⁰ Daisy is an artist and a bohemian and when Tom comes to her New York apartment to tell her he's marrying someone else, she first tells him that she realizes she loves him and suggests that they go to Mexico for a month together so that she can paint and they can "make a baby. It's not a life sentence,"⁶¹ she assures him when he hesitates. When he does say that he's to be married, she wonders if he shouldn't just have an affair with the girl -- after all, we're all of the "animal kingdom;" but no, Tom is "in love," Months later, Tom and Daisy, who have kept apart, rediscover each other, and he's now willing to have any relationship she wants. She agrees on friendship "with rules"⁶² since he's now married.

In most un-Crothers-like fashion, the gain is basically on the man's side in this renewed relationship; Barry, as has been noted, always wrote from the male viewpoint. Daisy, however,

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 179.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 183.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 187.

⁶²Ibid., p. 197.

realizing the rules will never hold breaks off with Tom, and not too long after, in a moment of crisis, Tom faces the fact of Cecilia's basically calculating and materialistic nature. He had invested her with qualities she had never possessed. Clearly, their relationship belonged only to the "animal kingdom" after all. He leaves her, together with his inheritance, to return to his real "wife,"⁶³ his spiritual consort and soul-mate, Daisy. The women here are a bit stereotypic; Cecilia is the frivolous and empty-headed society beauty and Daisy is the warm, all-wise and off-beat bohemian. Nevertheless, Crothers would applaud the outcome, namely an affirmation that love has to be a meeting of two sympathetic spirits in order to happily work out.

The second Crothers' hit of this decade, When Ladies Meet, was first presented at the Royale Theater in New York on October 6, 1932 under the playwright's direction. It is with this play that Crothers may be said to have most fully come into her own as the American doyenne of sophisticated comedy.⁶⁴ Burns Mantle called it "the best play of the year"⁶⁵ and cited the fact that "in this comedy Miss Crothers continues her studies of the human family as it is variously domesticated in America."⁶⁶

In this play, we have the familiar triangle of two women in love with one man, Rogers Woodruff, one, his wife, Claire, the other, his mistress, Mary Howard. Crothers had previously

⁶³Ibid., p. 207.

⁶⁴In 1932, the Megrue Prize was awarded to Crothers for this play.

⁶⁵Burns Mantle (ed.), The Best Plays of 1932-1933 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1933), p. v.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 105.

toyed with the idea of extra-marital sex, dealing with it as a possibility in Let Us Be Gay, but now she comes to grips with the reality, if romantically. It is a triangle with a difference, though, because the women are superior, highly intelligent, even gifted. Mary Howard is a well-known novelist, and Crothers, depicting a truly successful and independent career woman for the first time since A Man's World is concerned with the "price she pays." The ladies meet inadvertently, in a typical Crothers' circumstance (a weekend at an elegant country mansion) and discuss and "individually air and justify their claims of possession"⁶⁷ of a man in terms of Mary's novel which is based on this triangle. Neither is aware of the identity of the other throughout the scene and there is rich irony involved, though the situation is a bit contrived. When the truth is revealed, it is the man who is left "high and dry," the wife finally having had enough of his philandering and the mistress having seen his real character through the wife's eyes. The originality of the piece lies in this dénouement. Here, as in the earlier A Man's World, the women are the decisive ones despite the emotional cost. Their loss of respect for the man is overshadowed by the new respect and liking for each other, as well as their own internal strengthening.

Mary Howard, the heroine, and successful writer, is described as "an extremely pretty woman about thirty-two...[whose] ...clothes are smart and alluring."⁶⁸All the appurtenances of

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Rachel Crothers, When Ladies Meet (New York: Samuel French, 1932), p. 3.

ease and comfort exist around her. We find her smoking and sipping cocktails with her long-time swain and admirer, Jimmie Lee, on her balcony-overlooking-a-garden setting on West 10th Street. We are immediately plunged into a male-female relationship, the snappy and up-to-date dialogue demonstrating Crothers' ever-increasing skill, as well as her sure ear for naturalness of tone and pertinence of topicality. The following exchange exemplifies this, suggesting first that Jimmie is in love with Mary. Not only doesn't she reciprocate the feeling, but she allows herself to veer between mild exasperation and criticism.

JIMMIE ...Give me New York! A backyard in West Tenth Street is just as good as The Chestnuts in Paris. Better -- not so much trouble to get here.

MARY That's it Jimmie. You're too lazy to give me up. I'm a habit with you. Here -- take this.

JIMMIE (taking the [cocktail] glass slowly)
If I'd rather stick around you -- knowing you're not going to marry me -- than some other woman who'd give her eyebrows for me -- that's my business. N'est-ce-pas?

.....

MARY I mean a girl Jimmie -- someone younger who would be romantic about you-- and think you're wonderful. That's what you really need to make you happy.

JIMMIE To really make me sick -- you mean. What could be more nauseating than somebody around who's damn fool enough to think you're better than you are?

MARY You ought to be better than you are.

JIMMIE What's the use? You wouldn't marry me if I was -- were.

MARY You haven't a grain of ambition...I mean the way you write -- the way you ride -- the way you shoot. You don't try. You just do it. You don't live up to yourself -- what you might be.

JIMMIE ...You think I'm rotten -- and still you like me very much indeed.

MARY You deserve more than liking Jimmie.⁶⁹

Clearly Mary is fond of Jimmie, and because of his frustration, he wisely -- if testily -- responds that "liking is the greatest human relationship. It outlasts everything else."⁷⁰ There is growth in Crothers' understanding of Jimmie's blunt realism as contrasted with Mary's essential romanticism:

.....

MARY If I fell in love...

JIMMIE And the harder it hit you the more you'd hate him when it was over.

MARY But it wouldn't be over -- if it really happened.

JIMMIE It's always over. That's why I say liking's the the greatest -- why I've seen you get sick of somebody like that -- right under your nose while he's talking to you. Somebody you've been all het up about -- and all of a sudden -- bing -- you're through. The way he sits -- or his shoes -- or the way he eats his soup --⁷¹

The quasi-teasing over, Mary tells him she thinks he should be "capable of a grand passion,"⁷² that that's what everyone needs and wants. His answer is in character:

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 5.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 8.

⁷²Ibid., p. 6.

"God, I hope not...They always blow up."⁷³

Mary is in the throes of a grand passion, albeit a secret one. She is having an affair. -- although she wouldn't designate it as such -- with a married man, her publisher, Rogers Woodruff. While she won't discuss him with Jimmie, she will discuss her novel and thus her affair, in this fictionalized version of the love triangle. Jimmie manages to be iconoclastic for Mary on many levels: He criticizes the realism of her work, calling it a "manufactured situation," asserting further that a certain kind of woman "doesn't fool around with a married man."⁷⁴ Mary argues that a "great love" changes the questionability of such a relationship and redeems it, while Jimmie keeps harking back to the old reliable double standard: "If a woman's good -- she's good -- if she isn't -- she isn't."⁷⁵ Mary retorts that "there are just as many reasons and conditions for women as there are for men,"⁷⁶ but he disagrees: Men are men, is his timeworn point, and no "great love" makes a difference once they've gotten what they wanted from women.

Mary's own needs have influenced not only her writing, but her decisions. She has reached a point in her life where, despite her success, she feels lonely and frightened. "I haven't found anything," she tells Jimmie dolefully. "Except to know that I haven't got anything that really counts. Nobody belongs

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁶Ibid.

to me -- nobody whose very existence depends on me. I am completely and absolutely alone."⁷⁷ When Jimmie suggests that that is her choice -- he wants to marry her -- she responds: "No it isn't. Loneliness is something we can't help. If nothing comes that completes us -- what can we do?"⁷⁸ It is this cri de coeur, this feeling that she's missed something that has led her to the married and philandering Rogers Woodruff.

Woodruff is prototypical of a class and an age, "...forty-two -- good looking and good style -- a man of the world with the poise of success -- and an irresistible charm for women."⁷⁹ He's not really capable of love and has no intention of leaving his wife and children despite his assurance to Mary that he wants a divorce, and to marry her. Nor does Crothers oversimplify by presenting him as a thorough-going villain and seducer. He tells Claire at the end of the play: "Mary's the one and only woman I would want to marry -- if it weren't for you."⁸⁰ He's a cad for everyone to see except the infatuated Mary. Claire has always recognized this, but the playwright is clever enough to make her renounce her husband at the end, thus demonstrating how he has killed their love through her understanding of what he has done to Mary, what he has allowed Mary to believe about their future together. Before these superior women, these "ladies"

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 133.

of equally high class and breeding and their spectacular meeting are discussed, the other male-female relationship in the play should be mentioned.

Mrs. Bridget Drake is

...more than forty -- but doesn't look it. She is small -- round and rather pretty. Her crinkled blonde hair is sticking out from a very coquettish little hat -- and keeps getting in her near-sighted eyes -- which she squints as she looks at things. She is frankly made up and her clothes are extremely chic. She speaks in a quick, sputtering sort of way -- knowing as well as anyone else she isn't saying anything. ⁸¹

She is the rich widow who owns the country estate, the setting of this play. Her younger lover, Walter Manners, is a bit of a decorator and a bit of a musician, but far more a likeable gigolo. Theirs is the most overt "need" relationship of the piece; a man and a woman of disparate ages and interests staying together, she from loneliness and the need for "someone," and he from economic advantage and, a Crothers touch, evident kindness of heart. They echo somewhat the Emmie-Hippie relationship in As Husbands Go.

The male characters in When Ladies Meet are particularly interesting. Though there's not much to choose between the redoubtable Rogers and the weak Walter as males there is the redeeming figure of Jimmie who, for all his talk, is capable of real devotion. When he finds out that it's Woodruff whom Mary loves, he tells Bridget, his hostess that "...if he doesn't come

⁸¹Ibid., p. 15.

through -- I'll kill him...that's the way I love her."⁸² His genuine love for Mary is reminiscent of Charles Lingard's for Lucile, and it is interesting that in these later plays, more selflessness is shown in the men than in the heroines.⁸³ In A Man's World (1910) and He and She (1920), Frank and Ann were the ones who were expected to make sacrifices, at least for their children, although the anomalous Frank made her personal sacrifice for her principles as well; in As Husbands Go, Charles -- as has been seen -- is the one who is ready to sacrifice his love to his wife's happiness, while to a lesser degree, Jimmie Lee in When Ladies Meet (although he is the one who engineers the meeting between Mary and Claire to show Woodruff up) is generous enough to want Mary's happiness even after he realizes his suit is hopeless.

The language in this play is salty for Crothers and, for the first time, she attempts some double entendres:

BRIDGET ...We've been looking at pictures in Mc-Dougal Alley. I said 'Well -- now that we have come as far as this we might as well go all the way.'

JIMMIE You said that to Walter?

BRIDGET About the pictures -- idiot.⁸⁴

Crothers puts such little vulgarisms into the mouth of a non-"lady," Bridgie (watered-down shades of "Bouci" of Let us Be

⁸²Ibid., p. 140.

⁸³Claire Woodruff, the wife in When Ladies Meet, can be said to have been selfless in the sense of having accepted her husband's perennial peccadilloes before finally being put off him for good.

⁸⁴When Ladies Meet, p. 17.

Gay fame), but Bridget is searching, like Mary, for love, for companionship, but male companionship. Complaining about the difficulty of getting people to stay at her country house, she says: "...I could fill up the house with women easy enough of course -- but my God I'm so sick of females!"⁸⁵ Since the play makes clear that lovers, for a mature woman at least, need no longer be sub rosa, it is Bridgie who points out that the quandary is not "whether" but "where." She says:

If women do have lovers -- nice women I mean -- where do they go?...How a nice woman can sneak and lie and run around to queer places -- I honestly think the only happy women in the world are the ones who positively hate men. After all what do you get out of them but downright misery? ⁸⁶

This outspoken female speaks here just as much for the Marys of the world who see their involvements idealistically as she does for those who, like herself, have more limited and pragmatic expectations.

There are two heroines, both "ladies," and both women of spirit. What has their superiority achieved for them? For Mary, the result has been a life of independence, but loneliness -- she needs a man -- while for Claire, her marriage has been a matter of overlooking and forgiving her husband's continual deceptions. She has really loved him but she has understood that their marriage was more than a sexual thing, a point Crothers stated first in her plays of the 1920s. The women's sympathy

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 31.

⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 20-21.

with and liking for each other, as sensitive and caring people, ultimately releases them both from Woodruff. There are two aspects in the ironic scene à faire climaxing Act II when the two ladies discuss a wife-mistress situation abstractly by means of Mary's novel:

MARY My publisher says the girl is the best thing in the book. But he doesn't think the wife is real.

CLAIRE And does he think the man is well done -- that he would stick to the other woman -- after she's -- lived with him?

MARY He says it would make him love her more.

CLAIRE I suppose you've done this girl -- so well-- because you believe -- she's right. You'd do it yourself.

MARY Yes. I think love like that comes before everything. She didn't go after this man or take him away from anybody! He was just there-- and the sun itself changed. The meaning to everything was there -- in him -- for her -- and for him -- in her. What could they do? -- It came. -- It was. -- That's all.

CLAIRE You can't hold him with just yourself. I don't care how beautiful and clever and wonderful you are. He has to have something in him that will make him stick to you. Nothing else can pull a man and a woman through the ghastly job of living together...⁸⁷

During this conversation, Claire's awareness of the reality of the situation develops, and the irony lies in her not yet knowing who the man in question is. The second confrontation between Mary and Claire is direct, the entire truth having come out:

⁸⁷Ibid., pp. 116-17.

MARY ...Everything I said last night -- is true.
 It's me -- and -- that's the way it is.

CLAIRE And you think the wife ought to have the intelligence to give him up.

MARY Is that what you're going to do?

CLAIRE Is that what you expect me to do?

MARY It isn't -- just as I thought it was going to be. I thought you were quite different somehow. I don't know why I did -- but I did.

CLAIRE That hasn't anything to do with this.

MARY But it has. If you still --

CLAIRE If I still want him.

MARY Yes.

CLAIRE That has nothing to do with this.

MARY But it has everything. That is what will make all the difference in the world -- to me -- now that I've seen you.

CLAIRE The only thing of importance to you -- is how he loves you.

MARY And that's what he must tell you himself. None of us were ready last night to say what we must say. I'm sorry Jimmie did this ridiculous thing.

CLAIRE I'm not. If he hadn't, I never would have known the kind of woman you are. I never would have seen it from you...⁸⁸

Thus, the "bond of instinctive sympathy between the two women... is stronger than the tie between the philandering husband and the formerly forgiving wife [and one might add, the self-deceiving mistress] a bond which refuses to let one gentleman [sic]

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 129-30.

consciously hurt another."⁸⁹ More importantly, there is a "subtle reversion to [Crothers'] earlier plea to women [as expressed in A Man's World] to stand together, in an attempt to enforce a single standard of morality and thus wipe out any such thing as a triangle situation."⁹⁰ Until the day comes, however, when women are more emotionally independent, the triangle situation will undoubtedly always exist -- a point that seems to be implicit in When Ladies Meet.

Divorce is not a problem here, certainly not from a societal point of view any more than it was in As Husbands Go, and children are dealt with cursorily. Like Kitty's children in Let Us Be Gay who were left in town with Nanny, they are spoken of in the abstract by Claire. Enough is said of her concern and love for them, however, to make evident that they'll prevent her from being utterly alone in the world, something that neither Mary nor Bridget can look forward to. Economic independence and even success, as Mary knows, certainly aren't the answers to life's emotional problems. There is irony both in situation and outcome, and Crothers' excellent dialogue -- witty, wise, humorous, perceptive -- moves the play along to a climax that seems inevitable.

A contemporary article called this piece a "tragi-comedy,"⁹¹ and that seems a more accurate appellation than "comedy." In the

⁸⁹Koster, pp. 96-7.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 97.

⁹¹Richard Dana Skinner, Review of "When Ladies Meet," Commonweal, XVI (October 26, 1932), p. 621.

reassessing of independence as opposed to dependence, in the recognition of the primacy of emotional needs to the vast majority of women -- not only to "ordinary" women, as she had indicated in He and She -- Crothers, as Eleanor Flexner has pointed out, has come "full circle."⁹² Mary Howard can speak about truth in art, about writing "from a woman's standpoint,"⁹³ and be applauded for her vision; she can have an affair and couch it in terms of a great love; but she cannot surmount her growing loneliness. "...It's the aloneness that frightens me," she tells Woodruff. "You don't know -- you can't even guess... And into that terrible emptiness you came..."⁹⁴ Thus, for the first time in her plays, Crothers really confronts and comes to grips with such substantial matters as the only partial satisfactions of success and independence; the overriding importance of human ties and relationships, and the changes that can be brought about in life -- with irony, as in When Ladies Meet -- by the unanticipated event at the unexpected moment. Claire Woodruff had never really felt her marriage threatened by her husband's affairs, much as she disliked them; Victorian-like, she accepted them as part of a "man's life" and need. With the meeting and confrontation with Mary, however, she develops a new sense of herself and of her rival, and she sheds her husband like an outworn skin. Similarly, Mary, liking and admiring Claire, is repelled by her own self-deception as much as she is by

⁹²Flexner, p. 245.

⁹³When Ladies Meet, p. 58.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 43.

Woodruff's cowardice and dishonesty. Ultimately he "loses both women to the deep satisfaction of the women in the audience and the pained surprise of most of the men."⁹⁵ Life here has imitated art, Crothers indicates, because the women in question have behaved in real life (that is to say, in the author's conception of reality) as nobly, if differently, than as Mary had written they would in the "showdown" scene of her novel. The irony lies in the fact that the description Mary gave in her book, namely of the wife and mistress being "big enough and intelligent enough to face this -- without letting it destroy either one of them"⁹⁶ does happen in fact but with the unforeseen results of neither of them wanting the man any more. Liking and admiring each other, on some levels the women here have triumphed.

These evolved, elegant and eloquent ladies have met to some avail, and have overthrown the indignities perpetrated by the common enemy in the person of Rogers Woodruff. Mary will go on writing, Claire will make a life for herself and her children, for as the down-to-earth Bridget exclaims to Mary: "...when a strong intelligent woman at last persuades herself that a man is the thing in life she wants -- of course she's the biggest fool of all."⁹⁷ Claire and Mary will no longer be "fools" but they will be lonely, and Bridget's worldly wisdom about men has a bitter ring: "...after all -- you can't expect too much

⁹⁵Elizabeth Jordan, "Our Plays and Players," America, (November 26, 1932), p. 188.

⁹⁶When Ladies Meet, p. 110.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 144.

of them...The only real unhappiness on earth for a woman -- is losing a man...Death isn't nature's greatest mistake -- falling in love is."⁹⁸ The insoluble dilemma of the heart is stated wryly: "If we didn't have to [fall in love] -- the real misery would be cut right out of life -- but my God there wouldn't be any fun either -- so what are you going to do about it?"⁹⁹

Eleanor Flexner's observation that Mary Howard as the prototype of "the successful, popular, intelligent, and independent woman who was the ideal of the first quarter of the century [is now] obsessed with a horror of loneliness, with futility,"¹⁰⁰ is a perceptive one. A capitulation -- with reservations, of course -- to the acknowledgement of where women's fulfillment essentially lies undergirds both As Husbands Go and When Ladies Meet despite the former's foray into an "older civilization" approach to life and the latter's tempered concession to the strides made in female success and independence as well as to "modern" and "sophisticated" living.

The 1932-33 season had many excellent plays in addition to When Ladies Meet. Two plays are useful for some points of comparison with the Crothers vehicle, in their female characters at least: Dinner at Eight by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber and Biography by S.N. Behrman. Dinner at Eight, designated a

⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 145-6.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁰⁰Flexner, p. 245.

drama rather than a comedy, is an episodic play, "calling for successive changes in the locale [and thus] the continuity of story is well sustained...Playgoers trained in the ways of the motion picture and the story of frequently broken sequences, admired it greatly."¹⁰¹ There are several stories interwoven here, all touching at some point, although the characters involved are not always cognizant of it. The focus of the play -- like the Crothers' piece it is set in a wealthy New York milieu -- as well as the climax is a dinner at the home of the Oliver Jordans. This occasion throws into relief both openly and through indirection the intermingling of the various relationships, entanglements and chicaneries, personal and professional, of the preceding individual vignettes.

The women are all skillfully created and varied. Millicent Jordan is the lion-hunting society hostess reminiscent of some of Crothers' more brittle society women. "Her interest in the morning paper is confined to the news of the society page."¹⁰² Insensitivity to the needs of her husband and daughter foreshadows the character of Susan Trexel, in Susan and God. Paula Jordan, her daughter, "nineteen, modern and chic,"¹⁰³ is an up-to-date, willful and free young woman in the Crothers' mold. Paula is engaged to a correct young man she doesn't love. In addition, she has a lover, an older man who is a has-been movie star. She intends to break off with her fiancé but because of

¹⁰¹Mantle, The Best Plays of 1932-1933, p. 61.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 64.

career problems, the lover commits suicide. The curtain comes down before the girl learns of it, and we leave the play knowing that she will unwillingly and helplessly -- unlike a Crothers' "happy ending" -- marry the man to whom she is engaged and live emptily ever after. Carlotta Vance is a stock and fairly vintage femme fatale. She had been a great theatrical beauty, a breaker of marriages and of high-placed hearts and the heroine of millions, and now, in middle-age, spread and all, she's in need of funding. She is a woman who is still witty and fascinating, and it is made evident that she belongs to those for whom some rescue will always turn up. Kitty Packard, a younger, parvenue, "slightly faded wild-rose Irish type"¹⁰⁴ is a vulgarian and a social climber, but she is also a lonely, empty and neglected wife. Not having the social connections or possibilities of a Millicent Jordan, Kitty spends her days in bed playing cards, primping and waiting for visits from the doctor who is also her slightly reluctant lover. Hattie Loomis, Millicent's sister, is a down-to-earth, no-nonsense type who speaks her mind but who is always treated as a poor relation. She aids and abets this by making herself and her husband always available at the last minute for her rich sister's society "doings." Less incisively sketched are Mrs. Talbot, the philandering doctor's patient and resigned wife, and Dora, the Jordans' maid, beloved of both

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 72.

butler and chauffeur. The spectrum of female hearts and personalities presented in this drama is broad but does not include a truly independent woman, economically or otherwise; there is no representative here of the "heroine of spirit."

In S. N. Behrman's Biography, on the other hand, Marion Froude represents the independent, modern woman, par excellence. There is about her an aura of the heteira too. Originally, a small-town girl who didn't fit into a mold, she is a portrait painter who has made her own way into society, into the highest circles of international politics, and is now ensconced in a 57th Street studio in New York pondering her next step. She's thirty-five and beautiful, has always been surrounded by men, and has had many lovers. When standards of morality are discussed by an old lover turned cautious politician, "Bunny" Nolan, who's afraid he may be compromised in her upcoming autobiography, she says: "I gave up codes long ago. I'm a laissez-faire girl."¹⁰⁵ She's fascinating to and fascinated by all the men who come into her sphere, and the latest among them, the jealous young editor who wants to run her story in his magazine, is angered by her "superficiality, casualness and irresponsibility."¹⁰⁶ She counters that he oversimplifies, which is "a defect of the radical and the young,"¹⁰⁷ and decides to give him up because he's an "angry young man!" She's wise enough and experienced enough to

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

know that the two of them are too different in all important respects to have a worthwhile relationship, and that to try to change him would be, paradoxically, the end of her love for him. She will go on in her independent way and, it is implied, hope for a relationship that will better suit her "tolerant" temperament.

The other woman in the play is Slade Kinnicott, the would-be senator Bunny Nolan's fiancée. She is a modern, high-spirited girl, unsentimental, smart and snappy. A sample of her style is the following comment to Nolan about his past with Marion: "I'm dying to ask her one thing: When you made love to her in the old days did it always sound like a prepared speech on tariff[s]?"¹⁰⁸ Here is yet another contemporaneous example of the "new woman," a theme on which Crothers together with her fellow authors wrote continuing variations. There is an interesting exchange worth citing vis-à-vis these two female types. Marion's insight is like that of Mary Howard's in When Ladies Meet:

SLADE I envy you, Marion...you're independent. You're yourself. You can do anything you like.

MARION Yes, I know. But it's possible one can pay too much for independence. I'm adrift. Sometimes -- you know what seems to me the most heavenly thing-- the only thing -- for a woman? Marriage, children -- the dear boundaries of routine...

SLADE I wish we could change places, Marion. You can with me but I can't with you.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 199.

As in Crothers, we have come "full circle," on the one hand, and the luxury--and the loneliness--of choice on the other. Slade's future is unknown as we leave the play; Marion will go along doing as she pleases, because for all her tender ruminations on the joys of "boundaries," again, like Mary Howard, she has not chosen them and will not choose them because she doesn't want to be bound.

On October 7, 1937, Susan and God, "the entire production under the supervision of Miss Crothers,"¹¹⁰ opened at New York's Plymouth Theatre. The ever-faithful John Golden was the producer and what would prove to be the last dramatic hurrah of Rachel Crothers was a great success. In this, her last play of the 1930s, Crothers makes her most complete bow in the direction of the importance of a woman's choice of home and family, but with a difference. In As Husbands Go, American and European approaches to "l'amour" were compared; in When Ladies Meet, varying combinations of men and women -- husband-wife, married lover-mistress, young gigolo-older woman, would-be lover-rejecting woman, and, finally, wife-mistress -- made for often incisive commentary on the needs and often tangled motivations of modern relationships. Susan and God, a play which is more satirical¹¹¹ than any previous Crothers vehicle, deals with the espousal of a faddist cause by

¹¹⁰Rachel Crothers, Susan and God (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1938), p. 3.

¹¹¹The only exception to this was Expressing Willie (1924) which was a take-off on the new psychoanalytically inspired craze to "express" oneself.

a vain, selfish and bored woman, Susan Trexel,¹¹² which, amazingly, turns out well for the wrong reasons.

Susan is the restless, energetic wife of a gentle and charming alcoholic, Barrie Trexel, and the mother of a lonely teen-age daughter, Blossom, who travels from boarding school to camp and back again with the seasons, while her mother flits about trying to fill up her life. On her latest European jaunt, a certain Lady Wiggam converts Susan to a "new idea" of God and self-improvement. The idea is based on the so-called "Oxford Group" led by one F.N.D. Buchman -- hence the appellation "Buchmanism" -- who thought the world needed "moral Re-Armament, the catchword for his campaign for moral and spiritual regeneration."¹¹³ Open discussion and "confession" at houseparties and "strong mysticism" were techniques and elements of this movement, "and social problems were attacked...through the personal role and by means of appeal to the wealthy and prominent rather than to the poor or humble."¹¹⁴

Susan returns home full of enthusiasm, prepared to proffer "divine guidance" to her friends at a houseparty, whether they

¹¹²According to Mrs. Margaret Riddle of Bloomington, Illinois, the character of Susan was exaggeratedly based on a Mrs. Julia Roman of that city, whom Crothers had known.

¹¹³T. Driberg, "The Mystery of Moral Rearmament. A Study of Frank Buchman and his Story," 1964, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. F.L. Cross (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 937.

¹¹⁴Joseph Fletcher, "Buchman, Frank Nathan Daniel," Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, ed. Lefferts A Loetscher (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 187.

wish it or not. No one takes her seriously"...She's just getting a big kick out of...the last thing she ran into,"¹¹⁵ and "Susan -- doesn't change her mind -- she changes her emotions,"¹¹⁶ are among the opinions expressed about her. When she exhorts them to cleanse their souls by confessing their mistakes and their real feelings to each other and they play along, she believes they've really fallen under her spell: "...Telling us is only to break down your-- will -- make you humble -- bring you near to [God]. No matter what we are -- or what we do -- if we're sorry -- really -- really and honestly want His help -- we can be made over."¹¹⁷

Unbeknownst to them all, Barrie Trexel, not having yet seen Susan since her return, and coming in upon this assemblage without being seen, overhears this and thinks Susan has changed and that there may now be a chance to save their failing marriage. Making himself known, his pent-up hopes burst forth to Susan's great dismay: "If you believe what you've just said, Susan -- I believe it too...[You have] just said something that changes the whole stinking rotten world. I never knew you, Susan."¹¹⁸ There is irony in Barrie's reaction based on the false assumption that she has changed and that the group has been taken in by what she has been saying. Susan is only embarrassed by Barrie,

¹¹⁵Susan and God, p. 15.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 33.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

and when he asks her to open their nearby country house and, together with Blossom, live there as a family for the summer on the condition that he doesn't take a drop, she gives in, ungraciously and unwillingly.

After the summer, which sees Blossom bloom into happy, teenage normalcy and companionability, and in which Barrie keeps his promise, made harder by the fact that he had unwillingly agreed to her pre-condition that they just live as "friends" -- Susan still wants the divorce. "...We thought we saw things in each other that weren't there at all."¹¹⁹ It's only after Barrie -- hurt and defeated in spirit -- has gone off and gone off the wagon -- that Susan realizes that her "work" of saving souls is not what she really wants to do, after all. "...All the things I've been running away from -- are the only ones I want now."¹²⁰ And so, after some dramatically effective anxiety and confrontation, the conventional happy ending takes place, Crothers' suggesting that Susan, Barrie and Blossom will be a happier, reconciled family now, Susan's character notwithstanding.

Within the framework of this contrived plot, some interesting questions are dealt with humorously, such as the need for goodness in the world. In addition, several of the relationships are skillfully presented. There are male-female relationships of different sorts and intensities in Susan and God. At rise of curtain, we meet Susan's friend and neighbor, Irene Burroughs.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 35.

¹²⁰Ibid., p. 70.

It is in her elegant country house that the play takes place. Irene is twice-divorced and currently having an affair with the man she hopes to marry, Michael O'Hara. She is described as "incisive -- restless-- dissatisfied and hard -- but nevertheless an extremely attractive woman."¹²¹ It is only a world-weary female who can be represented as "living in sin," however temporarily, among respectable people in a Broadway vehicle of the mid-1930s. Nor is Irene really unconventional; she has doubts that Mike respects her. He tries to assure her, but she rationalizes, protesting a bit too much, that "if it all means to you -- what it does to me -- it's right -- right -- right! I'm not apologizing to anybody. My life's my own affair..."¹²² Crothers points out that the double standard is still very much in operation when she has Mike say to Irene: "...Mind you, I don't give a hang -- I'm only thinking of you. Why don't you go away -- Europe or some place -- till just before we're married? --That would stop talk and put the whole thing on a different basis."¹²³ Obviously he does "give a hang" what people think, and is of two minds about the openness of their present situation. When Irene tells him: "I sometimes think you wish the whole thing [between us] had never happened. I sometimes think it's been only an affair to you,"¹²⁴ she's emphasizing something that even the most modern woman in a Crothers play dreads. Mary

¹²¹Ibid., p. 5.

¹²²Ibid., p. 6.

¹²³Ibid., p. 46.

¹²⁴Ibid.

Howard, it will be remembered, could only justify her affair -- which had the extra onus, of course, of being with a married man -- by seeing it as a "great love." Irene underscores her insecurity in living "liberatedly" since that confuses her basic views of morality. At the end of the play, having taken Susan's advice to put her pre-marital relationship on a more "spiritual plane" and having gone abroad for the summer as Mike had suggested, she returns to find that he, lonely and restless, has found someone else. Irene immediately blames Susan for her interference but then has the insight to say: "...I wasn't fair just now -- Susan. It wasn't anything you said that made me lose Mike. It's myself -- the way I've lived."¹²⁵ Ironically, Susan's "cause" forces, and quite inadvertently, each character to confront his or her own life.

We find each woman in this play eventually taking responsibility for her own actions, and the results of such actions. In this respect, Crothers' female characters may be said to have grown, although, as has been stated before, they seem to have regressed "professionally" with their sights no longer set on the kind of independence that had once seemed so desirable and important to Crothers. To be sure, Leonora Stubbs ("...tall, beautiful...twenty-eight...honest and unaffected in manner..."¹²⁶) a young actress who apparently had given up a promising career

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 70.

¹²⁶Ibid., pp. 6-7.

to marry Hutchins Stubbs ("Stubbie") for ease and security, does come to realize that this life of idleness is empty and ultimately unfulfilling and wants "to run -- [wants] to go back to work -- where I belong."¹²⁷ The context of the play makes evident, however, that it's not the work (the theatre, in this case) that's pulling her so much as the lack of love for her husband and the catalytic power of Clyde Rochester, an actor-friend who has long loved her and who has just left Irene's house where he, too, has been a guest. Leonora sees in the selflessness of Clyde's attitude to her (reminiscent on some level of Charles Lingard and Jimmie Lee) an intolerable comparison with her husband's selfish and petulant possessiveness, and we are not at all sure that her going "back to work" may not be synonymous with going back to Clyde.

Susan's idea of work has always been faddist, we are given to understand, and has nothing to do with independence or with needs that are other than emotional, while the lone truly independent woman of the piece -- again, not in relation to career -- Charlotte Marley, who is Crothers' representative of the "heroine of spirit," is single but not by choice. She has always loved and appreciated Barrie and, were he to choose her over Susan at the end of the play, she would be happy. Charlotte is a more whole and a more giving person than the other women (ironically, she's the only one who doesn't have a man); she is

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 50.

capable of understanding and self-scarifice and generosity as exemplified by her devotion to Barrie. He goes on a binge after he's kept his pledge to stay sober all summer and Susan still wants a divorce: "...She did the driving and we kept going -- till I'd lapped up all I had with me," Barrie recounts to Susan about Charlotte. "We landed at some little Inn and she put us up as Mr. and Mrs. Somebody -- and she stayed with me -- till I slept it off -- and today she drove three hundred miles to bring me back -- and there it is."¹²⁸

Charlotte is worth a dozen of Susan and Barrie knows it, but he loves his wayward wife. Weak as he is depicted, Barrie is yet another Crothers male capable of deep devotion. Ultimately that is the cause of Charlotte's misfortune and of Susan's grace. Barrie recognizes that Charlotte has more than "real charm." He recognizes that she has "character,"¹²⁹ which is what matters, or should matter, in a woman. Further, he recognizes that liking may be more important than love in the long run, as did Jimmie Lee, but, like that gentleman, Barrie wants love, not a sensible, though comforting, substitute. To Susan's contention that people get over "all that"¹³⁰ and grow more intelligent when they fall in love at a more mature age, he responds perceptively that "unfortunately intelligence has nothing to do with love-- at any age."¹³¹

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 71.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 59.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 60.

¹³¹Ibid.

All the women are dependent in the play both economically and emotionally with the exception of Charlotte who seems to have her own income and inner strength. The by-now conventional Crothers' milieu of wealth, servants and intense idleness and lack of purpose continues to reinforce the author's not coming to terms with the grimmer realities of economic dependence or need. A minor exception is Leonora Stubbs, as previously discussed. Relationships are the only problems on these people's minds, while the lush settings forward the plot giving the characters the maximum advantage against which to play out their desires.

The character of Susan ("...thirty-five -- a woman with so much charm that it covers most of her faults -- most of the time -- for most people. She is slender and alert and pretty -- with a very individual style and chic. Just now she is delightful in a new spring Paris creation...")¹³² is that of a superficial, clever, ruthlessly selfish, yet somehow disarming woman. "If a woman has charm she doesn't need anything else; if she doesn't, it doesn't matter much what else she has," says a woman character ruefully in James Barrie's What Every Woman Knows, and Susan wields hers like a divining rod: However murky the waters she churns up, there is always the sense of beguilement. A closer look at some points already mentioned may be in order here, devolving more closely on the character of Susan herself.

¹³²Ibid., pp. 9-10.

"...Chic, attractive, gushing...she returns from a long stay in England where she has been converted to Lady Wiggam's movement¹³³...[and] has found God in a new way."¹³⁴ With overriding enthusiasm, she assures her amused and startled friends that this new movement demands no conversion, "...you can keep right on being what you are -- An Episcopalian -- or Ethiopian -- or Catholic or Jew -- or colored or anything. It's just love -- love -- love -- for other people -- not for yourself."¹³⁵ When it's pointed out to her that her statement is no more than the golden rule, she asks what that is. The implication seems to be that the basis for her credulity is ignorance or superficial understanding. As for the movement itself, Crothers points out:

I have merely used the Oxford Group as the cult which has so strongly appealed to the kind of people to which Susan Trexel belongs. Everyone realizes, I hope, that it might be any cult, any code of ethics of conduct that Susan, or any other completely selfish person, had taken hold of, never believing for one instant that it could be applied to herself.¹³⁶

Irony is the key word. It is precisely because of the inherent unfairness of Susan's being a perennial if unworthy love object for Barrie -- to say nothing of Blossom -- and the misapprehension of her motives that causes Susan to spend the summer with her family. It is ironic that "for all her religious fervor, Susan has had no thought since her return for her unhappy, inebricated husband...and even less for her [emotionally bereft]

¹³³Similar to the Oxford Group, previously described.

¹³⁴Gagey, p. 195.

¹³⁵Susan and God, p. 12.

¹³⁶The Boston Transcript, Interview with Rachel Crothers, February 18, 1939, Part Four.

fifteen-year-old daughter, Blossom..."¹³⁷ And it is equally ironic when Barrie, overhearing her urgings to confess in order to effect change and, being "somewhat drunk, takes Susan's words about reformation seriously, and trapped by her own eloquence [she] cannot back out."¹³⁸ After the successful summer, when Barrie has remained sober and patiently continent and Blossom has been transformed into a happy girl, even the ego-centric Susan has felt some stirrings, at least, of familial harmony, has felt a touch of joy in really giving of herself where it is needed. There is continual irony in her lack of realization of that need, and it continues unabated. When Barrie asks her to cut short the week in August when she's to speak at a convention on behalf of Lady Wiggam so as to be able to be present at Blossom's birthday party, Susan can unhesitatingly say: "I've given up my entire summer -- you surely can't ask me to give up any more."¹³⁹ She is so totally self-involved that even the happiness her presence has afforded her husband and daughter, and so apparent to her, is immediately subsumed, brushed aside in her craving for wider approbation. "Don't you think it's more important," she asks Barrie, "to reach out to thousands of souls -- than it is to stay at home one more week -- with one child?"¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷Gagey, p. 195.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Susan and God, p. 63.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 62.

Although Crothers insists that "I have painstakingly endeavored to point out through Susan, that here is a woman who is called upon...to look closely into her own heart and soul [and by means of] this bit of self-analysis she is brought to the realization that she, Susan Trexel, is in dire need of divine help from within,"¹⁴¹ she weakens her message by the contrived reconciliation at the end of the play. The "happy ending," bringing the family together, and suddenly lacking in any irony, is poorly juxtaposed and therefore doesn't ring at all true. What does ring true, however, is the first-rate dialogue and repartée.

Comedy is served in Crothers' rather successful stab at social satire, directed at the Susans of the world and those they represent, to say nothing of the cultist fads that spring into being at their behest. We have to smile when Susan depicts Lady Wiggam's gathering,

...there isn't any dogma or anything hard to believe about it. That's why so many intelligent thinking people are interested in it. It's thrilling and alive and fun -- so people aren't ashamed to be good. This was the most remarkable collection of people...all sorts and kinds. I never heard so many titles -- all at once -- in my life -- and great thinkers -- you never saw so much thinking -- and some were just people...well -- there was an actor there too -- literally anybody. The Duchess of Keating said, 'This is a great experience -- coming into spiritual contact with people we never even knew existed...' ¹⁴²

When she inimitably juxtaposes lofty thoughts with frothily feminine frivolity, we find ourselves simultaneously irritated

¹⁴¹The Boston Transcript.

¹⁴²Susan and God, pp. 12-13.

and mesmerized: "Everybody [is] batting around trying to fill up this awful emptiness. It's the only thing in the world that will stop war. Oh, Irene -- I've brought you the most ravishing panties --."143

On a superficial level in which she is not required to give too much of herself, as in her friendship with Irene, for example -- Susan can function adequately. Her monumental selfishness, however, typical of those who "love" humanity because they are incapable of loving another individual, is demonstrated devastatingly in her relationship to her weak but decent husband and her pathetic daughter, and totally undermines her singular charm. Her character is revealed harshly when it is contrasted to the fineness and fairness of Charlotte who not only has been the one who helps Barrie, but who has had the decency to warn Susan of her "honorable intentions" toward him should he become free. The result of this extraordinary generosity is to remind Susan of the value of what she has and to make her want to keep it.

The daughter, Blossom, whose age and "motherlessness" recalls that other Crothers adolescent banished to boarding school because her mother was too busy, Millicent in He and She, is the most fully drawn child to appear in a Crothers play. In the earlier drama, the daughter is a rather awkwardly sketched, not too believable teenager, whose artist-mother's only flaw is her

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 15.

over-zealousness and preoccupation with her own work rather than with egocentricity or self-seeking. Indeed, Ann Herford, as we know, gives up the career chance of a lifetime in order to take more effective charge of her daughter and to guide her more personally than she had done. In Susan and God, Susan's gratuitous distancing of Blossom is only for the purpose of allowing herself to enjoy life in untrammelled fashion and to find new outlets for her energies. She rationalizes, however, that it's Barrie's alcoholism that has made it impossible for them to live together normally as a family and then we are asked to believe that one summer of living together can change all that. We see changes in parent-child relationships from earlier plays also in the more "modern" approach to family living such as Susan's telling Barrie in a sophisticated, tongue-in-cheek style about having explained the facts of life to Blossom. "I've done my entire maternal duty. When she was seven I gave her a book about the wind and the pollen and the flowers. So sweet -- and so silly."¹⁴⁴ Crothers would not have used such dialogue earlier but would have handled the matter more earnestly.

Divorce, as a fact of modern life, is once more taken as a matter of course in this play. Irene, as we know, has been twice-divorced and, as this relates to society, is none the worse for it, while Leonora Stubbs and her husband will divorce, as is made clear. Indeed, in the "wealthy set whom [Crothers]

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 60.

has written about in most of her work since 1920...domestic happiness appears to be a rarity and divorce a matter of course."¹⁴⁵ (I would take exception to the "matter of course" aspect until the works of the 1930s.) When Susan tells Blossom she will be "forced" to divorce her father (after she has practically thrown him into Charlotte's arms by rejecting him, telling him she wants to be free of him), she adds: "You'll have to accept it, Blossom -- After all -- you've had the same father and mother longer than most people have." The daughter's reply is a combination of bowing to the inevitable coupled with a forlorn hope: "Yes -- I have. Nearly every girl in school has only got one of them -- at a time. Not both together at once. And when you like both of them it mixes things up so..."¹⁴⁶ Either way the poor girl will have a problem to contend with although she doesn't yet realize it.

Susan is a manipulator par excellence and it is blind good fortune that, in the penitent frame of mind which the conclusion of the play assigns her, she emerges the victor in the sense that despite the harm she has done and the hurts she's perpetuated, she gets another chance. With a moralistic thrust that is vintage Crothers rather than vaunted Susan, the regenerated one ends on this note to Barrie: "Oh, dearest -- I don't think God is something out there -- to pray to -- I think He's here -- in us. And I don't believe He helps one bit -- till we dig and dig and

¹⁴⁵Koster, p. 104.

¹⁴⁶Susan and God, pp. 66-7.

dig -- to get the rottenness out of us. Barrie -- hold me. Oh, dear God, don't let me fall down again."¹⁴⁷

The Susan that grandiosely began with "I want to give, give, give all I can -- to all of you"¹⁴⁸ ends on a wobbly understanding of the importance of her own small bailiwick and a desire to make it work. Maybe Crothers wants to say that even the Susans of the world have deeper needs than they are capable of realizing. In any event, we are left with the distinct feeling that the ending is manufactured, that she is incapable of changing so drastically, that she knows it, and that it will all fall apart sooner rather than later.

The season of 1937-38 in which Susan and God appeared, and in which it was included in the "best plays" by the perennial Burns Mantle, was "the third year of the government's participation in show business [with] many plays [being] sponsored by the WPA Federal Theatre Project."¹⁴⁹ Some of the other hits of that season were "novelties" such as Our Town by Thornton Wilder, Shadow and Substance by Paul Vincent Carroll and Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck. The drawing-room comedy à la Susan and God was much more visible in the previous season of 1936-37. Two comedies of that season that were well received may be compared to Susan and God, namely The Women by Clare Boothe and Yes, My

¹⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 71-2.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴⁹Burns Mantle (ed.), The Best Plays of 1937-1938 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1938), p. 3.

Darling Daughter by Mark Reed. The Women is a satire as is Susan and God. Both are set in the same Park Avenue milieu and deal somewhat with divorce. Divorce is the main theme of The Women. While in the Crothers' play, it is a secondary theme. The aim of the two plays, however, is very different. The goal of The Women is narrow, "a clinical study of a more or less isolated group...in bad temper, but in good faith."¹⁵⁰ It is this narrowness of focus that primarily distinguishes this play and which makes such satirical strength as it has work. We are not as interested in the fates of the bitchy, canting, one-dimensional women of The Women -- with the possible exception of its heroine, Mary -- as we are in the more fully drawn and often suffering characters in Susan and God.

In The Women, four Park Avenue matrons in their thirties -- Nancy, Peggy, Sylvia and Edith -- are playing bridge at Mary Haines' home, and the conversation is catty and acerbic, dwelling as it does, on the enjoyment of other people's miseries and on a collectively gossipy approach to the marriages around them; "a woman's paradise is always a fool's paradise."¹⁵¹ Sylvia's gossipy manicurist has told her that Stephen, Mary's husband, has been "fooling around" with a glamorous shopgirl named Crystal Allen, and the women are delightedly clicking their tongues over "poor Mary" while she's out of the room. There is an echo of When Ladies Meet when one of the ladies (though not in Crothers' use of the word) says: "There's only one tragedy for a woman... losing her man,"¹⁵² and that is precisely what Mary, who's finer

¹⁵⁰Burns Mantle (ed.), The Best Plays of 1936-1937 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1937), p. 218.

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 223.

than the rest of her set and who really loves her husband, is prodded to do: Divorce him out of "pride." When her small daughter is to be apprised of the situation and is fresh to her brother, their English nanny advises Mary that "after all, this is a man's world...the sooner our girls are taught to accept the fact graciously...",¹⁵³ the better. Mary's mother, a "clever" wife of the old school, reinforces this attitude by taking the ancient view of overlooking and forgetting.

The double standard is again trumpeted loud and clear, and we hear the echo of Let Us Be Gay in the advice, which neither Kitty in the Crothers play nor Mary in the Boothe vehicle take. In both plays, the husbands really love their wives despite their lapses with other women, and Clare Boothe slyly has Mary's mother say that "there's nothing like a good dose of another woman to make a man appreciate his wife."¹⁵⁴ Accordingly, Mary leaves things alone until an accidental confrontation with her husband's mistress. The two women meet in a fashionable dress salon, and after that Mary has a showdown with Stephen and asks for a divorce. In this play men, who are only talked about and do not appear, are portrayed as operating on a purely animal plane in this world of the haut monde. "You can't trust any man ...that's all they want,"¹⁵⁵ it's also clear that many of these women think of themselves in the same way. "What else have we got to give?"¹⁵⁶ Many females in this play are reminiscent of types Crothers had dealt with long before. For instance, in Act II, Miss Trimmerback, Stephen's efficient, "plain," tailored secretary speaks her mind about women's independence

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 226.
¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 232.
¹⁵⁶Ibid.

making an implicit comment on its inequality with a man's, very much as did Clara in A Man's World almost thirty years before:

I wish I could get a man to foot my bills...I'm sick and tired, cooking my own breakfast, sloshing through the rain at 8 A.M., working like a dog. For what? Independence? A lot of independence you have on a woman's wages. I'd chuck it like that for a decent, or an indecent, home.

Crothers, who had stopped the battle cry for women's independence as a battle cry in her plays of the post-war era, again proves how "with it" her perceptions were of what was "in the air." In Boothe's satire, too, the satisfactions accrued by getting along on her own for a woman who is unexceptional or in less than exceptional circumstances are depicted as virtually non-existent.

As in Let Us Be Gay, Stephen and Mary are going to get a divorce pro forma, out of hurt, though they no more really want it than did Kitty and Bob. The scenes in Reno, although enlivened with laughs, are essentially depressing as the divorce mill grinds out its mechanical decrees. Divorce, in this play, is treated as the newest fad of bored society ladies who are totally spoiled and self-indulgent and who have never really come to grips with life or with themselves.

The different types of women coming to Reno make up the most illuminating and pithy aspects of the play, as well as the most amusing, and the current divorce capital is depicted mostly farcically, although sentimentality is present. The brash, boozing females are obviously meant to inspire both laughter and pity. "[There are] two kinds of women, owls and ostriches...the

feathered sisterhood...the girls who get paid and paid..."¹⁵⁷
Among these, the somewhat "heroine of spirit" is Mary, who has real feelings and her principles, and is therefore seen as a rara avis here, a finer specimen of humanity. Mary's ideas of love are very Crothers-like. Marriage should be based on the love that comes of having lived together and from a shared mutual need, and not just on the hot, bright light of sex. The children of divorce are shown hurt and emotionally deprived as they are caught in the middle. In the comparable situation in Crothers' Let Us Be Gay we never see the effects on the children. Despite Mary's inclinations, she reverts to the law of the jungle around her when she gets Stephen back a couple of years later, having trapped Crystal, now his wife, into an admission of an on-going affair. If the "modern" view of marriage (get a rich husband and hang on to him no matter what) is the rule, then the exception is exculpated in the person of the caring Mary who, again like Kitty in Let Us Be Gay, gladly takes her penitent husband back. "[I have] no pride, that's a luxury a woman in love can't afford."¹⁵⁸
The dialogue is earthier, racier and more direct than is Crothers', the clawing females are more malicious and of lesser complexity than Crothers' heroines. Nevertheless, the essentially accepting "love-will-find-a-way" approach that Crothers promulgated is to be found even in such a superficial and limited satire as The Women.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 256.

"Yes, My Darling Daughter by Mark Reed is a comedy remarkably reminiscent of Crothers on many levels, its story of three generations of women in a family seeming almost patterned after Mary the Third. Not only is the setting the kind of rambling, comfortable house in Connecticut very much the same as those Crothers wrote of in the same era, but the story deals with the generation gap that Crothers had dealt with, if somewhat differently. In this comedy, we have a sympathetic, understanding feminist mother, an erstwhile flaming (and still glowing) aunt and a straight-thinking, college bred daughter. The three represent definite points of view, namely "rebellion, license and a growing sanity toward sex."¹⁵⁹ In Mary the Third, the changing point of view of the generations had only been set forth in terms of marriage, what is to be expected of it, and how it is to be handled or withstood.

In Yes, My Darling Daughter, the mother, Ann Murray, now in her fifties, is a successful writer, as well as a successful wife and mother. She is a generation and a half younger than "Mary the First," Granny in the Crothers comedy. Right there, in terms of having a professional life, is one enormous difference with the Crothers' play; the other is that she represents that bohemian and artistic set which flowered in Greenwich Village in the decade preceding World War I.¹⁶⁰ She had loved a poet and lived with him before settling down to married respectability

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 293.

¹⁶⁰Crothers' bow to this milieu and era was made in A Man's World. Ann is of Frank Ware's generation and exceptional quality.

with Lewis Murray, a wealthy and cultivated man who knew how to handle his modern wife. She had rebelled against the restrictions of her time and had been a feminist, a suffragette and a free spirit; in other words, she had been a leader in living out her emancipated ideas. Her husband's younger sister, Connie, much married and divorced and in her thirties, represents the license of the 1920s to which the idealism and romanticism of Ann's generation had given way, but having lived sybaritically for so long, Connie has succeeded in jading her appetites and blunting her possibilities. It was the "free spirits" like Ann who managed to épater le bourgeois; Connie's multifarious relationships were part of a search for meaning. Ellen, Ann's and Lewis' twenty-two year old daughter, has very independent ideas of her own about life; she hopes to be a journalist and tells her gallivanting aunt that "personally I think a woman's a fool to try to build her happiness around a man."¹⁶¹ This proves to be "famous last words" because her own young man, Doug, shows up (he's chucked his architectural studies and is unexpectedly off on a two-year job stint in Belgium) and Ellen decides that they should go away together for the couple of remaining days before he leaves. Interestingly, it is Doug who demurs, who is concerned about "what people will think" about her. Connie, the aunt,

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 295.

gets wind of the plan and, as one who has lived loosely and now regrets it, is afraid that her niece may be starting on the same mistaken road. Therefore, she tells Ann and the whole business comes down to the latter's struggle between her past conviction of what constitutes a woman's freedom and the fact that it is her daughter who is about to take such a step.

In the mother-daughter confrontation that follows, some sound observations on the generation gap are made, and these with more depth and with more of the ring of truth about them than was the case with Crothers, although there is an underlying moral tone that is not inconsistent with that lady's ideas:

ELLEN ...About everything we've got now, that we take as a matter of course...bobbed hair... better art, poetry, votes for women, freedom of speech and sex...is due to you pioneer women.

ANN Maybe not all to our credit!

ELLEN That's what I meant...it's so ridiculous for you to start going back on yourself.

ANN At my age we know more about the world's limitations than at twenty.¹⁶²

Of course, Ann is too wise to think that she can bestow her life's experience on her daughter; she understands that Ellen must find everything out for herself. She therefore tells her daughter to do what she thinks she must (as no mother in Crothers' work could be envisioned telling), and that she, Ann, will back her

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 309.

up. (Actually this serves to resuscitate Ann's feminist spirit.)

After the escapade has taken place, the father having found out and carried on in traditionally paternal fashion, ironically it is Doug who wants to make an "honest woman" of Ellen because he loves her. Ellen rebels at this -- "...we women have considerable sense when we don't love a man. Mighty little when we do. With a man it's the opposite. If he doesn't care for a girl he's without scruples. If he does care, he is likely to develop a moral code only the angels can live up to..."¹⁶³ However, when a newspaper job she covets in Paris conveniently comes through, she decides to give in to his importuning and marry him. Ann's irrepressible comment-- "I think, when a man makes such a fuss over being seduced...a nice girl ought to marry him"¹⁶⁴ brings the play to its conventionally happy ending, one with which Crothers would have heartily concurred.

The reviews of Crothers' plays of the 1930s were more often raves than not. Writing of As Husbands Go in the New York Daily News for March 6, 1931, Burns Mantle said: "It is this playwright's virtue that she can be wholesomely human without becoming stickily sentimental, amusingly light-minded without seeming a little too balmy for words...Her morals are plain and her reasoning simple. But she knows her characters, she knows

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 310.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., p. 326.

their normal reactions and being blessed with the privilege of staging her own plays with a minimum of opposition, she manages to get the best out of any piece she writes." Other comments included those of Richard Lockridge in his review of the play in The New York Sun of March 6, 1931: The play "brought back to the waning season [a] pleasing note of professionalism ...that the characters are superior to their activities...[that] the husband is drawn admirably and at full-length -- always remembering, of course, that Miss Crothers sees him...solely in his relation to the woman." He added that "Miss Crothers' wit remains bright, sharp, gracefully feminine," while John Anderson in the New York Journal on the same date spoke of the fact that "Miss Crothers can work merciless wonders in her portraits of flutter-brained women...Her sense of situation is acute, and her direction gets full value out of the play's material." Robert Garland in the New York World-Telegram, same date again, thought that "it's not only what Miss Crothers says that counts. It's what she leaves unsaid as well," and Brooks Atkinson in The New York Times on this date mentioned that the play "constantly bursts into merriment, and it is full of hilarious lines. But Miss Crothers knows her people so intimately, both the men and the women, that her play is brimming with heart-breaking emotion as well."

When Ladies Meet was even more highly praised by the critics than its immediate predecessor. Arthur Ruhl in the New

York Herald Tribune for October 7, 1932 thought that "the new comedy is a variation on the two-women-and-a-man theme, [and that it is] suavely and wisely written, tactfully set and beautifully acted-an entertaining and throughly civilized performance in every way," while Brooks Atkinson in The New York Times on the same date said that "having an extraordinary understanding of women and a cheerful disposition, Rachel Crothers has written another jovial comedy...if Miss Crothers takes the reins it is gay and somber sport by turns, and it is endlessly refreshing. For [she] has not only a mind of her own but a sound touch in the theatre. When she stages one of her own comedies and translates players into actors, you are in good hands. When Ladies Meet is an immensely satisfying piece."

John Mason Brown in the New York Evening Post on October 7, 1932, wrote that this play was "a study in human relationships which is as honest as it is pleasant," and the critic of the New York Wall St. Journal on the same date commented that "the role of the man whom the two women want is pitiably weak and unenviable ...Miss Crothers has chosen to people her play with strong women and weakish men. It's ladies night, and here's to them." The Boston Christian Science Monitor, probably the same date, said that "this play offers a galaxy of women, presented brilliantly by a woman. By contrast the men seem a slightly sorry lot," and Sidney Skolsky in his column called "Tintypes" in the New York

News, . . . (undated but obviously October, 1932), declared that "from her first play to her latest is the study of the morals of women, showing that they have changed more in style than even the gowns of that period."

Susan and God received much critical praise, and much discussion. Richard Watts Jr. in the New York Herald Tribune, October 8, 1937, called Miss Crothers "both shrewd and exasperating," adding "it is only fair to go on and say that Susan and God is a play that lives up to both adjectives...its dramatist has an authentic gift for vigorous dialogue, credible feminine characterization and an occasional burst of lively wit...but... she then handicapped her work by making her heroine a more disagreeable person than she realized." Brooks Atkinson in the New York Times on the same date looked back at Crothers' long career saying that "at first she may have been something of a feminine crusader in the day of problem plays when the theatre was trying to grow up. During the past fifteen years of the theatre's adolescence she has been taking her problems with a nice sense of humor...she has the detached point of view that is always alert and wholesome whatever the prevailing manners may be." As for Susan and God per se, he added: "She knows a good deal about women and enough about men to season the dish agreeably." Richard Lockridge in The New York Sun, October 8, 1937, could write that Susan and God "brightened the theater's

season perceptibly...Miss Crothers, theme or no theme, can write dialogue that humor glints on, and handle her situations and characters with a suave dexterity enchanting to watch. She has a fine collection of both here," while Dorothy Dunbar Bromley in the New York World Telegram, November 6, 1937, thought that Crothers "tries to make [Susan] see in a fade-out that does justice to Hollywood. You'd almost think that Miss Crothers had been fooled by her own character." John Anderson in the New York Journal and American, October 31, 1937, called the play "a civilized comedy, with...a message...[Miss Crothers] knows that some women are fools and others are saints, and she has the gaiety and good taste to treat them all as human beings, which is more than the boys always do." Finally, there is a telling and touching critique from a woman's viewpoint written by none other than Eleanor Roosevelt in her syndicated column "My Day" which appeared in the Atlanta Constitution -- among other papers -- October 30, 1937, and which is worth quoting in its entirety:

The play is well-cast and very well acted and only the last curtain left me with a rather let-down feeling. Could Susan be really honest with herself or anyone else? Why is it that people like Charlotte, who really are the ones with character and who face life with courage so rarely charm the people they love? The Susans of the world seem to have it all over the Charlottes, which is not a very good lesson for the younger generation!

The "full circle" of Crothers' plays had been made. After the clamor for "freedom of choice" had died away--and neither

Crothers nor Flexner who commented on this in her book on current American playwrights published in 1938, could have known that it would be a temporary hiatus, that this cause would be taken up and embellished and would meet with greater success and inclusiveness in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s--what remained as most fulfilling in the long run were satisfying male-female relationships. Crothers showed some of the understanding with which she was always credited by recognizing that this basic need was as true for men as for women and she remained consistent in her projection of that judgment. As Jimmie Lee says to Mary Howard in When Ladies Meet, after asking her to assess her life and her success as a novelist:

Won't do? Not the swell little flat...nor the people chasing you -- eating out of your hand -- not even your damned success you're so cocky about? Not enough? Only a woman for a man -- and a man for a woman -- no matter how much of everything else we've got. It's true -- and it's hell. ¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵When Ladies Meet, p. 7.

CHAPTER 7

Reminiscences and Assessments

"I never get used to it," Rachel Crothers once confided in an interview. "Every time it's just as exciting as the time before..."¹ This attitude to the theatre, engendering as it did the most careful preparations on her part of every new play in all aspects of production, explains much of the interest that this playwright's work kindled in audiences and critics alike. As one critic noted in 1932: "For the last quarter of a century, Miss Crothers has been writing successful plays, popular hits, and her work covers the progress of that period, in a social sense at least...[particularly as] 'A History of Women, Early Twentieth Century'...more thoroughly and more representationally than any other dramatist."²

Holding "the same position among American women playwrights as that held in the tennis world by Helen Wills [and] in a class by herself,"³ Crothers evoked a good deal of comment on all aspects, as author, director and creative guide to her productions. Invariably, such comment pivoted on her central theme, namely woman and her conflicts. It is "as a woman she

¹The New York Evening Post, Interview with Rachel Crothers, no byline, November 4, 1931.

²"Rachel Crothers: Pacemaker for Social Comedy," no byline, Theatre Arts Monthly, XVI, No. 12 (December, 1932), p. 971.

³William Lyon Phelps, "Speaking of the Theatre," unnamed publication-- (November, 1932), p. 28.

has written with understanding about women and the problems they have faced -- [as well as] created in and out of their homes..."⁴ Since she began "at a time when...women dramatists were barely tolerated"⁵ and went on to successfully write, produce and direct over twenty-five Broadway plays, it is particularly interesting to see what some of her contemporaries -- fellow theatre workers, friends and critics -- thought of her achievements.

The prodigious energy and will that she projected was basic:

Were she not so fine an Artist, so charmingly feminine, domestic and sympathetic, she might almost be compared to a captain of industry...Anyone upon seeing her...would conclude at once that here is a woman of rare and unusual creative energy. She is a born creator. . .and this writer has never seen Miss Crothers as other than alive, energetic, full of verve and zest, and with the sparkle of vitality in her eyes.⁶

Such a view of Crothers is held consistently by others:

Miss Crothers makes a habit of watching, unannounced, the comedy from the front once ever week, despite the play now being in its eighth month. On one occasion she will visit back-stage between the acts, again she will have the cast held on stage to talk with them after the performance. Other times she will wait on the stage before a performance time until all the case has assembled. Each time she will impart ideas for the play that have occurred to her since the last visit. The feminine members of the company would not change a ribbon or their hair dress without consulting Miss Crothers. The suggestions by Miss Crothers are made in the most casual conver-

⁴The Eleusis of Chi Omega., p. 424.

⁵Ibid., p. 418.

⁶Henry James Forman, The Story of Rachel Crothers, p. 22.

sational manner. The meetings are similar to a friendly family gathering. But they are quite frequent, and each visit means an improvement of some degree in a line or a situation...⁷

It was as far back as 1910 with A Man's World, it will be remembered, that Crothers had asserted that "the author certainly ought to produce and direct his own plays if he has the ability and practical experience to do it [for someone else] can't possibly see in a play all that the author does..."⁸ As soon as she was able to act upon that conviction, she did.

In his eulogistic speech given on her Chi Omega Award night at the White House in April of 1939, John Golden mentioned her production methods:

She designs her sets, her costumes -- she does the lighting -- and as for the direction of the players, she has no peer in the theater today. Her direction inspires. She paints every picture of the actor's postures -- she not only tells them where and how to stand, walk, sit, but she teaches them the accent, inflection and tone of every line they speak.

Some of the actors and actresses who appeared in Crothers' ¹ vehicles had their own interpretations of her approach. Taken in chronological order of the plays in which they appeared, the most senior actor to be interviewed for the study was Walter Abel.⁹ Mr. Abel, who starred in three of Crothers' plays (Nice People, 1921, Mary the Third, 1923, and When Ladies Meet, 1932), had very clear memories of working with this woman. He depicted

⁷Press Release from Charles Bochert of the John Golden office, undated but clearly in the 1937-38 season because its reference in the unquoted portion is to the currently-playing Susan and God. (MCNY)

⁸Rachel Crothers, "Troubles of a Playwright," Harper's Bazaar, XLV (January, 1911), p. 14.

⁹Personal interview. New York City, April 21, 1977.

Crothers on his first encounter with her in Nice People as "a very hard, tough director," but added that she had been very patient with him since he had taken over the part of Billy (the young man, it will be remembered, who "gets the girl.")¹⁰ In Mary the Third, he found Crothers extremely "high-powered." She was a perfectionist, demanding that the "torrid" love scenes of the play be "played intimately," which the young Abel found disconcerting and difficult. "A hayseed from Minnesota," as he put it, Abel's embarrassment took time to abate. After the opening in Pittsburgh, Crothers came to every town to see the play. She was famous for her Monday night rehearsals to "freshen" things up. She wanted it her way -- and she was right," Abel asserted. "She knew everything about the theatre there was to know." When he got his part (Jimmie Lee) in When Ladies Meet and read his first lines at rehearsal, Crothers kept criticizing him and when he asked "why" she told him: "I can't talk to the others as I can to you." Clearly, she was capable of being shattering with those with whom she felt comfortable or familiar; she could be warm and affectionate only when she got to know people well. The young actor didn't mind because here was "the most fabulous part for a young man ever written," and "such a piece of comedy as I'd never played before." On opening night

¹⁰In both Nice People and Mary the Third, Mr. Abel was a replacement. In Mary the Third, he originated his role.

he found himself "a hit in a hit," How did he find her personally? "She was modest in terms of her face [shown] to the world...she was incredible." Conflicting facets of her character are seen in these observations: Crothers was a "high romantic;" Crothers was "so austere no man could have endured her;" Crothers "faced the world with an austerity that very much reflected her spirit;" Crothers lived for many years "with Mary Kirkpatrick, a lush." Relating to Crothers was formal but interesting, according to Abel. He felt that there was a great deal of tenderness in her, but that apparently she found it hard to express. She extended this personal formality to her directing where it took the form of objectivity. In a love scene, for example, she'd say: "This is a woman, Walter. You're in love with her. Let's have it." On her view of male-female relationships? "She set herself up as an arbiter between men and women and wrote romantically about them," but her lack of life experience, he felt showed in her work. Nevertheless, "it was a real experience working with Crothers. You were in the hands of a great pro."

Selena Royle, who played Claire Woodruff in When Ladies Meet, told some characteristic anecdotes about Crothers and made some insightful inferences in a letter sent from Guadalajara, Mexico to this writer on June 25, 1977. Portions of it are worth quoting as it gives a rounded and somewhat more human picture of Crothers than the one constantly before us of the "great lady of the theatre," and they are more evocative than a paraphrase:

...I was always intrigued by Rachel Crothers. Before I worked with her I had heard that she directed by getting the actors' attention with a very shrill policeman's whistle which would blast at you from the dark theatre as you were endeavoring to work out a characterization...Very early in the rehearsals we had a wee tiff. [Royle had scheduled a visit to her husband for the weekend and found she would be at Crothers' Monday night rehearsal about fifteen minutes late]...I asked [Crothers] if I could be allowed that leeway. I explained why to Rachel. She promptly drew herself up and rather briskly said, 'You have put your shoulder to this wheel and you should be here on time.' [Royle] was there on time...After that she was very overly gracious to me.

I always had the feeling that in When Ladies Meet the part Frieda Inescourt played [Mary Howard] was Rachel as she saw herself but Claire (my part) was as she would have liked to be...

One day after we had been playing for sometime Rachel called a rehearsal for Frieda and me. Frieda sent word that she was ill. So Rachel shrugged and said 'What do you want to do?' I said 'Rachel, you saw when we got the results you wanted we had to get them in different ways. I don't want to get self-conscious and I'm beginning to be that when I know you're out front.' She simply said 'You'd rather not? O.K. Give me a cigarette and you can drive me home.' You can see that as far as I was concerned I always felt her to be honest and completely just. It was not too easy to play one of her plays. Her lines had to be read as she meant them to be for if not the comedy, which of course was her great gift, didn't come across...

...One day she said as a sort of off beat compliment that one of the other actors when they had a cold turned away from the audience and made a big thing of suffering and trying not to cough. 'you just cough,' she said...

A very human portrait is etched here, indicating that if you, as one of her actors, were a thorough-going professional, her own kindness and consideration would come through.

Paul McGrath, who took over the part of Barrie Trexel in Susan and God when Osgood Perkins (Anthony Perkins' father) died suddenly after opening night in Washington, D. C., spoke of his reactions to Crothers:¹¹ "I don't think I've ever known a stronger woman. In theatre she could do anything." It was she who made it possible for him to take over the Perkins part -- which he had understudied -- at the last minute and in the tragic circumstances; "Crothers' strength pulled me through and the play through. I told her I couldn't do it." An interesting point that McGrath made was that although he acknowledged her approach to theatre to be conventional in all externals, he understood Crothers' essential unconventionality in her close and careful work with actors, much like the Group Theatre or, later, the Actors' Studio. In this respect he felt she was "a bit ahead of her time." She was "a damn good director -- one of the best I've ever worked with. She knew where the play was going and consistently worked toward the climax." He commented on her "marvellous ear" for dialogue, and on the fact that though he saw no great difference in her directing of men and women, the character of Barrie Trexel (whom he played), "a charming man -- but weak -- ineffectual," was, he felt, Crothers' basic idea of the male. McGrath thought, however, that any weaknesses she may have had were overridden by her strengths.

¹¹Personal interview, New York City, July 28, 1977.

If she worked everyone overtime, she drove herself more; she despised dramatic theory and being a "doer," she was never a poseur, nor did she care what people thought of her; and if she wanted her plays to remain exactly as she had staged them, she was also a realist and knew that was impossible..."it changes with the audience."

Nancy Coleman,¹² who took over the role of Blossom Trexel, the teen-age daughter in Susan and God from Nancy Kelly who had originated it, had her own "teen's-eye view" of Crothers. The formidable doyenne rehearsed the young newcomer in her elegant East Side apartment for several days before she went on. Coleman called her "a martinet -- but nice." When once Nancy changed the interpretation of a certain line, Crothers leapt on her, saying that was not the way to read it. She didn't want any changes in "movement, lines, interpretation, anything," according to Coleman as well as the others interviewed. It was her play all around, and although seen from the perspective of a very young person, Coleman's recollection that everyone was a bit afraid of her because she was "so very strict" seems to have rather general application.

Vera Allen,¹³ who originally played Irene Burroughs in Susan and God, corroborated Coleman's opinion, saying: "Crothers'

¹²Personal interview, New York City, June 8, 1977.

¹³Telephone interview, New York City, June 12, 1977.

methods were sometimes a little strident, but she was always right. She was a very hard taskmaster, but never personal, and since she was usually right and knew exactly what she wanted, no one really objected." Allen felt Crothers to be a "dynamic, stern and exciting director," and pithily characterized her "as an onlooker at life who found it essentially comic." John Seymour,¹⁴ who played Leeds, the butler in Susan and God, recalled that "Rachel Crothers was not too fond of men, or of men's rôles in her plays. In Susan and God [for example] the women's rôles were "meatier" than the men's..."

Other people interviewed who worked -- or were merely acquainted -- with her in capacities other than acting included Radie Harris, Marion Spitzer Thompson and Jean Dalrymple,¹⁵ who saw her somewhat differently. Miss Harris,¹⁶ a columnist for The Hollywood Reporter, knew Crothers slightly and called her "an imposing woman...you felt you couldn't get in touch with her, which may have been a facade." Marion Spitzer Thompson,¹⁷ a press agent for the Schuberts and, in 1925, the publicity person for A Lady's Virtue, one of Crothers' rare failures, remembered her as a "crusty lady, peremptory, more like an old-maid school teacher with a pointer in her hand than a theatrical personage." Mrs. Thompson was very young at that time and, with

¹⁴Letter dated October 28, 1977.

¹⁵Later--and currently--a well-known producer connected mainly with The New York City Center.

¹⁶Telephone interview, New York City, October, 1977.

¹⁷Personal interview, New York City, August, 1977.

the impression Crothers gave of always being overwhelmingly busy, felt a bit intimidated by her, as did so many others. Jean Dalrymple,¹⁸ who was John Golden's press representative at the height of Crothers' career in the 1930s, and who did the publicity for As Husbands Go and When Ladies Meet, knew her better than the others. She worked closely with her, helped her choose costumes and even played golf with her in Connecticut where Crothers apparently spent all her non-Broadway time. Based on this deeper knowledge of Crothers, Miss Dalrymple's calling her "a great playwright...completely happy...very accepted as a writer and director...[most] unusual for a woman," carries a great deal of weight. Miss Dalrymple also spoke of the fact that Crothers influenced other women playwrights and that she had been the head of Theatre Women's War Relief in the 1914-18 war as well as starting the American Theatre Wing in 1939-40. Crothers' public spiritedness and her leadership of women's causes always seems to have been linked. She reminisced too about the care Crothers took in the overseeing of her productions. She had assisted her with casting, selecting scenery (usually from John Golden's storehouse) and costumes.

Miss Dalrymple used as an example of the "meticulousness" of Crothers' attention to detail, a particular costume. A negligee was called for in As Husbands Go, to be worn by Lily Cahill who was playing Lucile Lingard, and nothing would suit

¹⁸Personal interview, New York City, April, 1976.

Crothers but a pink lace negligee from Hattie Carnegie costing the extravagant sum -- in 1931 -- of "well over \$200." Money, it seems was not to interfere with her ideas of perfection.

Crothers would not allow anyone to watch rehearsals, and Miss Dalrymple would often watch her direct through the secret door of Mr. Golden's office. Her description corroborates those of the actors cited. Crothers would "yell and get tough, often reducing some of the women to tears" (apparently they'd come to Dalrymple for solace); "then she'd be sorry and take [the actress] out to tea. She wasn't deliberately cruel, just dedicated to getting things right." Once again we hear the by-now familiar phrase: "She knew exactly what she wanted." Miss Dalrymple corroborates, too, Crothers' independence of spirit. "She was a liberated woman all her life and had no use for women who weren't," which, apparently, was one of the reasons she liked Jean Dalrymple.

Apart from such personal memories of people who in working with her were impressed by her talent, formidable drive and forceful personality, many letters exist¹⁹ testifying to the appreciation of her plays and the admiration, enjoyment and respect they inspired from the general public, and from well-known figures in the literary and theatrical world.²⁰ John

¹⁹All letters and reviews cited in this chapter are from the various Scrapbooks in the Rachel Crothers Collection, (The Angeline C. Hoagland bequest) in the Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

²⁰Where possible, the ensuing representative choices have been made with reference to the "woman's angle" in Crothers' work, as well as with her contribution as a woman; otherwise, general reactions to her plays or impact seemed germane.

Golden, referring to her chosen profession and her success in it as a woman, called her a "brilliant, beautiful exception."²¹ John Galsworthy, in a letter from London dated April 6,²² expressed admiration for her work and his interest in meeting her after having seen Nice People. Maestro Walter Damrosch addressed her as "Dear Poetess Rachel," and in a letter dated November 30, 1921, Augustus Thomas praised her current work (Nice People) "which I admire so much, and your great success upon which I heartily congratulate you." It is the postscript to this missive, however, which personalizes the conventional praise of her famous colleague and gives it significance: "As I finished this letter I said to my secretary 'She's an awfully nice person, that Miss Crothers, and the smartest woman that has written for the American theatre.'" On March 22, 1921, Hamlin Garland wrote her a letter about Nice People, saying: "...I found it very much worthwhile ...As I see them, the women of the younger generation are breaking out on the wrong side of their walls. To seek a modern life by taking on the habits of vicious ways is to [see] a curious reversal..." Florence Allen, Judge of the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote to Crothers on May 15, 1939, after the latter had received her National Achievement Award: "I do wish to tell you how delightful your address was to me. It is an inspiration to all woman, including myself, that one who

²¹The Eleusis of Chi Omega, p. 418.

²²No year given, but clearly between 1921-22.

leads brilliantly as you should retain a charming sense of humor...and such directness..." Charles Darnton, the critic for the New York Evening World, wrote in a 1919 review²³ of Crothers' comedy 39 East that "Miss Crothers is an unusually intelligent playwright. I was on the point of saying woman which has nothing to do with the case. She knows her play and she knows her stage, and in the art of producing a play, she has much in common with the first artist in our theatre, Mrs. Fiske." Minnie Maddern Fiske herself was an admirer of Crothers, writing to her on June 26, 1924 that she had reserved a box for the playwright for a matinee of her current vehicle "in the faint hope that you will come! -- and that if you do give me that great pleasure -- you will come behind the scene after the performance -- so that we may meet -- and I may have the opportunity of saying to you some things I have wished to say for a long time..."

He and She evoked many paeans of praise including some for her acting. Eleanor Gates, wrote to Crothers on February 28, 1920:

Dear Rachel Crothers,

I wish you could hear all the splendid things I have been told about He and She by those to whom I sent invitations through your kindness. Most of the list I sent you was made of women who earn their own living. And their interest in the play, and you, and your whole thesis was so keen. ALL think you are a most satisfying actress. Just as

²³Review undated as to month and day (Scrapbook I, MCNY)

I did. They enjoyed you every minute, and could have enjoyed more of you. And how they all love the little slim magazine editor!

I have seen several plays lately. And what I notice about yours is that it has more of what the picture people call "residue" than any of the others except Beyond the Horizon, which also leaves a lot with one. Over and over things come up about people and things that your play touched. If ever you get it out where people think and feel, you're going to have a winner. Only don't go with it. The women playwrights are coming along strong, and the lot of us can't spare our leader.

I'm so proud of you, Rachel Crothers, and so fond of you.

Eleanor Gates

Troop says women critics should have gone to your plays. They would have understood what some of the men missed. And he says he's glad that your [sic] a playwright and an actress and a producer, because any woman can be a mother.

A whole spectrum of audience reaction, critical understanding and personal achievement is encapsulated here. A certain Caroline Phippen wrote in a letter that is undated but clearly written about the time of the opening of He and She that "you made Ann so utterly real to me that today I am still filled with rage that she felt her real job was the girl. Oh Lord, why couldn't she have done them both?...Thank the Lord you haven't a real Tom. I am enough of a new woman to say he's an Ass or plain man if you prefer. You put it over all right..." Still another unletter, undated but implicitly the winter of 1920, from personal friends, is also worth setting down in its entirety:

Dear Leading Lady --

We loved your play. We took a school-marm-- a mother -- a literary lady and a spinster. The school-marm wanted to spank the child. The mother wept a little, she had some experience, and the literary lady didn't think the flapper was worth the sacrifice. "Poor Ann -- poor Ann" -- she kept saying after the curtain went down. Thank you so much for the treat. We three spinsters just sat back and chuckled and had a beautiful time.

Your acting is very finished and absolutely natural.

We liked your gown in the second act-- It was lovely and you were lovely in it.

Best wishes for great success.

Yours -- affectionately

The Harts

There is some correspondence extant on some reactions to Crothers' 1923 hit, Mary the Third. In a letter from one Ina Merlin Broadhurst²⁴ dated February 7, 1923, the writer says: "My husband says -- 'here's a woman who is writing more significantly about her times than any man is doing'...And as a woman, I am impressed by the naturalness of your women, and by the pity of it all. I do feel -- and your final curtain emphasized this to me -- that we women may talk and legislate and work and worry, but somehow our longing for love makes fools of us. We're tied by our emotions whether we give way to them or clamp down with a 'Thou shalt not.' So, I say, your play emphasized to me the

²⁴A fascinating personal note here is that according to The New York Times obituary notice for January 31, 1952, Broadhurst had divorced his wife in 1928 and had married "America's first woman director," Lillian Trimble Bradley.

pity of it all..." One Dorothy Kenny wrote Crothers on April 17, 1923: "So now, when the subject of marriage and divorce comes up for discussion, I simply say 'Please see Mary the Third, for all I believe [about this subject] is said there so much better than I could ever possibly express it myself...It is a real social service as well as a splendid dramatic achievement!"

A rare adverse reaction is worth citing, to show how Crothers' "daring" ideas must have seemed to very conservative or Fundamentalist elements. An undated letter (but clearly 1923) from a certain F. Champion states:

...A more disagreeable filthy play I never saw in all my life. Don't you think there is enough evil at present in the world without adding to it? If you could hear the remarks passed about your play you would never write another of this sort for it is disgusting and has a bad moral for you level[sic] life and marriage without beauty and holyness[sic]. ...If you prefer the Devil to Christ you certainly are pandering to the Devil in this play.

Apparently, Mr. Champion was hearing audience reactions rather selectively as no less a theatrical scholar than Arthur Hobson Quinn could write to Crothers on May 24, 1923:

I am delighted with Mary the Third. It's the best thing you've done since He and She, and the audience seemed to think so too...The comments of the women were most favorable, and the approval of the feminine in the audiences makes the success of a play, does it not? Perhaps they appreciated the feminine psychology of Mary, which even a mere male like myself could not fail to apprehend."

It was not only the "feminine in the audiences" that made Crothers' work succeed, however. True, a Frances Wolcott wrote on

February 10, 1923 that "you are one of the few who have looked life between the eyes and who worked because you loved work -- and made the children of your brain more in the rythm[sic] of the day," but there was similar praise from an editor-- Henry Clapp Smith-- at E. P. Dutton Publishers whose letter of June 12, 1923, stated: "I surely would think that your play would be chosen as the best of American dramatic writing." There was still more fulsome praise; the following excerpts -- all from males, incidentally-- exemplifying it. A certain Leroy Scott wrote on February 12, 1923:

I consider 'Mary' the most brilliant American production I have seen. In fact, my present sense is that I have never been so profoundly impressed by an American play. Though 'Mary' is a comedy, I cried half through it, cried in joy over a wonderful job wonderfully done. I give you my respect and admiration.

One Dr. Thomas Green wrote on October 29, 1923:

[Here is] one of the most successful pieces of work that I have ever seen. The novelty of the idea, the exquisite punch of the dialogue and the subtle philosophy that underlies it all are equally to be praised.

And topping all these is a tribute from a Charles Bockert sent on May 9, 1923:

...it is about the most perfect and most interesting picture of modern family life I have ever seen on the stage, and that it not only gives genuine entertainment, but at the same time presents a state of affairs rampant in our national domestic relations worthy of some thought. It is surprising how many families are held together so loosely, without the

real controlling element of love. It must be our slovenly way of living -- too little attention to the home -- mad chasing after money and not a thought for the more important things of life. You have...driven the lesson home with a master hand. I must thank you for a real contribution of merit to the American stage, as well as thank you for one of the most delightful evenings I have had in the theatre during the last ten years.

What emerges is a picture of a "workaholic," a director but not a "woman" director, a person fiercely and singlemindedly dedicated to her craft and art, and imbuing her work with a sense of health and balance. Living in the country, as she did, for half the year, she would "gain strength and vitality for the arduous task of producing the play in New York after it has been written in the country."²⁵ Her joy and pride in her work, her choice of work above all, is unmistakable: "I thank God I love my work better than anything else in the world -- it is so exciting and interesting...Work is the most healing thing in the world, and I am especially grateful now that I have an all absorbing work to do and consider myself a very lucky person..."²⁶

²⁵Alma S. Blood, "In the Dramatic World," The Spinning Wheel (October 1, 1931), p. 14.

²⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

Rachel Crothers' consistent record of Broadway triumphs over a period of more than three decades is an impressive one. The fact that she was successful not only as playwright, but also producer, director and occasional star is even more impressive. The fact, however, that she was a woman and accomplished all that she did in one of the most highly competitive and difficult proving grounds in the world, even more so in her day than now, is most impressive of all. Unfortunately, she is hardly recognized today outside of academic circles and even there her reputation is peripheral, based somewhat on the interest engendered by the Woman's Movement rather than by any posthumous recognition of her as one of this country's more successful women. Among dramatic cognescenti she has been recognized as a force in the theatre of her day,¹ sometimes because of the ground-breaking subject matter of her plays (A Man's World, for example), more often because of the impact of her personality which dominated all her productions, and her staying power as a woman in an extremely competitive profession.

It is her resounding success rather than the value of her plays that seems to be the reason for whatever minor surge

¹Honor Moore (ed.), The New Women's Theatre (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. xxii.

her reputation is beginning to enjoy. In New York City during 1978 there have been Off-Off-Broadway productions of two of her plays, He and She (1920), and Expressing Willie (1924). An overview and an assessment of some of the more important factors in her theatrical life and thought, as well as a look at the work of some current women dramatists, will help to put her work into perspective.

Crothers was, as John Golden said of her, "a brilliant exception;"² certainly she was an anomaly in the American theatre preceding World War II. There were other gifted women playwrights of her generation who wrote as well as or better than Crothers, such as Zona Gale, Susan Glaspell, Zoë Akins and Edna Ferber. There were male contemporaries, notably Philip Barry and S. N. Behrman, who received the same theatrical acclaim as Crothers and who were also mindful of the "heroine of spirit" referred to in earlier chapters. However, none of these contemporaries had the broad theatrical impact of the dynamic Crothers in her time.

"Anyone can be a playwright," Crothers said seriously, "because we are all born story-tellers and a play is merely a story told in dramatic form."³ She had a formula:

The idea comes first, the characters second, and the story last of all...[The characters are endemic to the idea but] the story is a secondary thing and quite the most mechanical part of writing a play. It is the situations that require the most effort and forcing. The characters once they are strongly and sympathetically visualized, seem almost to write their own speeches...⁴

²The Eleusis of Chi Omega.

³The Chicago Daily News, November 25, 1925.

⁴The New York Times, April 27, 1919.

This approach was an outgrowth of her childhood efforts. Finding an original manuscript of a one-acter she'd written long ago "...hot off the pencil -- few scratchings out and writings in. Very young and naive it was -- but it had an idea -- marched straight to the climax and said something. The characters were cleancut believable human beings and the dialogue ripped along with such bounce and common sense that I laughed."⁵

Her dialogue stood out, and it was the quality of naturalness in her characters' speech plus timely ideas, which accounted for her enormous popularity. The "First Lady among American Playwrights,"⁶ had a sense of what audiences respond to, of what's "in the air," she wrote at the outset of the flapper age. Her understanding that was "mixed with capacious humor, considerable charity and much human warmth, which [made] the final result... less like preaching than most such efforts and much more like the unobtrusive force of quiet and persistent example."⁷ This approach, combined with the fact that "her characters are seldom all black or all white [but] are apt to be delicately and subtly colored...",⁸ and that her productions were superlatively cast, lavish and impeccably mounted, gave her audience the pleasure of identifying with problems that were softened by being glamorously presented.

⁵Crothers, "The Box in the Attic," p. 11.

⁶Review of When Ladies Meet, unnamed paper, dated only as October, 1932. (MCNY).

⁷Skinner, Review of "As Husbands Go," Commonweal, March 18, 1931.

⁸Ibid.

"The theatre is influenced by the times more than any other form of art,"⁹ declared Crothers, a view she implemented in practice through the subject matter of her plays and the understanding of the audience for whom her work was intended -- a very pragmatic approach. She divided audiences into "classes," into "...attitudes towards the theatre; Those who find the stage degenerating, those who have a highbrow approach...Then there is the largest and the most powerful and important class -- Those who love the theatre because it amuses them -- who don't expect too much of it -- who know that if one play is poor, some other will be better...And these are the people with their indifferent friendliness -- their kindly curiosity -- their demand to be amused -- the [sic] ignorant power and honest outspoken verdict of liking or disliking -- these are the hands in which the fate of a play lies."¹⁰ Her commercialism necessitated "amusement" for "commercialism really only means professionalism."¹¹ In common-sense manner, she asserted that "it's only by money and business methods that the big machinery of the theatre can be moved...No commercial manager -- no audience -- no theatre."¹²

"Her interest in matters of technique has been inextricably united with her interest in people. And not content with writing, she has gone in for directing..."¹³ Acknowledging the

⁹Helen Rorabach, Interview with Crothers, The Pantagraph (Bloomington, Ill.), February 22, 1953.

¹⁰"Four Kinds of Audiences," an informal talk given by Rachel Crothers at the Cosmopolitan Club in New York, undated specifically but delivered during the run of Old Lady 31, 1916. (Typescript in MCNY).

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³The New York Times, April 20, 1924.

many modes of directing, her typical self-assurance comes through in the following statement:

So far as I am concerned, directing can mean but one thing...a compromise between the part as I conceived it and what the actors have to give. I keep my fingers off everything else...The supreme thing to me is to make art and directing as a phase of art, not a fixed thing, but a release of the spirit; not brushing aside truth for the bizarre, but getting without limit on both sides the full power of the audience and the actors.¹⁴

In addition, overseeing as she did all the minute and technical aspects of production -- sets, lighting and costumes -- one can perceive what she believed a director's function to be.

Crothers was admired by her contemporaries, theatrical and non-professional alike. There were some who considered her an inhabitant of that "rarefied realm"¹⁵ that included O'Neill, Behrman, Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson, [and, later] Lillian Hellman. "And note, please, [these] are our best playwrights."¹⁶ All commercially successful playwrights, too, one might add, despite the brilliant experimentations of O'Neill and the poetic romanticism of Maxwell Anderson. Crothers' successful female contemporaries, on the other hand, were different. Susan Glaspell, for instance, though acclaimed artistically and the winner of the Pulitzer Prize,¹⁷ together with her husband, George Cram Cooke, scorned the commercial theatre,¹⁸ while Zona Gale with Miss Lulu Bett,¹⁹ a succès d'estime, bore "the revolutionary

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Louise Mace, "Miss Crothers' Style," The Sunday Union (Springfield, Ill.), undated except as 1945. (MCNY).

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷For Alison's House, 1931.

¹⁸Jean Gould, Modern American Playwrights (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1966), p. 38.

¹⁹Also a Pulitzer Prize winner, 1921.

banner of banality," superlatively "depicting uninspired American family life."²⁰ Since, to Crothers, being commercial was synonymous with being "professional,"²¹ she might have dubbed both these ladies with the converse term.

Whether Crothers influenced Philip Barry or he her in their similar and contemporaneous subject matter and comedic approach is not provable, but the female playwright that she may have influenced partly is her famous female successor, Lillian Hellman. Hellman's first success, The Children's Hour, (1934) came during the concluding stage of Crothers' career. There are possible parallels in their dependence on the well-made play, and both excelled in dialogue. On the other hand, the heroines of spirit in Hellman's plays -- the two teachers in The Children's Hour, Regina in The Little Foxes (1939) -- are tragic heroines, as opposed to the happier types in Crothers' post-war plays, even though both playwrights use their female characters forcefully and centrally. There is anger and frustration in Hellman's women characters. In Crothers' early plays, the heroine who is most easily compared to some of Hellman's is Frank Ware in A Man's World. The comparison extends not only to the character's strength and purpose, but also to the play's unhappy ending, self imposed by Frank. Despite the comedic

²⁰Gale, Miss Lulu Bett, pp. xii-xv.

²¹Crothers, "Four Kinds of Audiences" speech.

aspects of her later plays, Crothers' themes were always serious, like Hellman's, even though that author's work was mainly politically based, unlike Crothers'. Crothers' individualism kept her away from political causes, including feminism, per se.

Hellman did succeed Crothers as America's leading female playwright and was once quoted as saying: "'...A play is not only on paper. It is there to be shared with actors, directors, scene designers, electricians.' So speaks America's number-one playwright!"²² Hellman inherited this title in the 1940s, taking over from her hardy and seemingly perennial predecessor. A journalist wrote of Crothers and other successful female playwrights like Hellman, Akins and Ferber that "they have two things most women haven't -- talent and the ability to lose themselves completely in their work...Artistically speaking, no two of them inhabit the same sphere."²³ Crothers, called "the dean of women playwrights,"²⁴ denied writing about women's progress in the world. She did admit, however, that "I call upon the way-deep-down insides of women more than I do of men."²⁵

Before commenting on whether Crothers appears to have had any influence on present-day feminist writers, we should look once more at Crothers as a woman who wrote mainly about

²²Gould, p. 185.

²³Charlotte Hughes, "Women Playwrights," The New York Times, Magazine Section, p. 10, May 4, 1941.

²⁴Ibid., p. 11.

²⁵Ibid., p. 27.

women -- which means she also wrote about men -- and about the male-female relationship and the family. The following statement about another woman writer (Mary McCarthy) is equally applicable to Crothers: "Her literary accomplishment demonstrates her power...the power retrospectively to control experience by understanding it. And it is a means to love: The esteem and acceptance of a body of readers..."²⁶ It is this power that Crothers achieved in the theatre and "...publicly acknowledged achievement is a mode of power..."²⁷ that in her case apparently was a substitute for love. The choice was made for the flow of approval across the footlights. Here "the woman as artist does [help] to illuminate the woman as woman."²⁸ Indeed, the woman and the creative person have a sound yet homely connection in Crothers, pointing up her "house-keeping instincts" as well as the complete subjugation of her womanly to her artistic self.

Crothers did not differentiate between the requisites for success between male and female artists:

...The artist controls emotion -- uses it -- doesn't let it run away with him...The road to the stars is over stony ground. A career takes courage -- force -- undying tenacity -- to carry a thing through once it's started. I mean moral force -- not soft evasion along the easiest lines.²⁹

She was convinced that conditions should be the same for women as for men because their needs are the same, and she was one of the earliest to say this in popular fashion. As Crothers

²⁶Patricia M. Spacks, The Female Imagination (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), p. 189.

²⁷Ibid., p. 161.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Crothers, As Husbands Go, p. 123.

herself might have said: "...Perhaps the balance [for men and women] is different, but the substance is the same, for work and love, for independence and dependency, solitude and relationship, to enjoy community and value one's specialness."³⁰ Not only are male-female needs the same, but so are their frailties, and if it is the spirit of independence, in one way or another, that constitutes the essential link between all of Crothers' heroines, there is also the link in her concept of male-female equality. Crothers would agree with Diana Trilling that the female dilemma is the human dilemma.³¹ A heroine, as opposed to a hero, is one you, as a woman, subjectively identify with, even though "the traditional [literary] heroine is reality-bound to her home and family, [while] the hero can go off on any adventure."³² In the early 1920s, when the "liberated" woman began to make her appearance, Crothers' progressive view of the male-female relationship is well illustrated in her own specific reference to her play, Mary the Third;

Men of this generation may not like this new girl so well. But what does that matter? They don't have to live with her! It is the boys of today who will be her men folk. She is, I firmly believe, going to make love stronger and marriage happier because she is going to make it more honest, ridding it of the unfairness which used to infest it. And this indicates what is the problem which the girl of tomorrow must face -- the problem of adjusting her personal work to her job as a wife. She will solve this question. She will learn by trying and failing. But she will bring a better world for us and bring about the New Man.³³

³⁰Spacks, p. 320.

³¹Diana Trilling, Lecture on "The Liberated Heroine," April 17, 1978.

³²Ibid.

³³Marguerite Moers Marshall, Crothers quoted in "The Women of It," The New York Evening World, May 18, 1923.

And:

Even though the boy of the [present] day of [1921] understands his girl...far better than her mother, the older man may misinterpret her, but the young man is right in sympathy with her. He has been brought up with her, played with her, and knows [her] psychology.³⁴

It is interesting that her opinions about a woman having "personal work" had not changed even though she had stopped promulgating its value in her plays. The mature "new man" also referred to above had not yet appeared in 1920 when He and She was produced in New York, and certainly not in 1911 when the play was written. The two sculptors, Ann and Tom Herford, have the ideal marriage "from the standpoint of love, companionship and work."³⁵ He has been her teacher and guide, and when it is her work that wins the coveted prize, "the important thing is," as Crothers commented in an interview, "that they-- he and she -- have won."³⁶ It was not, however, to be so easy:

But he does not rejoice. Instead he is tortured by a primitive, elemental jealousy -- a kind that he could not have possibly had toward a man. At this point the wife realizes for the first time that she is a power and an entity herself, quite apart from being his wife. Then the husband tells her the same old things; that her work is taking her away from her home and that her job is in the home, while his is running the ship for her...³⁷

Crothers' point here is that, indignant jealousy apart, a man does not have the problems a creative woman does:

³⁴The New York Evening World, April 8, 1921.

³⁵The New York Tribune, Crothers quoted in "Interesting Chat," April 15, 1923.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

The question is not what can woman do, but what can she do in spite of her own woman's nature?...the happier the woman is, the stronger her own peculiar feminine nature is. No matter how great an artist she may be, or how great her success, she may have to choose between the things that call upon her nature and her work. Such a fight as this never comes to a man at all, not even if his family starves. He must, and does, go on with his work.³⁸

The relations between men and women had become freer and more open after the First World War, but the conflict between work and family responsibility was to remain an unsettled question until the Women's Liberation Movement removed much of the guilt by giving a mass stamp of approval -- "everybody's doing it" -- in the late 1960s. Crothers, as we know, thought that the sexes are fundamentally much more alike than either believes. "I used to think," she said, "that men were infinitely harder, cruder, less considerate in their relations with one another than women are. But after a great deal of observation...I found that men actually are just as kind, considerate and gracious to each other as are women."³⁹ There is a certain naivete in these generalizations, an attitude that tends to look at life as it "should be," an essential optimism that permeates Crothers' personality and thought.

At an earlier point in her career, around 1914, Crothers had said that "men know more about life [than women] and are more tolerant and good natured about it....,"⁴⁰ but she thought

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Central Press Association, (Cleveland), Interview, Nov. 10, 1937.

⁴⁰Marguerite Moers Marshall, article on women, The New York Evening World, undated except as 1914. (MCNY)

this was because, contrary to current belief, women had not yet "arrived." "It is the fashion today to say that women have arrived. They haven't; they have a long way to go."⁴¹ At that time Crothers also insisted that women did not applaud other women's achievements as women but only because of the achievement itself, that there was no special "sex loyalty" as with men.⁴² Such reaction was not true of the feminists of the pre-World War I era, but it was apparently true of the female majority. It would take a couple of generations of "modernity" to bring about the sense of community that exists among many women today.

What of the "modern girl" of the 1920s? Crothers was one of her champions and found her "far superior to her sisters of bygone days."⁴³ She thought "Miss 1921" was "so honest, so sensible, sane," that she had "freedom of living and of expression; that she was 'natural.'"⁴⁴ The "modern girl" no longer had to subscribe to the restrictions placed upon her predecessors; she could be all that they had been and also a "companion."⁴⁵ As always with a pet subject or theory, Crothers waxed enthusiastic: "The modern girl is the best thing women have turned out. She is thinking for herself and refusing to follow the orthodox stuff that has been handed out to her."⁴⁶ Once again, a naivete exists in Crothers' assumption that independence of outlook meant the same thing to the "modern girl" of 1921 as it did to her.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴³"Rachel Crothers Champions the Modern Girl," no byline, unnamed paper and undated except as 1921. (MCNY)

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶The New York Evening Telegram, undated except as 1921. (MCNY)

Her own attitude of assuming one's rights without fanfare and acting accordingly presaged one that has really come to pass only within the last decade and therein lies her chief claim to "modernity." With her usual optimism and her faith in things "coming right," her pronunciamientos were rarely made without a touch of humor and perspective. As was reported earlier, and it is worth reiterating, it was à propos her "modern girl" that Crothers quipped: "Imagine any girl [of my generation] letting her daughter do the things SHE used to do!"⁴⁷

"If woman is the practical sex, [if] she is capable of keeping her feet on the ground [unlike] the male [who] is up in the sky of his ideas or ideals,"⁴⁸ as Joseph Mersard put it, Rachel Crothers was one of the foremost representatives of her sex in the field of drama. "Women are realists in life and have carried over their skill into the theatre,"⁴⁹ and this critic, in applying this measure to Crothers, wrote that she was "sincerer [than most in] making her characters live, in her sense of the theater,"⁵⁰ [and especially in her] talent to hold an audience for two hours."⁵¹ Once more, commercialism as professionalism is being deemed praiseworthy here. "Crothers had identified early the erosion of women's energy to the empty routine that characterized the rise of the 'feminine mystique.'"⁵² In a play like A Man's World, this identification was stated boldly and literally

⁴⁷The New York Evening World, April 8, 1921.

⁴⁸Joseph Mersard, When Ladies Write Plays (New York: The Modern Chapbook Publishers, 1937) , p. 12.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 15.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 16.

⁵²Matlock, p. 14.

⁵⁴MATLOCK, p. 14.

by showing contrasting lifestyles and aspirations. In later efforts, such as When Ladies Meet, it was explained in terms of the emotional needs that supersede all the excitement of career fulfillment and worldly success. It was "...as... an unmarried, cool, self-contained woman of middle age who's been watching the passing scene with clinical detachment for these many years, that Miss Crothers [in 1932 conceded] reluctantly:

It's still a man's world. He made all the rules. When women juggle them and go in for this so-called freedom they still must lie and cheat and deceive. They can't yet be frank and open and impersonally free as men...The modern woman who would lead her own life as a man does has but cracked the shell. She has miles to go before she's learned to toss the whole thing off as lightly as man does.⁵³

Perhaps this conclusion made her downplay the "new woman" image she had -- ironically -- helped create by stressing the terrible price that must still (in 1932) be paid by a woman choosing a career over a home and family. This is so well illustrated in When Ladies Meet where it is made clear how exceptional one must be to sustain another choice without misery.

Economic independence which was so strongly argued in her early plays is omitted in her '20s and '30s vehicles. She makes her female characters so endemically well-off or, as in the case of Mary Howard in When Ladies Meet, so artistically and financially successful, that the issue is obviated. This shunting aside of the economic issue also made divorce more acceptable⁵⁴ because with

⁵³ The New York World Telegram, undated except as 1932.
(MCNY)

⁵⁴ Kolb, p. 156.

money, divorce, would create ~~less~~ problems than otherwise.

If a "sense of direction and high moral purpose had been lost"⁵⁵ by the post-war generation of the '20s, Crothers herself never lost this thrust. It is in all her work, even the lightest in tone and approach. As Deborah Kolb has correctly pointed out, the theatre reflected the trends of feminism, which, whether Crothers conceded the appellation of "feminist" or not, she continued to explore. ("That feminist among playwrights,"⁵⁶ another critic called her.) In her plays of the '20s and '30s, Crothers made "a new evaluation of terms such as freedom [and] independence...and [by the time she wrote As Husbands Go in 1931, the trend toward] domesticity is almost complete."⁵⁷ In Susan and God (1937) there is no serious talk about female careers at all, even as these relate to marriage. Not until the distant 60s, long after Crothers' time, would domesticity again not appear to be of major importance to the feminist movement.

Crothers' sympathy with the plight of children caught in the web of adult problems is present from the beginning of her career and appears rooted in her own life experience. In her autobiographical fragment, she reveals the following:

The heart of a child is perhaps the most important thing in the world. The little world in which he lives flows through it--leaving impressions and influences which nothing ever blots out. Astounding knowledge and understanding are there confused with misunderstandings which no one takes the trouble to make clear. How much a child suffers only that child knows.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 158.

⁵⁶Flexner, p. 246.

⁵⁷Kolb, p. 159.

⁵⁸Crothers, "The Box in the Attic," p. 16.

The thread of family responsibility, and mother-love especially, runs through all the plays, from the loving strength of the committed adoptive mother in A Man's World to the self-absorbed and reluctantly maternal posturings in Susan and God. It is this sense of responsibility that makes Ann Herford give up her glittering prize in He and She and that holds together the family strained to the breaking point by the generation gap in Mary the Third. In He and She, Crothers could state the very "modern" view that it is a woman's choice as to whether or not she has children, but having had them, she must put them first. In Mary the Third, after the shock of discovery of their parents' loveless marriage has subsided, young Mary and her brother want their parents to divorce since they believe that to live as a couple without love is "immoral." The play ends with a temporary separation being considered, but it is evident that family responsibility will bring the parents together again. The modern daughter, Crothers argues in Mary the Third, faces realities and copes with them better than her elders. Here is another instance of Crothers' rather romanticized optimism, if only somewhat supported by evidence. Will the "freer" girl cope with the realities of marriage (which Crothers never questions as the best way to live) better than her more repressed and suppressed mother? Further -- and this is the basic issue underlying the generation gap in Crothers' time or any other -- she understood, and used this understanding with considerable skill, that it was not ~~always~~ the younger

generation that was at fault. She claimed that she wrote Mary the Third because "the everlasting condemnation by the older generation of the younger generation and its ideas seems to me ...ridiculous and unfair..."⁵⁹

What influences did she have on contemporary women playwrights? They may be found in her pioneer status as 'an all-around successful female in the theatre, and possibly in her focus on women in her plays:

With few exceptions, every one of my plays has been a social attitude toward women at the moment I wrote it. I was so keenly interested in the social status of women that it was more or less unconscious for many years...There has been a gradual development of common sense [from the early days of her success] and the world's attitude toward women...In a way then I have been writing a sort of 'Comédie Humaine de la Femme' or a Dramatic History of Women.⁶⁰

She was a forerunner of today's successful women writers. It has been said of Doris Lessing that "she has been accused of being feminist, and accused by feminists of not being feminist enough..."⁶¹ Considered a feminist in her time, Crothers exploded this myth at the end of her career: "What a picayune, self-conscious side all this woman business has to it."⁶² As Eleanor Flexner has pointed out in her book on American playwrights, Crothers came "full circle" in her ideas of what women needed to be whole and happy: Emotional fulfillment first and foremost, with other choices of careers and economic independence secondary

⁵⁹The New York Tribune, February 25, 1923.

⁶⁰Henry Albert Phillips, "Miss Crothers Talks of Her Plays," unnamed paper, March 15, 1931. (MCNY)

⁶¹The New York Review of Books, Rosemary Dinnage's Review of "Before Her Time" by Doris Lessing, Sept. 28, 1978, p. 12.

⁶²Hughes, "Women Playwrights," May 4, 1941.

and far behind. Crothers' conclusion, as illustrated in Susan and God, her last dramatic statement of the "comédie humaine," but arrived at much earlier, is that only in harmonious human relationships do both men and women "find themselves" and are fulfilled.⁶³

Crothers cannot be said to have had much influence either in subject matter or style on the most recent female playwrights such as Maureen Duffy, Myrna Lamb, or Corinne Jacker, whose feminist points of view are strong and whose dramatic styles may be ritualistic, absurdist, expressionistic, symbolic. Crothers may be said to have had some possible influence on such contemporary women only in the concept of the "heroine of spirit." Other possibilities -- greater openness between the sexes, the single standard, the acceptance of divorce, the more supportive attitudes of women toward each other -- may owe their origins more to the social milieu, even though Crothers was one of the first American playwrights to discuss such ideas. In Play With A Tiger (1962) by Doris Lessing, for example, the heroine "is a particular type of modern women: The intellectual [in the case of this play, a writer] who refuses to make ideological and personal compromises in a world that demands them...She is attractive to men, but finds it impossible to break through the battle of the sexes and have a man on her own terms."⁶⁴ This

⁶³The New York Tribune, April 15, 1923.

⁶⁴Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch (eds.), Plays By and About Women (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), p. xi.

might be a description of Frank Ware in A Man's World, 1910!

In the 1970s, there is a change from absurdism in the theatre (a genre in which many women playwrights of the 60s wrote -- outstanding among them, Maureen Duffy, Rochelle Owens and Megan Terry) and a coming "back to a kind of realism,"⁶⁵ which recalls the work of such female playwrights as Lillian Hellman or Rachel Crothers. In the '70s, the work of female dramatists seem to come mainly "out of the concerns of the women's movement."⁶⁶ Plays such as Mod Donna by Myrna Lamb and Bits and Pieces by Corinne Jacker point up all the more how significant Crothers' work was since she was "writing plays about female experience"⁶⁷ prior to our current women's movement. It is Crothers writing as a woman about female experience in such plays as A Man's World or When Ladies Meet, whether in an earnestly engaging or a comic manner, that provides the basis on which her reputation must finally rest. It is because she wrote of what it meant to be a woman in our society in her time that today's female playwrights are able to write more freely about the physical, psychical and emotional conflicts of what it means to be a woman in our society now. Rachel Crothers, in her commercial and popular way, revealed the conflicts of "real" women⁶⁸ in her approach to divorce, family life, mother-child relationships and the career-marriage

⁶⁵Moore, The New Women's Theatre, p. xxix.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. xxx.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. xxxii.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. xxix.

conflict as surely as did her female successors.⁶⁹ When a female playwright (Corinne Jacker) in the 1970s writes: "It seems to me that what women are doing now is letting their own sensibilities come through -- you don't write like a man any more, you write like yourself,"⁷⁰ she might be describing Crothers who always wrote as herself. The current women playwrights who write out of the "female experience" -- such as Tina Howe (Birth and After Birth) or Maureen Duffy (Rites) -- write presumably out of their pain; Crothers did so too, as in A Man's World. However, the times in which she wrote, and the conventions of her (commercial) theatre when taken together with her very private personality, may account for why she didn't continue the probings of her early plays, and why the label of "facileness" or even "superficiality"⁷¹ has been often applied to her.

Crothers, "...well established as a dramatist of manners, social problems and feminine psychology..."⁷² by the end of World War I, had in serious fashion, and, later, quasi-comedically, made women articulate.⁷³ As "a writer of many representative plays and [as] an intense thinker on matters having to do with

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. xxxii and 101. Contemporary female playwrights have dealt with these matters in less idealized ways. For example, Tina Howe's Birth and After Birth deals "with grotesque comic energy [with the] rage and ambivalence motherhood brings."

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 3.

⁷¹Flexner, p. 247.

⁷²Gagey, p. 3.

⁷³The New York Tribune, "Interesting Chat," April 15, 1923.

women, her rights, her ethics, her power, and her place,"⁷⁴
Crothers earned dramatic distinction. If she was a bit romantic⁷⁵
in her conceptions of the individual and of human relationships,
her "full circle" of plays balanced the principled and vociferous
independence of her early heroines with such a conventional and
unthinking female as the trivial Susan Trexel. This is more
than a move from serious drama to satirical comedy. What Crothers
reveals about herself is the change from youthful idealism to
pragmatism and an almost resigned acceptance of things-as-they-
always-will-be. This is how she has come to perceive the human
condition, male or female. Eleanor Flexner, it will be remem-
bered, said that Crothers (together with Fitch and Moody) has
been cited as one of the main forces in carrying "over into the
theatre the progressive and growing thought of her day."⁷⁶ Such
"progressive thought," however, was stayed because of her prag-
matic approach. "...There has been a gradual development of
common sense [in] the world's attitude toward women..."⁷⁷

How well Crothers' work stands up today was given some
small test when two Off-Off Broadway productions of her plays
were presented in 1978. One was a staged reading of Expressing
Willie, elsewhere described as her 1924 satire on "the cult of
self-expression,"⁷⁸ the other a performance of He and She by the

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵The word "romantic" is used here in Pascal's meaning of
it: "The heart has its reasons of which the reason knows nothing."

⁷⁶Flexner, p. 29.

⁷⁷Phillips Interview, March 15, 1931.

⁷⁸Quinn, A History of the American Drama, p. 59.

Preparatory Repertory Company in New York's Soho district. The former, presented at the Encompass Theatre in New York on March 16, 1978, under the general title of Hear Their Voices ("Plays by Women Founders of the American Theatre, 1910-1945"), gave credence to all the pleasure expressed over Crothers' handling of dialogue, pace, theatrical sense and feeling for human relationships. The audience seemed thoroughly to enjoy the rather heavy dollop of satire (seen as such from this distance) in the mockery of "letting it all out" with Freudian overtones. It played well. He and She (seen in Soho on July 8, 1978) was well-paced and competently acted, but the didacticism of the over-emphasized issue -- the dilemma of women -- was a detriment to the play's effectiveness. When asked why he had chosen to do this play at this time, Michael Counts, the young director, said that he thought it timely because of such current issues as ERA, and also because he thought that Crothers was "America's most successful woman playwright. It blew my mind that no one knows anything about her!" The best of her plays, such as A Man's World or her later comedies like Let Us Be Gay and When Ladies Meet, might still be enjoyable theatre and are not museum pieces.

With all that she had achieved, with all her acclaim on so many theatrical fronts, why did Rachel Crothers fall into obscurity? Why has her work been virtually ignored since Susan and God? Her plays may be good "craft" rather than great "art," but many such theatre pieces have survived. Certain factors seem

to be at least contributory; her choice of themes: "She wins her immediate successes at the expense of a longevity her plays technically deserve,"⁷⁹ one contemporary critic wrote; her "snobbery," noted by another critic;⁸⁰ the fact that she wrote with "a facile pen rather than a great dramatic talent."⁸¹ Nevertheless, her ability to hold audiences by means of her deft and skillful craft, her speaking out for sexual equality over such a long period of time, and her tracing of a particular vision of women's progress in an entertaining and thought-provoking way, all add up to a great achievement in the annals of the American theatre. Some of her work deserves to be revived, first because of her understanding of the "woman issue" and its current timeliness, and second because, whatever the flaws, her plays remain eminently playable.

Crothers can best be described as a celebrator of the commonplace. Even though she made a fine start in the direction of reform and ended by reinforcing, ironically, "...the problems of female compliance,"⁸² it is no small achievement that she could both popularize -- and act as a touchstone for a deeper understanding -- the issues that she undertook to write about. On one level we hear: "...Miss Crothers is mistress of the occasion. Between women, ideas and the theatre, she manages to

⁷⁹Walter P. Eaton, Article on "Susan and God" The New York Herald Tribune, May 1, 1938.

⁸⁰Blood, p. 13.

⁸¹Mersand, p. 15.

⁸²Diana Trilling Lecture, April 17, 1978.

have and to give a good time."⁸³ On another, a more substantial note is sounded: "When, in some future day, some scholar begins his research on the social history of our times, he may well turn to the dramas of Rachel Crothers to build at least one angle of his many-sided structure."⁸⁴

⁸³Brooks Atkinson, Review of "When Ladies Meet," The New York Times, October 7, 1932.

⁸⁴Theatre Arts Monthly, December, 1932, p. 971

APPENDIX

This is a list of all Rachel Crothers' produced plays (after 1908 they were under her direction as well), together with the theatres and dates of their first productions.*

The Rector.** Madison Square Theatre, New York, April 3, 1902.

The Three of Us. Madison Square Theatre, New York, October 17, 1906.

The Coming of Mrs. Patrick. Madison Square Theatre, New York, November 6, 1907.

Myself--Bettina. Powers Theatre, Chicago, January, 1908; Daly's Theatre, New York, October 5, 1908.

A Man's World. National Theatre, Washington, D. C., October 18, 1909; Comedy Theatre, New York, February 8, 1910.

He and She. Plymouth Theatre, Boston, February 5, 1912 (as The Herfords); Little Theatre, New York, February 12, 1920 (as He and She).

Ourselves. Lyric Theatre, New York, November 13, 1913.

Young Wisdom. Criterion Theatre, New York, January 5, 1914.

The Heart of Paddy Whack. Grand Opera House, New York, November 26, 1914.

Old Lady 31. Thirty-Ninth Street Theatre, October 30, 1916.

Mother Carey's Chickens. (With Kate Douglas Wiggin.) Cort Theatre, New York, September 25, 1917.

Once Upon A Time. Fulton Theatre, New York, April 15, 1918.

A Little Journey. Little Theatre, New York, December 26, 1918.

39 East. Broadhurst Theatre, New York, March 31, 1919.

Nice People. Klaw Theatre, New York, March 3, 1921.

Everyday. Bijou Theatre, New York, November 16, 1921.

*I am indebted for the names of some of the theatres and first production dates listed here to A.H. Quinn, A History of the American Drama (1936 rev. ed.), pp. 276-7.

**A one-act play.

Appendix (cont'd.)

Mary the Third. Thirty-Ninth Street Theatre, New York, February 5, 1923.

Expressing Willie. Forty-Eighth Street Theatre, New York, April 16, 1924.

A Lady's Virtue. Selwyn Theatre, Chicago, October, 1925; Bijou Theatre, New York, November 23, 1925.

Venus.* Masque Theatre, New York, December 26, 1927.

Let Us Be Gay. Little Theatre, New York, February 21, 1929.

As Husbands Go. John Golden Theatre, New York, March 5, 1931.

Caught Wet. John Golden Theatre, New York, November 4, 1931.

When Ladies Meet. Royale Theatre, New York, October 6, 1932.

Talent. Royale Theatre, New York, December 18, 1933.

Susan and God. Plymouth Theatre, New York, October 7, 1937.

Plays Produced in Places Other Than Broadway.

Bill Comes Back.* Ford's Theatre, Baltimore, February 26, 1945.

Katy Did.** Published in The Smart Set, XXVII (January 1909), 129-36.

Mrs. Molly.** Published in The Smart Set, XXVII (March, 1909), 104-12.

Six One-Act Plays. Boston: W.H. Baker Co., 1925.

The plays are: The Importance of Being Clothed; The Importance of Being Nice; The Importance of Being Married; The Importance of Being a Woman; What They Think; Peggy.

*The only copies of this play to be found anywhere are in the MCNY Theatre Collection and exist in typescript.

** These publication details are listed in Abrahamson's dissertation, p. 412.

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The major source of all articles and reviews in all magazines, journals, newspapers and newspaper clippings listed is the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) Theatre Collection. Occasional duplications of a few clippings and reviews are to be found in the Lincoln Center and Harvard Theatre Collections. The MCNY Theatre Collection contains Mrs. Anthony D. Hoagland's bequest of Rachel Crothers memorabilia which consists of four boxes and one large envelope. Among a good deal of undifferentiated material are miscellaneous scrapbooks, one of which is marked "Newspaper Clippings." When a newspaper article or review comes from the latter, it will be designated. Where bylines, volume numbers, dates or pages are omitted, it means that they were missing in the MCNY Collection.

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Selected Newspaper Articles and Reviews

Reviews of all Crothers' plays appeared in the New York newspapers on the day following their opening. These reviews for the following original productions are to be found in the scrapbooks marked "Scrapbook" and "Newspaper Clippings" in the Rachel Crothers memorabilia in the Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

<u>The Three of Us</u>	October 18, 1906
<u>A Man's World</u>	February 9, 1910
<u>Old Lady 31</u>	October 31, 1916
<u>He and She</u>	February 13, 1920

<u>Nice People</u>	March 4, 1921
<u>Mary the Third</u>	February 5, 1923
<u>Let Us Be Gay</u>	February 22, 1929
<u>As Husbands Go</u>	March 6, 1931
<u>When Ladies Meet</u>	October 7, 1932
<u>Susan and God</u>	October 8, 1932

Specific references to these reviews appear in the body of the text.

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