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**MYTH, BIOGRAPHY AND THE FEMALE ROLE IN THE PLAYS  
OF PAM GEMS**

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## SUMMARY

In this study, I give some attention to the themes and strategies occurring throughout Pam Gems's career as a female playwright. However, my main interest lies in five of Gems's plays that feature historical and mythical female figures: *Queen Christina* (1977), *Piaf* (1978), *Camille* (1984), *Marlene* (1997) and *The Snow Palace* (1998).

My objective is not to ascertain whether or not the plays I consider capture an accurate image of female myth in history, nor even to determine whether or not there exists an accurate image of the female role in literary history. I am far more interested in the ideological uses of myth and more particularly biography, as a form of myth in relation to gender. Such an interest rests upon the understanding that the reconstruction of a life can never be detached from the source of that reconstruction; in other words, the lenses which filter the telling of a life story become at least as important as the narrative itself. Moreover, as further biographies (lenses) are written on the same subject over time, it is possible to detect a gradual reconstitution of that subject to ultimately generate a pluralist evaluation - where truth and myth are flawlessly fused. It is my aim to analyse the variety of lenses and interpretations which have filtered the lives of Gems's female protagonists with a view to discovering the contribution Gems makes in her personal and feminist reassessment of their biographical narratives.

In the beginning the thesis attempts to unite biographical theory with feminist theory and use this as a framework for investigating Gems's work. After close examination of the aforementioned plays, the thesis concludes with the assertion that Gems strongly embraces the concept of female plurality as opposed to a restrictive 'feminist' label in her revisionary recreation of the female role.



## ABBREVIATIONS

British Broadcasting Corporation	BBC
British Film Institute	BFI
Dumas fils.	Dumas
<i>Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi</i>	<i>Dusa</i>
Illinois	Ill.
Indiana	Ind.
International Studies in Theatre Association	ISTA
Massachusetts	Mass.
Michigan	Mich.
Modern Humanities Research Association	MHRA
North Carolina	NC.
New Jersey	NJ.
New York	NY.
Ohio	Oh.
Oxford University Press	OUP
Pennsylvania	Penns.
Royal Shakespeare Company	RSC
Tennessee	TN.
Texas	TX.

## INTRODUCTION

Five plays by Pam Gems - *Queen Christina* (1977), *Piaf* (1978), *Camille* (1984), *Marlene* (1997) and *The Snow Palace* (1998) - assume a central place in the following pages. Seeking to understand something about the representation of historical women, my inquiry takes place at an intersection of biographical theory, writings on women's history and recent feminist queries into theatre and drama. In an important sense, this thesis becomes as much about Queen Christina, Edith Piaf, Marguerite Gautier and the rest as about Pam Gems.

Queen Christina (1626-1689), ruling a kingdom in a world ruled by men, created a sensation when she took the Swedish throne in 1650. She compounded that sensation throughout her life, rejecting the Lutheran faith of her family, abdicating her throne in 1654, converting to Catholicism and fleeing to Rome.

Edith Piaf (1915-1963), the Parisian singer, was born into a life of destitution. She rose to international fame, projected into the public's awareness as the tiny waif with a giant's portion of talent and temperament.

Marguerite Gautier remains visible as the prototypical 'penitent whore', romanticising men's love as redemptive and women's consumption as bittersweet. Born not on royal grounds, impoverished streets nor any earthly place between, but on the pages of Alexandre Dumas fils's *La Dame aux Camélias* in 1847, Marguerite initially seems odd company for her fellow female protagonists.

Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992), the German film star and cabaret singer who seduced Hollywood with her glamorous image, offers us a revealing insight into the nature of the legendary female icon.

By stark contrast, Stanisława Przybyszewska (1901-1935), a virtually unknown Polish writer who lived alone in an unheated hut in Gdansk, exposes the intensely private life of the addictive recluse, isolated from the world in order to devote herself to the creative process.

Together, all sections of the introductory chapter create a backdrop for exploring Gems's theatrical response to these female protagonists. However, this first section mostly considers recent work in dramatic criticism, biographical theory and women's history to introduce the themes interwoven into the later analyses of the plays. Chapter Two considers Pam Gems's drama and ideological posture to build a foundation for understanding *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Camille*, *Marlene* and *The Snow Palace* discussed at length in the five subsequent chapters.

Achieving the objectives of this thesis requires, among other things, a scrutiny of the interplay among form, content and meaning. Many biographers choose to write biographies in the most traditional sense: they offer their prose as non-fiction supported by research and documentation. Others, such as Gems, opt to write novels and plays based, to varying degrees, on biographical material. Discussing examples of several approaches to biography allows me to make certain observations about the comparison between them and how they construct myth.



Most important to my study, of course, is the precise challenge of shaping biography and the female role for the stage and its consequent re-shaping of myth and history. While the reader may be expected to digest a book in portions over a period of time, typically, an audience member must consume the entire work in one relatively brief sitting. In comparison to other mediums, the dynamic of a play requires a higher degree of selectivity and a greater condensation of images and ideas. Dramatists writing biographical plays use varying formal strategies in response to this need, and analysing these strategies in relation to ideology represents one of my primary tasks.<sup>†</sup>

### **Representation, Revision and Role Models: A Methodology**

While feminist scholarship reflects a diversity of thought, two recurrent themes provide a springboard for the methodology that this section outlines: an acceptance of the concept of ‘woman as other’ and an impulse to expose the representations which continue to relegate women to this position.

One way of understanding this concept of woman as ‘other’, first articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), relies on a psychoanalytic framework. Psychoanalysis proceeds from the general assumption that an individual’s maturation process involves the separation of ‘self’ from ‘other’. This initial ‘self-other’ distinction becomes an organising cognitive principle as the individual attempts to make sense of the world. For females, such a process is complicated by the fact that the accepted way of seeing the world is from the male perspective. While the girl child must recognise herself

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<sup>†</sup> Production choices, of course, have a tremendous impact upon the kind of statement made about a play’s relation to myth, ideology and biography. Primarily, intended as an exercise in textual analysis (dramaturgy), however, this thesis discusses theatrical form and staging only as they become apparent in stage directions. It is beyond the scope of my work to reflect on the way a director and his/her staff might translate these directions into a three dimensional representation and how such a translation interacts with textual meaning.



as 'self', she is simultaneously indoctrinated in a way of seeing which automatically relegates her to 'otherness'.

Feminists reveal how representations of lives - whether through historical materials, biographies, literature or theatre - often encode the 'self-other' dichotomy into formal designs built upon male and female oppositions. Pioneering work done by film theorist Laura Mulvey<sup>1</sup> in 1975 led to widespread recognition of the designs which feed upon pre-existing "patterns of fascination" and "social formations" (6). Mulvey explains:

In a world governed by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. (6)

She posits the presence of an idealised male spectator behind the camera's "gaze" (7), as a force both constructed by and perpetuating psycho-social gender beliefs. More recent work done by women in a range of academic disciplines reflects the feminist impulse to unseat the male spectator whose presence permeates all forms of representation.†

The feminist demand for access to theatrical representation, enjoying enhanced visibility since the publication of Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), and Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* (1988) begins by exposing the characterisations and narratives which reward female passivity. Because women are depicted by culture as the 'other', they generally occupy the object (as opposed to subject) position in the traditional narrative line. By sustaining a male/subject-female/object dynamic, many narratives concretise images of female malleability. The fragile heroine of melodrama bound to the railway tracks offers one most transparent

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† This theory is further investigated in Gems's play *Marlene* in which I posit Josef Von Sternberg as the creator of the Dietrich myth, fuelled by his scopophilic desire to be the quintessential spectator of her image.



example of such imagery. Several female character types compliment such imagery. The virtuous beauty a reward for the hero's ardour, the calculating shrew stalemated in a form of poetic justice, and other popular female stereotypes, simply become part of the environment on which male characters imprint themselves. Feminists have routed these character types out of centuries of dramatic literature.

As long as agency is embodied predominantly in male characters, drama endorses the uneven distribution of power in actual male and female lives. Agency, in opposition to powerlessness, is a key concept in the pages which follow. Carolyn Heilbrun and Michelene Wandor offer compelling observations for understanding agency in very different contexts. Throughout *Carry on, Understudies*,<sup>2</sup> her book about British theatre and feminism, Wandor valorises the concept of 'self-determination' for women, while in *Writing a Woman's Life*,<sup>3</sup> addressing women's biography and autobiography, Heilbrun speculates on power and powerlessness:

The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or woman. Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in friendship and in politics. (18)

My concept of agency fuses Wandor's notion of self-determination to Heilbrun's notion of power. Agency is the ability to shape one's own identity and the potency to have an impact upon the environment. Agency includes autonomy, power and visibility.

Many feminist critics consider the role of theatrical form in disabling images of female agency. They argue that, like traditional plot and character strategies, traditional forms often enforce restrictive gender oppositions. Most suspect in this regard is

dramatic realism. The presumably objective point of view in realism becomes analogous to the gaze of the camera as construed by Mulvey. Dolan, Case and others see this pretence as a facade for endorsing dominant perspectives, and in her 1989 article, 'Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine*', Vivian M. Patraka<sup>4</sup> proposes that:

...the seamless unity of realism conceals the history of its own making, thereby suggesting that all the events which are depicted occur naturally and inevitably.  
(128)

In 'Realism, Narrative and the Feminist Playwright', written the same year, Jeanie Forte<sup>5</sup> argues that realism's "apparently objective or distanced viewpoint," works to render "the operations of ideology covert" (115). Forte and Patraka offer variations of a similar idea: that the pretence of objectivity in realism enables presentation of the playwright's biases as larger than self, as part of a reality we all must share. Through realist form, a playwright makes a tacit claim for close resemblance between the world of the play and the external world, concluding that realist drama is antithetical to feminism.

Such a claim, as Patraka's article begins to reveal, takes on added dimension when dealing with plays based on historical material. When historical sources are presented from a presumed objective point of view, the authority of realism multiplies. By making historical references in a form implying solid basis in reality, such plays take on documentary appearance and allow the playwright to pose as a chronicler through whom past events come to life.

In *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism*, Patricia Schroeder takes issue with theorists such as Case, Dolan and Forte. Schroeder offers a reasoned response to feminists who completely reject realism for its associations with patriarchal structures of



power. Schroeder provides this much-needed rejoinder to the anti-realist arguments by emphasising the importance of context and history in the analysis of any work potentially deemed feminist. Early in her discussion, Schroeder highlights a central problem with much of the anti-realist debate: the assumption of a static form for realism. As Schroeder explains, theatre theorists must realise the fluidity of such terms; the fact that these forms constantly evolve, and that artists adapt forms to fit their needs, makes it very difficult for critics to generalise about them. Similarly, an analysis of the historical and cultural contexts in which a theatrical work appeared reveals the multiple dramaturgical possibilities within the designation of feminist dramas. In my opinion, it is the latter of these two points - the need for historically aware, 'contextual' feminism - that makes Schroeder's work both timely and important. Much of the debate she engages developed from a post-structuralist sensibility that championed contemporary feminist, non-realist theatre for its subversion of traditional dramatic form. For historians of women's dramaturgy, however, these edicts have always been specious, precisely because they have not considered as legitimately feminist the plays of earlier eras that were written for expressly feminist purposes and received as such by their audiences.

Surprisingly, one of the questions Schroeder does not consider is why the authors she examines i.e. Marsha Norman and Wendy Kesselman, specifically chose theatre as the place to represent their characters' lives and to portray their political agendas. The connections between live performance and the politics of the dramaturgy perhaps underlie her arguments, but she makes the links between staging and feminism explicit only in her discussion of this contemporary revisionist realism.



Complementing Schroeder, Sheila Stowell in her article 'Rehabilitating Realism' argues convincingly that realism is not the monolith that critics with limited historical awareness sometimes mistakenly perceive.<sup>†</sup> Grounding her debate in a theatrical context, Stowell not only discusses realism in terms of history but also emphasises its connection with feminism. For her, realism is **not** an ideology but an aesthetic structure. While it is true that this structure (like all discursive models) is implicated in the political ideologies that led to its construction, Stowell argues that the structure itself is not the equivalent of patriarchal oppression. She states that:

... while dramatic and theatrical styles may be developed or adopted to naturalise or challenge particular positions, dramatic forms [ e.g. realism] are not in themselves narrowly partisan... While genres or styles ... may not be politically neutral, they are capable of presenting a range of ideological positions; the issue is not so much formal as historical, contextual and phenomenological. (87)

In any form, historical subject matter enjoys a form of credibility beyond the reach of mere fiction. Many plays re-enact the past through pageantry, song, expansive chronologies and locales but all heralds the playwright's engagement with a world external to the play, a dimension beyond wholly subjective experience. The authority wielded by the historical referent, whether it stands at the fore of theatre designed to capture the illusion of real life or lingers at the periphery of ornate pageantry, is ever present. In *Historical Drama*, Herbert Lindenberger<sup>6</sup> notes that:

... our first notion in reflecting about a history play is not to view it as an imaginative structure in its own right but to ask how it deals with historical materials. (3)

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<sup>†</sup> Stowell's intention behind her article was to prove that the case against realism was "not as strong or as self-evident as its proponents would have us believe." Her argument reviews some of the "principal charges that have been levelled against realism as a form - and the dangers inherent in, what seems to be a type of ahistorical thinking." See Sheila Stowell, 'Rehabilitating Realism', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 6 (1992), 81-88 (p. 81).



And he continues:

...whether we stress a work's closeness to or independence from its sources, we are thinking within a framework based on a play's relationship to the historical reality it purports to imitate. (3)

Through form a playwright projects a specific attitude on to the history s/he evokes and on to the gender relations contained within that history. Feminist criticism has special applications for analysing the representation of historical lives in relation to gender systems. Historical drama might endorse, challenge or bemoan gender relations, but on some level those relations always feed into its design. Male and female, as well as agency and powerlessness, objectivity and subjectivity, celebration and lamentation become part of a myriad of oppositions through which historical images are filtered through present perceptions.

My effort to situate Gems's female protagonists in the midst of these opposing forces is an exercise in dramatic criticism, which I hope will contribute to the dialogue surrounding ideology and theatrical form. Before this specific task might be accomplished, however, it is important to come to terms with various issues raised about gender and historical/mythical images which go beyond the theatrical context. The remainder of this chapter looks to biographical theory, women's history and gender performativity to isolate the premises on which later analyses build.

Revolutions toward modern concepts of biography and history, like the feminist critique of theatrical form, turn upon the question of objectivity. Representation of historical lives (in any fashion) imprints design upon detail. Modern theories of



biography and history are defined, in part, by the greater emphasis they place on design and its importance. These theories surrendering the pretence that facts speak for themselves, openly embrace the combination of objective fact and subjective reconstruction inherent in historical and biographical writing.

The movement toward modern biography precedes its counterpart in history by several decades. This movement actually works to disassociate biography from history and stress its affinities with literature. Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf stand at the fore of this movement: rebelling against the extensive accumulation of facts which characterised Victorian biographical practices, they opened the door to a new understanding of biography as a self-conscious and artistic construct. Strachey's Preface to *Eminent Victorians* written in 1918, is often cited as a watershed in thinking about biography, just as the four studies it contains ('Cardinal Manning', 'Dr. Arnold', 'Florence Nightingale' and 'General Gordon') are seen as the prototypes of modern biographical writing. Woolf's contribution to biographical theory includes two short essays, 'The Art of Biography', 'The New Biography' and a novel, *Orlando: A Biography*.

Strachey's preface is a mere two-and-a-half pages long, and fittingly so, for one of the main points it argues for is the efficacy of brevity. He faults the Victorian biographer for voluminous works which he finds characterised by "slipshod style", a "tone of tedious panegyric" and a "lack of selection, detachment or design."<sup>7</sup> He expresses his admiration for the French practice of "compressing into a few shining pages the manifold existences of men," (vii.) and argues in favour of a "brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant," and concludes "that surely, is the first duty of the biographer." (ix.)

Recognising the centrality of arrangement and interpretation, Strachey ultimately views his approach as one which elevates biography to an art, graced by selectivity, design and point of view. In *The Nature of Biography*, Robert Gittings<sup>8</sup> maintains that:

... biography designed as literature derives mainly from [Strachey]... After Strachey, no good biographer has dared to be less than an artist. (39)

Woolf reiterates many of Strachey's ideas in a fashion clarifying their application to a discussion which anticipates investigation of biographical drama. Woolf more clearly articulates the specific processes through which biographers negotiate fact and artistry. Like Strachey, she implies a spectrum with history at one end and literature at the other. She identifies how the biographer is obligated to both ends. When, in 'The Art of Biography'<sup>9</sup> she likens the biographical subject in Victorian biography to:

...the wax figures presented in Westminster Abbey ... effigies that have only a superficial likeness to the body in the coffin. (223)

she indicates the inadequacy of a mere listing of facts. In 'The New Biography'<sup>10</sup> she argues that, "the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life," which "dwells in the personality rather than in the act," and tempts the biographer to "use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion and dramatic effect to expound the private life." (234)

The way Woolf prioritises "personality" over "the act" illuminates a key element in the evolution from Victorian to modern concepts of biography, which move away from the attitudes Victorian biographers typically took toward their subjects. In *Biography*:



*Fiction, Fact and Form*, Ira Bruce Nadel<sup>11</sup> identifies the importance of Plutarch to the Victorian biographer. Nadel explains:

The Plutarchian ideal... taught the suppression of uncomfortable or too revealing facts in an effort to maintain nobility of character.(17)

For the typical Victorian, biography served as a didactic function. Operating under the influences of Freud and Marx, the modern biographer is less likely to depict his/her subject as removed from the larger population on the basis of other-worldly superiority, but rather as firmly rooted in psychological and/or socio-economic details. Generally speaking, the biographical subject is no longer revered as an example to be emulated but never equalled, yet is featured as a study in the various forces shaping an individual character.

Woolf's work also clarifies how the interplay between history and literature in modern biography interacts with assumptions about credible portraiture. Rather than suggesting that biography's affinities with literature undercut the authenticity of its rendering, Woolf suggests that literary devices facilitate the most palpable rendering of biographical subject. Through literary design, the biographer captures the essence of a life lived and creates an impression of a unique individual. Such achievements, Woolf believes, are not possible through a dry accumulation of facts. She chastises the Victorian biographer for over-reliance on superficial details. Such unmodulated details, she argues, accumulate only to leave the reader in desperate search for:

...a voice or laughter, for curse or anger, for any trace that this fossil was once a living man.<sup>12</sup>

Woolf ultimately stipulates that: “Facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity.”(229)

In *Orlando*, Woolf takes a rather playful approach to exploring biography. Moving between references to specific historical events and plot devices involving free flights of fancy, Woolf seems to be dramatising the tension between fact and imagination which figures so prominently in her essays. Nadel describes *Orlando* as “metabiography” which “not only contains a theory of biography, but shows that theory at work.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Orlando: A Modernist Experiment in Historical Biography**

*Orlando* begins in Elizabethan England, closes on October 11th, 1928, and unfolds the ‘biography’ of a subject who not only ages a mere twenty years but changes from male to female midway through the narrative. Woolf stresses the biographer’s interpretative control over the life s/he renders by treating these rather remarkable chronological and biological details with a glaring matter-of-factness. She creates a world where such details are relegated to the level of “simple facts”<sup>14</sup> and hence, given relatively little attention. When Orlando’s sex changes, Woolf insists that, although it may be tempting to search for ways to explain this occurrence, doing so would interrupt the narrative unduly. She writes:

It is enough for us to state the simple fact: Orlando was a man until the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. (128)



In stark contrast to the casual manner in which Woolf presents the ‘fact’ of Orlando’s transformation from male to female is the way she handles what might appear to be the more mundane minutia of the plot. Great attention is given, for instance, to Orlando’s process of choosing his/her clothing and this clothing is described in careful detail.<sup>†</sup> Woolf devotes but a few short sentences to the contrast between the weather patterns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where she might devote a number of lengthy paragraphs on detailing a conversation between Orlando and his/her lover.

*Orlando* juxtaposes two time-lines; the personal one of the subject and the one consisting of certain historical events. Various facts serve as anchors to keep Woolf’s ‘biography’ grounded in historical reality. Moving between these anchors is an account of the trials and tribulations of her subject, recounted in particularised detail against a generalised historical background. Every biographer must contend with the co-existence of two such time-lines. Woolf underscores the distinction between the two by having one chronology span twenty years and the other three hundred.

With the modern emphasis on selectivity and brevity, metaphor becomes a crucial instrument for the biographer. The biographer must find a ‘part’ to ‘act’ for the whole and often does so through images which seem to best capture the essence of a life lived: Choices about setting and situation take on considerable weight. Woolf’s decision, for example, to reveal character in scenes of dressing facilitates understanding of her subject on several levels. These scenes help create an image of physical presence and the methodical way Orlando selects and dons his/her attire provides a revealing glimpse at her

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<sup>†</sup> This technique is also used by Gems in *Piaf* and *Queen Christina* and will be discussed further in their respective chapters. It appears that types of clothes worn by the female protagonists take on a semiotic significance, indicating wealth, emotions and in Christina’s case even choice of gender.



personality. Finally, scenes of dressing condense the idea that Orlando's adaptation to the changing world was facilitated by a certain love for the external trappings of fashion.†

*Orlando*, though unabashedly fiction, offers a model for exploring how meaning is created in modern biography. Plot, setting, and metaphor attach significance to factual detail. Modern biography might be said to enjoy both the advantages of poetic licence and the embellished respectability conferred upon the 'true story.' The biographer accesses history without being subject to the rigorous expectations (about thoroughness, fidelity to fact and proof) which typically confront the historian. Modern historians have sought to re-address these expectations, but on the whole, history remains bound to standards far more exacting than those generally applied to biography.

### **Biography, History and Feminist Theory**

While Strachey and Woolf succeeded in nudging biography toward the literary end of a spectrum between history and literature, modern historians must work with an altogether different kind of spectrum. Their spectrum locates empirical knowledge at one end and the interpretative act at the other.

Hayden White, one of the most prolific and influential of modern historians, exhorts historians to move away from the guise of empirical understanding. In *Tropics of Discourse*,<sup>15</sup> he writes:

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† A similar statement could be made about Gems's portrayal of Edith Piaf and Marlene Dietrich. Gems shows their adaptation to a changing world as being facilitated by significant choices in attire.

Many historians continue to treat their 'facts' as though they were 'given,' and refuse to recognise, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much found but constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomenon before him. It is the same notion of objectivity that bends historians to an uncritical use of chronological framework for their narratives. (42)

White's remarks challenge the pretence that any one authoritative interpretation of the past exists. Such a challenge has particularly radical implications for understanding the historical representation of gender. Challenging the authority of presumably objective accounts of history means, among other things, shedding light on the gender biases they often encode. This task (like the work in feminist dramatic criticism exposing the liabilities inherent in traditional representations) is at the heart of a feminist 'revisioning'<sup>†</sup> of history.

Ultimately, while I hope to show the role of biography in feminist 'revisioning' - and this chapter concludes with an overview of feminist contributions to biographical theory - work from women's history helps articulate the challenges fundamental to dignifying the lives of women. Feminists must remove women from their untenable positions as 'others' of history without either emulating existing models or simply creating a different set of repressive images.<sup>††</sup>

The most lucid illumination of this challenge is offered by Gerda Lerner in *The Majority Finds its Past*.<sup>16</sup> Lerner identifies the relative values and liabilities of the various approaches which have been taken to women's history. For example, she

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<sup>†</sup> I use the term 'revisioning' here, in acknowledgement of Elaine Aston who uses the term to link together the process of revising, in terms of 'rewriting' with another definition of revising which means 'looking again' (viewing with a different perspective). See Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminist Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 32. I believe that the term crystallises a dynamic which is at work in Gems's writing of the female role.

<sup>††</sup> Again, my hypothesis is that Gems reflects this viewpoint in her writing of the female role.



describes one approach as the “history of notable women.” (7) Such history provides vital recognition of the important achievements of women, but also emulates traditional male models with its emphasis on the big events and key players. Exclusive reliance on such an approach, she argues:

...does not tell us much about those activities in which most women engaged, nor does it tell us about the significance of women’s activities to society as a whole.  
(145)

A second approach, “contribution history,” (8) seeks to identify women’s roles in various social movements, such as abolition or New Deal reform. Lerner maintains that this approach also has validity and potential pitfalls. Often foregrounding the social movements themselves, contribution history threatens to ignore:

...the ways in which women were aided and affected by the work and ... the ways in which they themselves grew into feminist awareness. (147)

Lerner identifies a third approach to writing women’s history as a focus on the struggle for women’s rights. Again she notes both the strengths and weaknesses inherent to such an approach:

While inferior status and oppressive restraints were no doubt aspects of women’s historical experience, and should be so recorded, the limitation of this approach is that it makes it appear either that women were largely passive or that, at the most, they reacted to male pressures or to the restraints of patriarchal society.  
(147)

The above remark identifies a central problematic in the writing of women’s history. How can women’s subordinate status throughout history be reconciled without construing historical women as victims? In *The Majority Finds its Past*, Lerner

construing historical women as victims? In *The Majority Finds its Past*, Lerner ultimately argues against a sweeping vision of women as history's unwitting victims. She takes her cue from Mary Beard,<sup>†</sup> whom she credits as:

... the first to point out that the ongoing and continuing contribution of women to the development of human culture cannot be found by treating them only as victims of oppression. (147-48)

Lerner returns to this theme in her more recent work, *The Creation of Patriarchy*<sup>17</sup> and argues:

While women have been victimised by ... their long subordination to men, it is a fundamental error to try to conceptualise women primarily as victims. To do so at once obscures what must be assumed as a 'given' of women's historical situation: women are essential and central to creating society; they are, and always have been actors and agents in history. (5)

Lerner recognises both the fact of women's subordination and their agency within it.<sup>††</sup>

Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Linda Gordon contribute further to understanding the tension between victimisation and agency in women's history. In trying to understand how women have been both victims and perpetrators of the processes which oppress them, questions invariably arise about women's participation in various male movements. At what point can women be said to make an impact upon male designs, and at what point do they appear simply assimilated into them? In a variation on Lerner's critique of

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<sup>†</sup> Mary Ritter Beard (1876-1958), an American historian was the first female writer to theorise on the contribution of women to human culture as being other than grounded in victimisation and oppression. Her ideas as set out in *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: Collier Press, 1962) seem to have provided the catalyst for Lerner's theories.

<sup>††</sup> Lerner's theory here seems to coincide with Gems's criteria. I believe she creates female roles in order to highlight the dichotomous female position of 'actor' and 'agent'.



“contribution history,” Smith-Rosenberg’s ‘The Feminist Reconstruction of History’<sup>18</sup> identifies two contrasting approaches to understanding the work of nineteenth century women social reformers. One approach disdains the efforts of these women as simply complicit with “bourgeois class interests.” (30) The contrasting approach applauds the achievement of these women, and recognises them not merely as contributors to a male system but as reformers of it.

Growing out of the contrast in these perceptions, Smith-Rosenberg contends is “the whole knotty issue of economic or cultural determinism.” (30) The first perception implies deterministic understanding, seeing the women as mere extensions of male-defined interests, while the second view portrays the women as wielding autonomous power. Smith-Rosenberg, without really favouring any one conceptualisation of women’s history, reveals how a tension between assimilation and reform runs parallel to the tension between treatments of women as victims or agents.†

Linda Gordon reveals another variation upon the central challenge embedded in women’s efforts to reclaim history. In ‘What’s New in Women’s History?’<sup>19</sup> Gordon argues that “the greatest of our contradictions has been between domination and resistance.” (22) She continues by asserting:

Sometimes we feel impelled to document oppression, diagram the structures of domination, specify the agents and authors of domination, mourn the damages. Sometimes we feel impelled to defend our honour and raise our spirits by documenting our struggles and identifying successes in mitigating the tyranny. (23)

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† It is interesting to observe how Gems treats this tension between victim and agency in the discussion of her plays.

Gordon argues that women's history must embrace both avenues and accept the difficulty of "writing interpretations of the past that encompass both domination and resistance."

(28) While Gordon's terminology evokes a somewhat deterministic view (defining women through their subordinate status, whether they are seen buckling under that status or pushing against it) like Lerner, she valorises the portrayal of historical women as individuals who simultaneously act and are acted upon.

Because Gordon's essay also considers the opposition between empirical knowledge and interpretative act, she helps bring my discussion of women's history full circle. She identifies two impulses - "poles of energy" (21) as she calls them - in women's history. One of these presupposes "the possibility of a truth achieved through historical objectivity" (22) in the tradition of empiricism. Following this impulse, women's historians seize the authority associated with fact to reveal how existing accounts of history have either misrepresented or rendered women invisible. The contrasting one gives priority to the interpretative act by "rejecting the possibility of objectivity and accepting the humanistic and story-telling function of history." This impulse "stimulated us to create new myths to serve our aspirations." (22)

I have used Gordon, Lerner and Smith-Rosenberg's work to introduce several key questions for feminist 'revisioning'. Removing women from the margins of male discourse requires a balancing act between images of subordination and transcendence, images of co-optation and contribution, of fact and legend, triumph and despair. While the necessity of revision is widely accepted among feminists, they differ in determining the precise distribution between these various, often contradictory, images. To fully appreciate this difference (and to help map out my own ideological position) it is useful to



consider the various strains of feminist thought and how each one interacts with the issues surrounding revision.<sup>†</sup>

Commentators, including Dolan and Wandor, identify three main strains of feminist thought. Wandor's definitions of radical, socialist and bourgeois feminisms, offered in *Carry on Understudies*, correspond roughly with Dolan's explanations of cultural, materialist and liberal feminisms in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. In 'cultural' or 'radical' feminism, biological differences are foregrounded to celebrate the unique qualities presumed inherent to female identity(ies). Contrasting with feminism based on such essentialist beliefs is 'materialist' or 'socialist' feminism which perceives gender inequality as socially defined and controlled. 'Liberal' or 'bourgeois' feminism works within existing systems to give women access to greater social and economic status.

Before linking these separate visions of feminism to the implications they hold for history and biography, I would like to offer that each vision has its unique appeal. Liberal feminism has certain practical possibilities which are not always entirely clear in the other two conceptualisations, but, at worst, it enables women with educational and other socio-economic advantages simply to be assimilated into existing (i.e. patriarchal) systems. There is something comforting in the cultural feminist notion of immutable bonds between women, but like any sweeping notion this one is overly simplistic, if not insulting. The materialist or socialist dynamic accounts for the greatest complexity in an analysis of the social mechanisations which perpetuate sexism.

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<sup>†</sup> In analysing these strains of feminist thought, I hope they will coincide with Gems's 'revisioning' of the female role.

Because I seek to understand how dramaturgy re-enacts certain social constructions of gender, my own approach relies most heavily on the materialist dynamic. I must admit, however, to initially finding the very categories problematically divisive and thus, reductive. My current feeling is that they offer a meaningful critical framework while, not divisive after all, working against a narrow definition of feminism to account for the range of perspectives which constitute feminist belief.

This range of perspectives, to return to my main line of thought; interacts meaningfully with the various tensions surrounding feminist 'revisioning'. Cultural, liberal and materialist feminisms imply varying postures toward history, and the value of its revision for present and future lives. Glorifying the gulf between men and women, the cultural feminist dynamic is abetted by a deterministic vision of the past. Such a vision takes separate male and female spheres as 'given' and encourages women to recognise their common-ground as it reaches back through time. The myth-making impulse in history thus has special appeal for the cultural feminist, pointing the way for celebratory images of women united. Fact (particularly where it can uphold a damning image of male transgressions) also serves the cultural feminist agenda. But seeking to understand history through an essentialist vision of male and female invariably leads to the suggestion that victimisation has been the defining factor of women's experience. This suggestion, as both Lerner and Gordon's discussions imply, carries with it some troubling implications. Not only does it make dignifying the contributions and participations of historical women problematic, this suggestion ultimately, leads to a rather bleak vision of the future. If history verifies that the gulf between men and women is really unbridgeable, the only logical alternative to male oppression and chauvinism is female oppression and chauvinism.



While liberal feminism devotes less energy to understanding women's oppression than to formulating a response to it, its tacit acceptance of existing systems seems at the heart of any connection between liberal feminism and historical writing. Seeking to articulate women's fitness to compete with men would seem best facilitated by the projects Lerner described as "contribution history" and the "history of notable women." The liberal feminist agenda would also be best served by images (to hark back to Smith-Rosenberg's discussion) of women reforming male systems and would be problematised by any implication that women were merely assimilated or 'tokenised' by those systems.

Because materialist feminism locates oppression in social systems and not in innate biological differences, it seems most compatible with the complexity of analysis advocated by Lerner and Gordon. Rather than looking to history to simply affirm images of women's oppression, the materialist project enables exploration of the historical processes through which oppression has been institutionalised. Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women'<sup>20</sup> (an essay greatly influencing the analyses at the heart of this thesis) undertakes just such exploration. Casting a feminist eye upon the theories of Marx, Engels, Levi-Strauss, Freud and Lacan, Rubin reveals how women's oppression is interwoven into the fabric of social organisation.

Rubin considers not how women and men differ, but how specific relations between the sexes have been legislated. While later chapters will extrapolate on her specific conclusions, for now it is only important to reveal the implications such analyses hold for feminist 'revisioning'. Guided by a philosophy such as Rubin's, revision works to expose how discourse breeds divisiveness between men and women and, by extension, to promote alternative ways of interacting. In contrast to the implications embedded in

the rubric of cultural feminism, the materialist critique suggests a more hopeful prognosis about the future. Rubin explains:

The analysis of the cause of women's oppression forms the basis for any assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender hierarchy. (156)

These remarks express a very clear attitude toward the specific use or (to sustain her evocation of Marxist terminology) "use-value" (156) a feminist 'revisioning' of the past holds for the present and for the future. As the above paragraphs and quotations hopefully illustrate, feminists express varying beliefs about the goal of revision. They share, however, a recognition that removing historical women from the margins of dominant discourse represents a crucial and invigorating endeavour.

For the woman biographer, this endeavour often becomes a highly personal one. In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Heilbrun offers a strong statement about the place of biography in the search for role models. She writes:

We women have begun to search for life somewhere, narrated as biography, which might give us courage to live our own.<sup>21</sup>

In accordance, she argues, women's biography needs to present subjects as autonomous beings rather than in the shadows of men. The agenda Heilbrun identifies has clear affinities with women's history which portrays women as agents rather than victims, but the discussions which surround biography are somewhat different and warrant attention. Biography, in comparison to history, is generally more interested in the private world of its subjects. This interest affords, among other things, a close scrutiny of a subject's



intimate relationships and encourages reflection on the impact of those relationships on a subject's larger experience.

According to Heilbrun, traditional trends in women's biography worked to support an understanding of female lives as determined through their relationships with men. In the main, she argues, women writing biography prior to 1970 tended either to write about men or about the wives of famous men.<sup>†</sup> When they departed from these two subjects, their efforts generally adhered to the same implicit belief in the greater importance of male lives:

Female biographers, that is, if they wrote about women, chose comfortable subjects whose fame was thrust upon them. Such subjects posed no threatening questions; their atypical lives provided no disturbing model for the possible destinies of other women. (17)

Heilbrun's reference to "women whose fame was thrust upon them" implies how even a biography featuring a 'notable' woman might sustain a male-identified perspective. By asserting that the status of a famous woman depends wholly on men, the biographer qualifies her subject's importance.

Heilbrun considers the 1970 publication of Nancy Milford's *Zelda*<sup>22</sup> as a turning point in women's biography. Milford's work also commands the focus of William H. Epstein's article, 'Milford's *Zelda* and the Poetics of the New Feminist Biography.'<sup>23</sup> Both Heilbrun and Epstein argue that *Zelda* exemplifies a new approach to biography which works to remove women from the margins of men's narratives. Where *Zelda* Fitzgerald previously had been treated as consequential only with regard to the life and

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<sup>†</sup> It is interesting to note that Gems has deliberately managed to subvert this tradition in her play entitled *Stanley* (1996). Here, the story of the infamous painter is recounted via the dominance of his wife and mistress, and thus he proves inferior. Spencer is merely used as a vehicle for discussing the lives of the females, instead of the opposite being true.

work of her husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Milford presents her as a woman with legitimate talents and ambitions in her own right. Because both husband and wife were writers, and because both wrote fiction with decidedly autobiographical inspiration, the struggle between the Fitzgeralds becomes a metaphor for understanding how women must struggle to seize language and discourse to define their own worlds. Heilbrun explains:

Only in 1970 were we ready to read, not that Zelda had destroyed Fitzgerald but Fitzgerald her; he usurped her narrative.<sup>24</sup>

Two important essays reveal how feminist biographers seek narratives of empowerment through their subjects. In Alix Kates Shulman's 'Living Our Life'<sup>25</sup> and Bell Chevigny's 'Daughter Writing,'<sup>26</sup> a rescue motif recurs in the biographer-subject relationship. Shulman discusses how she chose to write Emma Goldman's biography. She first considered the possibility of writing about Goldman's lover and manager, Ben Reitman, but soon rejected the idea. She asserts that:

I could not in conscience choose a man for my next subject. Emma had a hand in rescuing me from what seemed like a dangerously passive life; the least I could do was carry on the rescue operation.<sup>27</sup>

Chevigny adopts a family metaphor to explain a similar vision of women's biography:



Women writing about women, I am persuaded, are likely to move toward a subject that symbolically reflects their internalised relations with their mothers and that offers them an opportunity to recreate those relations. Whether our foremothers are famous and their histories distorted, or unknown and their histories neglected, the act of daughters writing about them is likely to be, on some level, an act of retrieval that is experienced as rescue, the fantasy of reciprocal reparations is likely to become an underlying impulse in it. That is, in the rescue (the reparative interpretation and recreation of a woman who was neglected or misunderstood) we may be seeking indirectly the reparative rescue of ourselves, in the sense of coming to understand and accept ourselves better.<sup>28</sup>

I am uncomfortable with the way Chevigny's family metaphor idealises mother-daughter relationships. And, I would argue, fascination with the lives of historical figures often occurs when women seek the kind of role models that (for one reason or another) they could not find in their own mothers. Nonetheless, Chevigny's image of "reciprocal reparations" raises an important point about the interaction between the biographer and her material. While manipulation of detail is a constant in biographical practice, a very distinct form of manipulation is bound to occur in the search for role models. A writer, eager to find feminist inspiration in her subject, may be tempted to emphasise certain facets of identity and downplay others. As feminists work to detach interpretations of women's lives from male definitions, however, they face dual challenges. They must free the past from the debilitating gender biases which have filtered its telling without denying the complexity of historical situations and personalities. In striving to overcome the limitations imposed by stereotypic treatments in the discourses of men, feminists must be wary of creating their own stereotypes. Even if such stereotypes project more positive images of women, they still hinder the textured understanding necessary to dignify historical women.



Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's 'Second Thoughts',<sup>29</sup> reveals one woman's struggle to negotiate reverence and accuracy. Hall discusses some of the factors frustrating her process as suffragette Jessie Daniel Ames's (1883-1972) biographer. Among these were the conventional ones that obstruct the efforts of women - traditional models of psychological and intellectual thought which seemed, at best, ill-suited to her purposes. But she also experienced a different kind of frustration, one growing out of the disparity between her ambitions to mythologise Jessie Daniel Ames and the portrait which began to emerge from the evidence at hand. Hall explains:

Among my own limitations was an unrealistic belief in the promise of sisterhood, nurtured by an idealistic view of the women in my own family, by the early women's liberation movement and by the scholarship on the nineteenth century female world. Once I discovered Jessie Daniel Ames's conflicted relationships with men, I looked for evidence that she relied for support and intimacy on women instead. What I found was that even as she devoted herself entirely to a female **public** world, her private relationships with women were often marked either by distance and reserve or by stormy competition. The question then was what to do with this unwelcome evidence of ambivalence where I had hoped to find female bonds. ... Here, I had to struggle not just with concern about discrediting an admirable woman, but with my own feelings of disappointment, even, dislike. (27)

Hall's earliest work had been focused on the public figure. Efforts to flesh out this portrait were facilitated by Ames's daughter, Lulu Ames, who provided Hall with Jessie's papers. Lulu knew that these papers would thwart the saintly image Hall had of Jessie. In a letter to a friend (which was later turned over to Hall) Lulu Ames described her motives.



I do not mean that I didn't love Mother, that she didn't do a tremendous job, that she wasn't magnetic and creative and brilliant, that all her public life and work weren't remarkable ... But ... the whole person isn't known and the whole person was human and real and good and bad. And if Jackie writes a thing on Mother, I want it to be on **all** of Mother. (25)

The feminist biographer must not only map out a place between history and literature, but one between tribute and authenticity - just as she must negotiate agency and victimisation to fully reveal the complexity of the historical texture.

### **Performance Theory and Gender**

As well as using aspects of feminist and biographical theory to explore Gems's use of the female role, it also seems appropriate to discuss performance theory in relation to Gems's work. In *Gender Trouble*,<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler offers an interesting insight into the performativity of gender which can be used as a tool for examining Gems's female protagonists. Butler recommends, in common with Foucault, a disaggregation of sexual categories and their heterosexist binary organisation on the basis that the sexed body cannot be located outside of discursive frameworks: "The body's sexuality and the direction of its desires are constructions within these frameworks." (224) Butler continues:

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. Identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. (224)

Discussion of Gems's plays should prove that her writing of the female role acknowledges Butler's notion of female identity. Namely, that it is premature to insist "on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women," since this insistence "inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category." (4)



Substantially working in a Foucauldian<sup>†</sup> framework and critiquing the "foundationalist reasoning of identity politics," (142) Butler argues for a shift from a grammar of identity (which privileges being) to an account of 'doing gender' as a performative enactment. Here the concept of the performative appears to cover two different senses. Firstly, it exists in Butler's account as a form of ideological mystification in which 'doing' serves to confirm or compel gender as 'being' - identity is performatively constructed. Butler writes:

The notion of sex as substance is achieved through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that 'being' a sex or gender is fundamentally impossible. Gender is an enactment that performatively constitutes the appearance of its own interior fixity. (21)

Secondly, the 'performative' and 'the performance' seem to become synonymous, or at least closely related, terms, and are discussed as radical ways of revealing the multiple constructions of gender identity and of opening up to "the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings" (92). Butler's repeated references throughout the text to subversion of traditional gender roles i.e. drag-acts and transvestism, reinforce the image of the theatricality of gender, of the performance aspects of the performative, and of the corporeal basis of gender roles:

Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself. (146)

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<sup>†</sup> Foucault rejects the "very idea of a stable, centred identity as a repressive fiction" and construes resistance to power as resistance to (or even liberation from) identity. Butler is an example of a feminist writer who is inclined to view Foucault's emphasis on gender plurality as presenting possibilities rather than problems. It is my opinion that Gems's writing also reflects this. See L. McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 108.



In short, the radical play of the performative is pitted against the essentialism of an identity-politics.

In accordance with Butler, Gems uses the figure of the cross-dresser (e.g. *Queen Christina*) and the transvestite (e.g. *Aunt Mary*) in her plays. Further discussion of Butler's theory of the performativity of gender in relation to Gems's plays will appear in subsequent chapters.

### New Biographical Theory

The concept of the performative has also generated new insights into recent developments in biographical theory. For a biographical theorist such as Laura Marcus, the 'performative' means:

... 'embodiment', a speaking-out of self-hood, and an enactment of 'situation' and 'position' which exploits the spatial and substantive metaphors of political affiliation, while insisting upon the singularity of the self or body occupying a particular space.<sup>31</sup>

The focus shared by biographical theorists on the performative suggests certain common tendencies in the cultural field which complements Gems's writing of the female role:

The performative allows for the valorisation of personal histories, a stress on the positional, a certain anti-theoreticism, a sense of the importance of 'speaking out' as a way of authorising identity while at the same time identity is said to be performatively constituted rather than pre-discursive.

Yet, for Marcus, the performative, in relation to biography, is defined in a variety of ways:

...as experience/action opposed to theory; as de-authorising play and performance; as authenticating identity and positionality; as deceit, duplicity and self-referentiality; as an ethical discourse of commitment; as testimony. (287)

Liz Stanley, writing in *The Auto/Biographical 'I'*,<sup>32</sup> recognises performativity in terms of a new feminist autobiography. She states that:

A distinct feminist autobiography is in the process of construction, characterised by its self-conscious and increasingly self-confident traversing of conventional boundaries between different genres of writing; and thus such innovations will centre a social focus, a contingent and engaged authorial voice... a focus upon textual practice, innovations which will encourage active reading. (255)

Most recent work in and on feminist biography and autobiography shares a focus on issues of identity, now seen less as something to be disinterred or captured and more as something to be made, cultural and gender hybridity, embodiment, and the transgression of generic and other boundaries. For example, Donna Stanton offers a theory on the concept of the biographical writer which aids our understanding of Gems as a female playwright. Stanton's concept of the non-narrated but situated self was proposed in her biographical study, *The Female Autograph*, in which she removes the life, the 'bios', from auto/biography in order to resolve or evade the apparently unresolvable problem of referentiality in the auto/biographical text - in her words:

...to bracket the traditional emphasis on the narration of a 'life' and that notion's facile presumption of referentiality.<sup>33</sup>



In fact, this strategy seems to reflect Gems's style in which she writes her biographical females - a self who seeks to mark her presence but not necessarily to recount her own history.

Aspects of this biographical discussion can be more pertinently understood in relation to the concerns of feminist epistemology, closely tied to debates around identity politics, performative theory and situated knowledge. Although Liz Stanley is aware that "the links between feminist auto/biography and feminist epistemology remain under-discussed,"<sup>34</sup> she argues for a concept of 'intellectual auto/biography', by which she means that the feminist researcher should record the context-dependent aspects of her approaches and understanding. Stanley continues:

...all knowledge is auto/biographically-located in a particular social context of experiencing and knowing... all auto/biographies are theoretical formulations through and through. (210)

While endorsing Stanley's assertion of the need for "accountable knowledge," (210)

Laura Marcus argues that the kinds of determinants which govern a biographer's knowledge are not always as readily known and available as Stanley suggests. It makes more sense to argue that knowledge, like identity, feminism and gender, is complex, multiple and "over-determined."<sup>35</sup>

Also taking issue with Stanley, Sandra Harding has argued, in her important work on 'feminist standpoint theory', that the biographer needs:

... more objectivity rather than less, a broader notion of objectivity grounded in but not confined to the positions of the marginalised. These are not necessarily, nor indeed usually, those of the theorists themselves.<sup>36</sup>

The radically different accounts of the performative invoked indicate the diversity, and perhaps incommensurability, of the conceptual approaches and intellectual or political contexts in which they arise. What matters (or should matter) is not only that a story or history is being recounted, nor even how it is told, but its varying content, contexts and import. These new ideas on biographical theory may be used as an effective framework for investigating Gems's plays.

To conclude, putting biography on stage offers its own unique challenges, particularly in relation to gender and theatrical form. Chapter One, exploring the work and ideological posture of Pam Gems, begins to consider the interplay between gender, form and the historical referent. Analyses in Chapter Two onwards considers a wide variety of theatrical forms for treating past lives, covering not only Gems's plays but those of other writers used for the sake of comparison. While Gems's approach varies from play to play, she generally moves easily between concrete historical reference, myth and free flights of imagination. She makes no claim to objective portraiture, but generates and challenges mythical images of the past to suggest their ongoing relevance in the lives of women. In the process, Gems manages to dramatise the very tension which exists between victimisation and agency in the historical experiences of women. Gems's drama enacts the complexity embodied in feminist thought, current perspective and historical lives.



## INTRODUCTION

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# CHAPTER ONE

## PAM GEMS

### Biography of the Biographer?†

In February 1998, Gems responded to a letter I had sent her explaining my academic work and asking about the sources she had used for her biographical plays. While her letter shares the names of authors she read and even some evaluation of them, it also emphasises her specific relationship to the source materials. Early in the letter she insists:

What one isn't interested in is academic opinion, which almost always runs up short on nous and reality.<sup>1</sup>

There is a no-nonsense quality to this letter, but in all her correspondence Gems emerges as a gracious yet outspoken personality. Gems's remarks occasionally suggest a predilection for self-effacement, and project an almost apologetic and matronly image. Such an image most clearly emerges in reference to her early participation in women's theatre groups in the early 1970's. Gems, then in her forties, felt alienated from the younger female playwrights. Speaking with Lyn Gardner in a 1985 interview for *Plays and Players*, Gems recalled:

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† Certain clues seem more provocative than others in trying to construct an image of the playwright which might enhance understanding of the plays discussed in later chapters. Because I consider Pam Gems's life, in the rather limited way it becomes available to me through various materials, as well as her work, I find myself in the rather invidious position of the biographer's role that my work critiques. Fascinated by oppositions in the lives of women (between past and present circumstances, determinism and will, innate and manufactured influences), my impression of Gems forms through a series of oppositions.



For a woman of my age, it was very difficult. I'd been very cut off. I had no connections in the theatre and suddenly I was mixing with women who had a very different style. I brought jam puffs to meetings and they all had flat stomachs and wore jeans.<sup>2</sup>

She had made similar statements in a 1977 interview with Michelene Wandor for *Spare Rib*, admitting to an early fear that the women's movement "was for younger women ... flat-bellied, tough, radical women," and said, "I was fat, flabby and a failure."<sup>3</sup>

Later, in the *Spare Rib* interview, Gems offers a very different image of herself. Wandor faulted Gems's play *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* for what she saw as an implied cynicism toward women's political activism (13). Fish, the play's most overtly political character, commits suicide when she fails to reconcile her political work and ideals with her personal needs for a man and a child. Gems responded to Wandor's criticism by presenting herself as a tough adversary, through language stripped of euphemism.

The play is not schematised in the sort of way you imply. It is not meant to be polemical, I have no feeling for such work which to me is often masturbation for the converted. Laying propaganda on people is ultimately fascist. (13)

The Gems who emerges here stands in stark opposition to the image of the playwright as a grandmotherly figure bringing baked goods to younger, liberated women. Such images never contradict one another but offer an impression of plurality textured through high contrast.

Trying to mould images of a life into meaningful form involves, as Woolf and Strachey first allowed modern writers of biography to broadcast, an exercise in selectivity. Certain details (information concerning dates, locations, status and general circumstances) however, seem to fall readily into broad outlines. While reading a number of biographies about one life (as I have with Christina and Piaf) some facts appear consistently and without alteration. I call the accumulation of these facts a 'basic chronology' and such chronology offers a basis for moving from hazy impression to more informed consideration of the individual. In spite of identifying the problematic nature of using biography as authoritative narrative, it still seems appropriate for the purposes of this thesis to offer a 'basic chronology' of Gems's life

### **Pam Gems: A 'Basic Chronology'**

The *Spare Rib* interview offers the most comprehensive information about Gems's life. She was born Pam Price in Christchurch, Hampshire, in 1925. Growing up in poverty, her father died four years later and her "very glamorous and beautiful" mother "in spite of her film star looks"<sup>†</sup> worked as a domestic in upper-class households to support the family. Gems, along with one of her two brothers, attended grammar school on a scholarship. She left school at fifteen and took a variety of jobs in "offices, shops, factories" and finally in "a glue factory where the money was grand."<sup>4</sup> Gems worked as a machine gun assessor during the Second World War, service which entitled her to free college tuition. She went on to study psychology at Manchester University. While there,

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<sup>†</sup> In a letter written to me in February 1998, Gems confessed to be in awe of her mother's beauty and felt slightly jealous at the fact that her mother, who she claimed resembled Greta Garbo, was always more attractive than Gems herself. Gems's London home is now filled with pictures of Garbo, acting as a reminder of her mother. It is interesting to note that Garbo played both Marguerite Gautier and Queen Christina during her film career.



she met her future husband, Ken Gems. They married and moved to London where Gems pursued a career at the BBC, writing scripts and conducting audience research. In 1952, she had her first child. With the birth of her second child, she left work. By 1960, she had three children and the family moved to the Isle of Wight. A fourth child with Down's Syndrome was born in 1965, and by the advent of the 1970's, the family had returned to London to secure special training for her.

Shortly after her arrival, Gems became involved in the fringe theatre movement, partly through her need to find personal fulfilment outside of the home. It was during this involvement, as well as visits to lunchtime theatres in London, that she noticed there was a distinct lack of roles for women:

I used to count up every week in the *Radio Times* ... and there was twice the amount of work offered to men ... and I thought, now I can justify sitting at home and writing. I'll write parts for women. It was just as simple as that.<sup>5</sup>

Although Gems had always been interested in playwrighting since childhood, she was not a produced playwright until she was forty-seven years old. From this point, her life story becomes dominated by a steadied and varied career in the theatre and in 1972, her first play *Betty's Wonderful Christmas*, written for children, received production at the Cockpit Theatre. Since then Gems has had more than twenty plays produced, in spaces from small provincial theatres to the large and prestigious stages of both London and Broadway.

Given the scope of Gems's contribution to the British theatre, surprisingly little critical attention has been given to her work. Lynne Gardner predicted that Gems would "become the grand dame of the British Theatre."<sup>6</sup> Gardner asserts that where Caryl Churchill "may have conquered Broadway," it was Gems who made a more powerful impact:

She [Gems] was the first female playwright who forced West End managers to reconsider the long held opinion that Agatha Christie is the only woman of note the British Theatre has produced. (12)

Gems's prominence as the first woman playwright to be produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, as a playwright to have a series of premieres with the company as well as a number of West End productions, does establish her as a major force in the contemporary British theatre. Despite such visibility, however, no book-length treatment of the playwright exists. Gems is given scant attention in a handful of critical discussions and much of what has been written about her has been contained in the popular press.<sup>†</sup>

The facts of Gems's life offer a framework for understanding her relationship to feminism which, in turn, informs this study of her drama. Appraisals of Gems's work typically situate her within the context of feminist theatre and as a part of the growing visibility of women in the British theatre since the early 1970's, yet Gems herself has never seemed entirely comfortable with this association. In a 1977 interview with Ann McFerran, Gems first expressed resistance to being labelled as a 'feminist writer':

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<sup>†</sup> It is interesting to note that while most people are aware of Caryl Churchill's work in the theatre, few people had heard of Pam Gems in the course of my research.



I think the phrase ‘feminist playwright’ is absolutely meaningless because it implies polemic, and polemic is about changing things in a direct, political way. Drama is subversive.<sup>7</sup>

Despite such resistance, however, she espoused a personal philosophy interweaving various strands of feminist ideology. Her work shows a marked concern with issues of gender and power and in plays and essays alike she expresses her convictions about revising oppressive images of women. A consideration of Gems’s career reveals how her concern with gender dynamics coexists with an empathy for the plight of the downtrodden, a fascination with revising historical female figures, and a deep suspicion of unchecked acceptance of traditional power structures:

There is a burden in being asked to be a voice for feminism. You cannot be that, and be an artist ... Brecht said, “Unhappy the land that needs heroes” and I hate the way that certain women have been forced into the role of icon through oppression. I find it improper, foolish, lazy and destructive to look for leaders in this way. You lead yourself.<sup>8</sup>

Gems’s resistance to the feminist label stems in part from reservations about writing in the interest of any specific agenda. In her essay ‘Gender and Imagination,’<sup>9</sup> Gems explained:

People constantly ask if, being a woman, you are a feminist. Do you write as a feminist (or as a socialist, or as a 'committed' writer?) And, if you are a wet mix, do you try to please with your answer, to placate, even reassure? There is never a question without implied need. To be honest, I tend to find the questions insulting. I don't know why, and I don't know if other writers feel the same, perhaps not, anyway, there is a tendency to lie when you don't know the answers. To make something up. As I say, to reassure. Because the fact is, the sort of writer you are is irrelevant to the writer. The questions are, one: am I a writer? And two: what is a writer? Is trying to write a way of placating boredom? A way of imposing yourself, getting rich and famous? Is it a retreat into a world that you **can** manipulate, that **does** have order? If that is so ... writing is a fascist act ... I've often suspected it. Or a wank. No doubt, it's both, all or none.(148)

This quotation not only expressed Gems's misgivings about being categorised as a writer, it affirms an earlier observation about the contrasting sides of her personality. The essay was written in response to Wandor's specific request for commentary on the interplay of gender and writing. Gems began by explaining why she feels such projects are, by nature, dubious, and perpetuates an image of herself as outspoken and bluntly direct. Yet, by injecting humour and elements of self-mockery into her evaluation, she also manages to temper this image.

Most importantly, 'Gender and Imagination' stresses the context in which Gems's stated resistance to the feminist label must be understood. Such resistance has at least as much to do with her vision of artistic process as her politics. She does disassociate herself from select images and stereotypes of feminism but, typically, she does so while situating herself within its parameters. Later in the same essay, for example, she refers to feminism as "our movement" but expresses reservations about the "hatred of men which pervades so much writing," and which she sees as its "great



heresy.” (150) Similarly, in an interview with David Isaacs for the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, she referred to many feminists as “women full of hate”<sup>10</sup> Also, in a 1987 interview with Susan Carlson, Gems faulted Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for subscribing to a simplistic vision of “women/good v. men/bad.”<sup>11</sup> When asked to define feminism, Gems places great emphasis on “friendliness” and a “relevant privilege” as opposed to “special privilege.” She continues:

All women are asking for now is fair dues - a rate for the job, equal opportunities - what else can you ask for? We’ve had equal pay and the Sex Discrimination Act, but they are not enforced, partly through exigency, yet feminism can put up a terrible wall between the sexes, an awful resentment. The key is having a mutual regard, a mutual respect.<sup>12</sup>

Again she shifts away from radical feminism with the assertion that it “divides rather than unites us which is sad.”<sup>13</sup>

She confesses to having played devil’s advocate in the days when feminism tended to mean, or at least include, some degree of man-hating. However, now that type of polemic is more unusual, what is the most disturbing for Gems is the reality of women’s situations which, for her, “go much further than a Millett tract.”<sup>†</sup> Gems continues to clarify her personal philosophy:

If you go to a battered women’s home and see a woman with a broken nose you can understand feminism. We have to try and embrace all the aspects of unfairness and exploitation and out of that try and build a structure for survival, for progress, even for creativity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> This comment responds directly to Kate Millett’s radical feminism which was illustrated in her polemic text, *Sexual Politics* (1970).

This philosophy seems to complement her desire for theatres to develop and maintain a mutually supportive structure:

Men and women must co-operate in order to combat the pressures of under-funding, unemployment and ineffective unions within the profession.<sup>15</sup>

Just as it is possible to detect her sense of defeatism, Gems is quick to assert a bright future for women in the theatre:

Anything is possible. Everything is possible. Theatre can affect social change. It must. Of course, art changes things: society, people, art itself. One woman can make tremendous changes. If we, as women, can pervade with our nobility, forgiveness and wit we can change everything.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, Gems's feminism can incorporate the distance she first perceived between herself and a younger generation of feminists. In the *Spare Rib* interview, Gems evokes something of the displaced homemaker syndrome when she discusses how her family situation contributed to the self-image she brought to her early involvement in the theatre. She had been at home with her children for several years and, she explains, had found herself "very depressed in a London suburb."<sup>17</sup> Her daughter's handicap added to the isolation which often accompanies staying at home with children. Speaking with Claire Colvin in a 1982 interview for *Plays and Players*,<sup>18</sup> she explained:

When you have a handicapped child you lose friends. She was incontinent for nine years and people didn't want to visit us. (9)



However, in the Wandor interview, Gems explained that while her family situation “cut” her “off totally from other people,” she “wrote more than ever.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the difficulties Gems experienced as a mother, she is adamant about the importance she attaches to her maternal role and enthusiastic about its rewards. In the *Spare Rib* interview, for example, she remarks:

I must say, I found having children fantastic ... I would have eight if I could. (12)

In another remark, she describes mothering as a formative artistic experience. When asked about a female aesthetic in an interview for Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig’s *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*,<sup>20</sup> she argues that having children “at the teat and the heel, certainly for the first four years,” makes a mother:

...sophisticated in the minutiae of emotional information, feeling and response ... it’s necessary for the survival of the infant. (203)

This strong sense of maternal identity combines with Gems’s age (now seventy-four), size and unassuming demeanour to attach an ‘earth mother’ image to the playwright. The title of Colvin’s article, ‘Earth Mother from Christchurch,’ makes this image most explicit. Isaacs exploits it in a somewhat more offensive manner, calling Gems, “a calm overweight lady of fifty one years who has had four children.” For Isaacs, this image offers a refreshing “contrast” to the “professional libber” clamouring for reform in a “shrill voice.” (16)

Beyond promoting an earth mother image (and inspiring its exploitation), references to women as caregivers combine with a general emphasis on women's reproductive capacities to suggest an association between Gems and cultural feminism. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*,<sup>21</sup> Jill Dolan explains that women's ability to bear children provides a cornerstone for a cultural feminist understanding of gender. Dolan asserts that:

... because they can give birth, women are viewed as instinctually more natural, more closely related to life cycles mirrored in nature. Men are seen as removed from nature, which they denigrate rapaciously. (7)

A later passage offers further elucidation of the cultural feminist tendency to "valorise what they see as innate, biologically based differences between men and women." Dolan continues:

Women as the life source, for example, and men as destructive warmongers are distinctions commonly drawn by cultural feminists. (60-61)

In a passage from the *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*<sup>22</sup> afterword, Gems draws upon this very distinction:

I, myself, feel that there is something deeply criminal and dangerous in women who fight. We **make** the arms and legs and torsos. We **make** the bodies, we invest a good deal of our lives in it. Men are programmed to range, defend and protect. We are not, not in the same way. Aggression in a woman is an existential act, except in the direct defence of her young. (72)

With this statement, implying an equation between being a woman and being a mother, Gems borders on revealing the liabilities inherent to any vision of feminism which



champions women's biology and 'natural' nurturing instincts. Such a vision turns too readily in upon itself to dignify the very arguments which historically have been used to naturalise women's oppression. Only a negligible distance separates statements glorifying women in maternity from statements restricting women's movements outside those roles. Furthermore, it is important to note that Gems and Dolan write from different standpoints within a cultural feminist context. It is my opinion that Gems writes with an acceptance of mimesis - the notion that theatre can accurately reflect off-stage existence, whereas Dolan is an example of a theorist who rejects realism on the grounds it was designed to reflect specifically and only male experience.

However, Patricia Schroeder notes that some of the very contemporary feminist thinkers who decried realism a decade ago are now beginning to revise their assessments.<sup>†</sup> Dolan, for example has recently noted that:

...while realism's limitations have been successfully documented and usefully theorised, realist plays continue to be produced, especially by marginalised communities and historically under-represented groups who need to see their experiences reflected and validated on stage.<sup>23</sup>

In answer to her own questions about the continued use of realism by such groups, Dolan concludes that "returning to realism frequently to check its status and meaning seems inevitable." (27)

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<sup>†</sup> Schroeder notes that both Dolan (*Presence and Desire*, 1994) and Janelle Reinelt ('A Feminist Reconsideration of the Brecht/Lukacs debates', 1994) have made similar revisionist moves in their debates over realism. See Patricia Schroeder, *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), pp. 157-59. See Bibliography for full references.

Because Gems's celebration of maternity takes place within a complex network of thought, she avoids the most oppressive implications of biological essentialism. Gems's strong sense of identity as a mother does, however, inform her feminism in a very specific way. Where many feminists reject traditional roles and relationships, Gems comes from a background defined to some extent by traditional roles. She offers valuable perspective to the dilemmas peculiar to heterosexual feminists and the concerns which accompany reproduction and child care.

Gems's interest in these issues and the premium she places on the rights of all individuals to live in dignity suggest some compatibility with liberal feminism. Both liberal feminism, as described by Dolan, and bourgeois feminism, as described by Wandor, focus on the advancement of individual women. Such an agenda displaces concern for women in a more collective sense and, like cultural feminism, tends to downplay class, as well as race and sexual orientation, as factors in women's lives. Because Wandor writes from a British perspective, she stresses the class component of bourgeois feminism in a manner most applicable to Gems. She writes:

... because bourgeois feminism accepts the status quo (with a bit more power for women) it also - like radical feminism - has no interest in a class analysis, and certainly no interest whatsoever in socialism or the Labour movement.<sup>24</sup>

Another passage from the *Dusa* afterword reflects Gems's compatibility with liberal feminist thought, but simultaneously critiques its assumptions. Gems states that:



It seemed to me when I was writing the play that for all the rhetoric and the equal opportunities and the Sex Discrimination Acts, that society had not moved one step towards accommodating the other fifty per cent of us and our needs. Not that the age of industry fires the imagination of any of us too much, men or women. But to be told, as women, that we were to be allowed to 'join' as fully fledged citizens was one thing. How we were supposed to do it, and breed and rear our young, particularly in a country which since the war had chosen to build offices and high-rises rather than houses where people might live in some sort of dignity and privacy - well, we've seen the result of all that...<sup>25</sup>

Gems's suspicions about women being co-opted into prevailing value systems (simply accepting existing social reforms and "fully fledged" citizenship) recur throughout her essays, interviews and plays. These suspicions along with her concerns about class deflect from her affiliation with liberal feminist thought.

Gems's sensitivity to class and her awareness that class and gender oppression alike spring from a hierarchical understanding of human relations can be considered in accordance with materialist feminist ideology. Gems's experience with the burgeoning women's movement in the seventies makes her wary of subsuming the differences among women under either class-blindness typical to liberal feminism or the generic woman of cultural feminism. In a recent letter, she recalls that movement as a largely middle-class phenomenon and her own sense of isolation from it. With immense pride she states:

I come from the lower working class and I have all the class loyalty that I don't see in the middle classes ... boy, do they fall apart when the wind is blowing.<sup>26</sup>

Gems's class consciousness is an important element of her identity. As Colvin points out, Gems's childhood made her acutely aware of the "sharp divide" between classes: her

family “wore cast-offs of their upper-class employers silk underwear and Worth clothes but existed some days on bread and sugar.”<sup>27</sup> In the *Spare Rib* interview, Gems recalled: “We lived in a very isolated way, on the edge of the marsh and we were very, very poor.”<sup>28</sup> Despite her education and the commercial success of some of her plays, Gems continues to carry an awareness of these early circumstances. She explains that she never expected to make a living as a writer:

I didn't have that kind of self image. I come from the working classes and was used to a world of weekly wages and the fear of the sack.<sup>29</sup>

- and she acknowledges the relative comfort she enjoys in another statement: “I can't really believe my luck ... I'm in a clean, dry job that I want to do.”<sup>30</sup>

I have been struck by the extent to which Gems struggles to balance her sensitivity to gender and class and the ramifications such a struggle has on her career. She is almost apologetic about her success in mainstream British theatre, a success marked most notably by her position as the first woman playwright produced at Stratford-upon-Avon by the RSC in 1977 with *Queen Christina*.<sup>†</sup> Gems still expresses great affection for the fringe theatre movement which gave her a start while acknowledging the budget and casting advantages which accompany commercial success.

Gems emerges as an outspoken advocate for women's increased visibility in the theatre and is acutely sensitive to the male networks which frustrate this visibility. She

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<sup>†</sup> This is an extraordinarily significant achievement by Gems which cannot be underestimated. Gems is one of the very few female playwrights to consistently have had work commissioned by the RSC (a major state funded theatre). (See Appendix)



values her own work with women's groups, such as the Women's Playhouse Trust and the Women's Company. In 'Gender and Imagination,' Gems describes working with women as: "...providing the occasional feeling of true camaraderie, the absence of hierarchy"<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Gems is keen to stress her role as a founder member of the Women's Theatre Group<sup>†</sup> in the early seventies. In her correspondence she recalls writing two plays for the group which were commissioned by Ed Berman to complete a season of plays by women at the Almost Free Theatre in London. Offended by Berman's specific request for "sexy pieces,"<sup>32</sup> Gems first demonstrated the penchant for controversy that surfaces throughout her career. She responded to his request with two monologues she describes as "black pieces."<sup>33</sup> The first, *My Warren* focuses on a young girl who flushes her baby down a toilet, while *After Birthday*<sup>‡</sup> features an elderly, bedridden woman who is sent a vibrator by a practical joker and instead of taking offence, as was the joker's intent, responds with delight. Gems makes comment:

I remember an argument with someone who thought *My Warren* and *After Birthday* were depressing, and therefore politically suspect. To me, both women in the plays were tough survivors.<sup>34</sup>

These "black pieces" provided an early indication of both Gems's predilection for controversy and her interest in female characters. Building upon this interest, Gems became more of an active participant in the British Theatre's growing women's movement. In 1973, her play *The Amiable Courtship of Mz. Venus and Wild Bill* was produced as part of the all-women's lunchtime season at the Almost Free Theatre. In 1974, Gems wrote *Go West, Young Woman* (in the space of a week) for production at

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<sup>†</sup> In spite of Gems pioneering the Women's Theatre Group, its success was limited. Only two productions came out of the venture.

<sup>‡</sup> Both *My Warren* and *After Birthday* remain unpublished manuscripts but xerox copies are available from Gems's agent. (See Bibliography)



London's Roundhouse Theatre. Although these early plays never received critical acclaim or recognition, Gems was inspired by the female creativity demonstrated in this theatre group. She relished the fact that women did everything from choosing and directing the plays to painting the scenery.<sup>†</sup>

The Almost Free venture and lunchtime theatre forums were very important for launching playwrights such as Gems.<sup>††</sup> Such projects sought to consciously avoid working in the hierarchical, competitive structures which characterised the male-dominated establishment theatre and media. Their 'open-house' meetings and discussion groups made it easy for any interested women to become as involved as they so wished.

Catherine Itzin charts the progress of these groups in *Stages in the Revolution*:

As word spread, the meetings attracted more and more women, some professionals with considerable experience of establishment theatre, some professionals from fringe theatre, and some altogether or relatively new to the theatre. The response was indicative of the neglect of women in theatre. (231)

Eventually, its popularity and the differences of opinion which arose as to the organisation of events occasioned the split of the group into two separate companies, the Women's Company, including the previously established, establishment theatre professionals and the Women's Theatre Group, the alternative theatre workers who went on to produce more experimental work.

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<sup>†</sup> Ensuing lunchtime seasons were a success, measured by the featuring of women playwrights produced by women directors with women stage-management in a context in which workshops and crèches were provided as well as productions, and by the fact that The Women's Company and the Women's Theatre Group were catalysed by these seasons. See Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 230.

<sup>††</sup> Work produced in 1973 by Gems's contemporaries within the Almost Free lunchtime groups included: Jane Wibberley, *Parade of Cats*; Jennifer Phillips, *Bodywork*; Micheline Wandor, *Spilt Milk* and collaborations between Wandor, Sally Ordway and Dinah Brook, *Mal de Mer*, *Lovefood* and *Crabs*. See Lizbeth Goodman, *Feminist Stages* (London: Harwood, 1996), p. 311.



Toward the end of the seventies Gems became a member of the Women's Playhouse Trust and undertook collaborative work on a touring play tackling the subject of abortion. She admits to enjoying the mass of contributive ideas which collaborative work allows but Gems missed the "mysterious" side to writing alone which she refers to as:

... an impulsion, a deep, passionate energy which comes from one head. Egotistic perhaps, but it should be respected.<sup>35</sup>

Gems found that her choice of structure, reason, text and subtext was often not conducive to, or in some cases disregarded, in collaborative work. Therefore, nowadays, she prefers to write alone but admits that in any production a writer is forced to collaborate totally with designers, producers, actors etc. because their relationships are mutually dependent with the writer.

Another reason for Gems's writing to have changed with time is as much to do with her health as personal choice. At the age of thirty, Gems had an internal operation which would totally mar her health for the rest of her life. She also confesses to suffering considerable pain from serious arthritis and liver problems. When she won the Olivier Award for her play *Stanley* in 1997, failing health meant that her friend, the actress Denise Black (chosen by Gems to play Delores Ibarruri in *Pasionaria*) had to collect the award on her behalf.

For Gems, the greater part of the nineties has been spent abroad relaxing in her Spanish villa, just south of Marbella. Her health tends to dictate the patterns of her

working life, so much time is spent in the lighter pursuits of cultivating flowers in her courtyard garden as well as reading her vast collection of books. However, she still feels the urge to continue writing with as much dedication as in previous years. Gems continues to work on new material as well as adaptations and translations. In 1992, her version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, produced by the National Theatre Company, featuring Ian McKellen and Anthony Sher was eventually adapted for film, directed by Sean Mathias and produced by Little Bird Productions (see Appendix). Simultaneous to the revival of *Piaf* in 1993, Gems collaborated with Tony Yates on the translation of *Yerma*, a play by Federico Garcia Lorca, (see Appendix). Following its success, Gems also adapted Chekhov's *The Seagull* in 1995 for a West End production by the National Theatre Company (see Appendix). One of the main highlights for Gems in this decade was her hugely successful tribute to the painter Stanley Spencer, in *Stanley* (1996). This play, produced by the Royal National Theatre Company, not only enjoyed a long run in London and Broadway, but also won several prestigious awards which could not fail to bring Gems further into public consciousness (see Appendix). In addition to her credits as a playwright, Gems has written two novels in the nineties, *Mrs Frampton* and *Bon Voyage, Mrs Frampton*. The Spanish film company Expresso/Fortunata is currently adapting the first of these novels for a feature film. However, her main project at the moment returns to her biographical tradition; a play recalling and 'revisioning' the life of the Italian patriot, Guiseppe Garibaldi.

### **Gems and her Contemporaries: A Social and Political Context**

As her production list proves, Gems is among a very few playwrights (male and female) whose work moves easily between provincial, mainstream (subsidised) and



mainstream (commercial) theatres (see Appendix). Furthermore, it seems appropriate to contextualise Gems's numerous West End and Broadway transfers in comparison with her contemporaries.

Spanning almost thirty years, Gems's production list must be read in the context of knowing that theatre is still predominantly run by men and commented on by men. Jenny Long's survey 'What Share of the Cake Now?'<sup>†</sup> concluded that, in 1994, only twenty per cent of productions were written by women and that the figure dropped to fourteen per cent in companies where the artistic director was male. Long's findings also revealed that women playwrights, proportionally, were less well represented the larger the size of the theatre and the larger the share of the revenue grant. In building based-companies, a marked decrease was recorded in the number of main-house productions by women, with an increase in studio productions. Thus, in acknowledgement of these statistics, Gems's career becomes an even greater achievement.

In the early seventies, Gems emerged as part of the second generation of female playwrights along with other writers such as Caryl Churchill and Maureen Duffy.<sup>††</sup> Their arrival and establishment as playwrights came at a time of political and social revolution in Britain. 1968 is now seen as the watershed year in women's theatre, as in many other areas of cultural and political life. The late 1960's in Britain saw a number of legal reforms relating to sexuality, divorce, abortion and equal pay for women, and a new

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<sup>†</sup> This survey analysed the distribution patterns of employment amongst women in theatre companies in receipt of Arts Council revenue funding in England. In 1994, this survey was the only current statistical research available. The research was undertaken as a graduate thesis by Jenny Long at the University of North London. See Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. ix.

<sup>††</sup> Lizbeth Goodman considers Ann Jellicoe, Jane Arden, Margaretta D'Arcy, Sheila Delaney and Doris Lessing to be the most important of the first generation of female playwrights, owing to their playwriting contributions in the 1950's and 1960's. See Lizbeth Goodman, *Feminist Stages* (London: Harwood, 1996), p. 18.



sense of the political nature of everyday life. A reform of specific import to the theatre was the abolition of the role of the Lord Chancellor as theatre censor. The theatre's (partial) liberation from censorship coincided, or, more accurately, was a part of liberalisation in other cultural spheres.

Maureen Duffy's *Rites* (1969) was a powerful lead into post-1968 theatre as it was set in a women's lavatory and explored gender roles within an all-female community. This play will be discussed later in the thesis in the context of Gems's plays. As a novelist, playwright, poet and critic, Duffy's writings, like Gems's plays, consistently focus on themes of social and sexual oppression, particularly the social pressures on lesbian identity in England. Another significant characteristic is Duffy's exploration of women's eroticism which features in her polemic novel *The Microcosm* (1966).

Of the generation of women dramatists beginning their writing careers in the 1970's, Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems are perhaps the best known. Like other recent feminist drama, Churchill's work has explored the arbitrariness of gender and role definitions, notably in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) and *Cloud Nine* (1978), and the need to reclaim women 'hidden from history', as in her play *Top Girls* (1982). She wrote *Vinegar Tom* (1976) for and with the feminist theatre company Monstrous Regiment, while she was the resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre, London. Perhaps her best-known play, *Serious Money* (1987), a comedy about stock exchange swindles and the effect of the 'Big Bang' in the City of London, was a collaboration with the Joint Stock Theatre Company, with whom Churchill has maintained a long and successful partnership. Churchill's career, like Gems's, has provided important links



between mainstream and feminist, alternative theatre, both writers having worked extensively with feminist theatre companies in the 1970's.

Poet, dramatist and critic Michelene Wandor was also a prominent figure in 1970's feminist theatre and has made a major contribution to theatre criticism, particularly to the knowledge and understanding of gay and women's theatre. Other women dramatists who have worked extensively with fringe theatre companies and have also contributed substantially to the development of lesbian theatre in the 1980's include Bryony Lavery, Sarah Daniels<sup>†</sup> and black dramatist Jackie Kay who has had plays performed by the Theatre of Black Women (*Chiaroscuro*, 1986) and the Black Theatre Co-operative, (*Twice Over*, for the Gay Sweatshop, 1990) founded in the 1980's.

It would be a misrepresentation of the current state of the theatre, however, to suggest that the fringe and feminist theatre (which first established Gems and her contemporaries) is still thriving. Much of the influential critical material on women's drama and theatre was based on the situation in the 1970's when, as Wandor<sup>††</sup> records, the Arts Council subsidy to fringe theatre rose from around £7,000 in 1971 to £1,500,000 in 1978. The 1980's, by contrast, saw a series of cuts in public funding for the arts, hitting both metropolitan and regional theatre. This steady impoverishment, coupled with the fragmentation of the women's movement, and hence of a politics of

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<sup>†</sup> A champion of gay and lesbian theatre, Bryony Lavery has swum against the tide of mainstream theatre and is a rounded theatre practitioner. Her achievements include: Artistic Director for Gay Sweatshop (1989-91), *Floorshow* (with Caryl Churchill for Monstrous Regiment in 1977) and *Goliath* (for Sphinx Theatre Company National Tour, 1997). Sarah Daniels was the first woman playwright to have a full production at the National Theatre with *Neoptide* (1986), she was also the first to give the issues of lesbian women a prominent voice in the theatre in *Masterpieces* (1983). See Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 1 and 105.

<sup>††</sup> This information is taken from Michelene Wandor, *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 18.



'collective' work, has made the future of women's theatre more uncertain. Fringe theatre (the crucial launch-pad for Gems) provided a space for women dramatists, actresses and theatre workers of all kinds, and it is now under threat. At the same time, mainstream theatre (which has also suffered substantial cuts) has not proved much more open to women than in a feminist era.

Theatre is perhaps the most directly political of all the arts, and has provided a crucial forum for feminist ideas. It is also the literary form in which women writers have had to struggle hardest for recognition, and there have been long periods this century in which women dramatists have been almost completely absent from the literary map. It is unlikely that such a situation will recur, but any real growth in women's theatre is dependent upon changes in the political and economic climate. This is not to suggest that creative drama will not be written, but it may not necessarily be performed. Whether 'alternative'/'counter-cultural' or 'mainstream' theatre is the more appropriate site for women's drama, and the related issue of a shift from 'feminist' to 'post-feminist' theatre, are questions which continue to demand our attention. Whatever the result, Gems's almost constant production of plays since the 1970's, set against such a turbulent socio-economic and political backdrop confirms her prominence and major accomplishment within women's theatre.

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So far, I have sought to define Gems's feminism in terms of her various statements in essays, interviews and letters. The remainder of the chapter considers how her drama enacts what Wandor concurs is a "fascinating mixture"<sup>36</sup> of influences from all strains of feminist ideology(ies). I shall then give a detailed analysis of *Guinevere* (1976),



*The Treat* (1982), *Aunt Mary* (1982) and *Loving Women* (1984). This will reveal that Pam Gems's work contains a recurrent critique of social hierarchies and oppression, communicated through a diverse range of subjects, theatrical forms and feminist stands. The chapter will conclude with a consideration of *Pasionaria* and *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, which find their inspiration in history. *Pasionaria* is about the life of Dolores Ibarruri (1915-1989) and the character of Fish in *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* is loosely based on Rosa Luxemburg and Buzz Goodbody. Considering the historical referent in these plays anticipates the more comprehensive discussions of *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Camille*, *Marlene* and *The Snow Palace* at the heart of my study, and *Dusa* offers the most translucent and comprehensive statements about Gems's feminism as it relates to her interest in history.

### **Guinevere (1976): Revisioning the Myth of the Damsel in Distress**

*Guinevere*<sup>37</sup> represents one of Gems's farthest departures from the realist frame. Like *The Treat*, which will be discussed later, this play works through graphic images. The play offers a dialogue between Guinevere and King Arthur dramatically punctuated by bolts of lightning and the chiming of clocks. A far cry from the gentle lady of Camelot, Gems's Guinevere boldly decries the double standards which men thrust upon women. She offers savage description of the mutilation, bondage and imprisonment women have been made to endure and exposes her husband, not as a proud emblem of chivalry, but as a lecherous victimiser who has had sex with his mother and her own (35). By the play's end, Arthur concedes enough to Guinevere that they may stand "separate, but side by side."(48)

Through this final statement, Gems implies that the age-old legends idealising women's oppression must be exposed before the sexes might live together peacefully and productively. Throwing off realist pretence, Gems makes no effort to present her characters as anything but abstractions of their gender identities against a stark, non-particularised background. She replaces the dreamy romance of the Arthurian legend with vivid images of sexual violence.

*Guinevere*, like several of Gems's plays, is a feminist revisioning of the past. While the popular tale of King Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere does not constitute history in the purest sense, it does (like *Camille*) supply images from a romanticised past which perpetuate various western cultural ideas about gender. Gems appropriates these images to expose their complicity in the ongoing oppression of women.

Unfortunately, *Guinevere* is virtually unknown as it has never been published, in spite of the fact that it achieved a successful appearance at the Edinburgh Festival in 1976. Considered to be too short, the play was also declined on the grounds that it would appeal more to women than to men: Gems still retains the letter of refusal from the Royal Court Theatre and reflects on its contents:

The seventies was a time when the cry was: "Yes, girls, you can join us. Find your shoulder-pads, we'll let you in." But we didn't want to be let in.<sup>38</sup>

Ironically, this was precisely Gems's motive for writing *Guinevere* and indeed many of her other plays - to deal with re-defining the rules so that women may contribute



appropriately to society. Eventually, the Royal Shakespeare Company agreed to produce the play in 1976, but on the condition that Gems write another act which offered King Arthur more dialogue. Yet, in spite of her efforts and amendments Gems was again refused production in that year<sup>†</sup>. Despite the advances of feminism in so many other areas, theatrical authority in the seventies was overwhelmingly male. Gems felt that male management persisted in insulting, oversimplifying, or, in the case of *Guinevere* and indeed *Queen Christina* (which also caused problems in being accepted by the Royal Court Theatre) simply missing the point of much of her work. She comments on their logic:

The men are often dismissive, with the attitude of “It’s just a little woman.” Recently I was criticised as arrogant for writing a new version of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. Baffling! Then, it clicked. How can a mere woman translate Chekhov?... So, who is the arrogant one now? <sup>39</sup>

Of course, Gems is not a playwright to be easily affected by male chauvinism. Her strategy is to retaliate with even more vitriolic material, specifically designed to target her male critics. *The Treat*, is an example of such a play whereby men are shown to dominate female prostitutes by subjecting them to humiliating sexual violence.

### ***The Treat* (1980): Woman as Flesh in the Meat-Market**

*The Treat* remains an unpublished manuscript and has only ever made one appearance in the theatre. A 'fringe' production opened at the Soho-Poly, London on 20

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<sup>†</sup> It was not until 1979 that the RSC finally produced *Guinevere* at the Gulbenkian Studio, Newcastle: 8-16 March 1979. It was a fringe production which starred Suzanne Bishop as Guinevere. It is interesting to note that although the RSC agreed to produce the play, they did not stage it at a familiar RSC theatre.

April 1980. The play was presented and produced by the Women's Playhouse Trust as part of their 'Women's Evening' season and was directed by Bill Pryde, (see Appendix).

Set in a French brothel of the 1920's, *The Treat* dramatises the interactions between three prostitutes (Fran, Berthe and Marie) and a variety of men. Gems contends that her interest in writing about prostitutes began with a rather non-judgmental understanding that heterosexual men “are attracted by secondary female characteristics.”<sup>40</sup> She and the women she collaborated with on the play's conception and production felt that a lot of feminism was incorrect “in its hostility to the phenomenon as such.” (207):

Thus, given that women turn men on ... what is permissible behaviour between the sexes? And what isn't? So we did a play about a brothel where women turned men on. We wanted to say, “Yes, ... a turn-on, right? But hang on. What's going on now? Is this alright? It isn't? Why not? (207)

Within its first moments, *The Treat* goes far beyond the simple premise that heterosexual men are aroused by women's bodies. After a short conversation between Fran, Berthe and Marie, their pimp, Ray, escorts Max into the room. As a customer, he is allowed to inspect their bodies, and this inspection leads easily and quickly to violence. He calls Marie over, slapping her without reservation because he objects to her aloof attitude.

Violence escalates throughout the play in one of Gems's most biting analyses of the role of class in sexual behaviour. Male characters (representing not only the wealthy, but government and religion) take full sexual advantage of the prostitute's lack of status.



Through prostitutes, these men can vent their rage at all women with impunity and express desires which would be taboo within their own families.

Berthe, a petite woman aspiring to own a sweet shop, tries to convince Marie that they have a good situation:

BERTHE After all, it's a good quality establishment here, we got a good clientele. I mean, they come here for what they can't get at home, which wouldn't be decent ... all good backgrounds, you know.  
*The Treat, p 25*

Offstage, a man who just "*had a row with his wife*" beats Fran savagely (23). The greatest torments are reserved for Marie, a deeply spiritual woman who defends her Catholicism even when Berthe demands:

BERTHE Listen, who's the most regular client we got ... Father Antoine! And who was it made you eat a shit sandwich ... the bloody Bishop!  
*The Treat, p 32*

Marie must dress like a nun for one of her customers, Monsieur le Comte, an aristocrat who proceeds to brutalise her with whips and chains. Throughout the play, Marie complains about these beatings. She becomes so physically ill that she haemorrhages, and must hold wads of fabric between her legs to contain the flow. She appeals to the brothel's owner, Ray, but to no avail. She fears le Comte will kill her next time. Ray reasons:

RAY I can't afford to upset the gentry. You'll have to take your chance.  
*The Treat, p. 35*

In another scene, a wealthy man drops in from his daughter's wedding reception. In the process of describing the wedding festivities (most particularly, the bride who looks "a

treat” (38)) the proud father becomes aroused. Ray seizes the moment, makes Marie change into a wedding gown and perform an impromptu trick.

Marie’s last assignment is to play the “surprise” at the Mayor’s birthday party - dress like the Virgin Mary and jump out of a cake. She dies before the party begins. Fearing Ray, the two other women costume Marie and conceal her in the cake. When she does not appear on cue, the secret is discovered. Ray fumbles for the words to explain. His most prestigious guest, however, intervenes. The Mayor congratulates Ray for surpassing the previous year’s surprise, “a ten year old” girl, and though he feels somewhat abashed because his true passion has been discovered, he asks to be left alone to enjoy his “treat”. He lays Marie’s inert body on a banquet table, smears pudding and confection on her hair and face, and admires her:

MAYOR Placid ... calm ... willing ... silent. ... if only they were all like that.  
*The Treat*, p. 61

He mounts Marie in a grotesque final scene, surrendering himself to her as “divine, silent marble” and, as the play ends, reaches orgasm (62).

As this powerful final image attests, *The Treat* exemplifies Gems’s skilful manipulation of visual imagery to offer concise stage metaphors. The physical changes in Marie underscore Gems’s commentary about the commodification of women. Marie becomes ‘consumed’ as the play progresses. She grows physically weaker, a less vibrant person and more a malleable object, constantly foreshadowing the play’s final horrific imagery. In the process, she assumes many guises of female identity (nun, daughter,



bride, virgin mother, and finally inert flesh) to embellish her marketability. This idea of commodification is re-addressed in Gems's *Piaf*.

Gems does not patently condemn prostitution. Two characters in plays discussed in later chapters, Stas and Camille, take advantage of prostitution to gain a kind of emotional autonomy withheld in other kinds of interactions between men and women. In *The Treat*, however, prostitution epitomises the interaction between women's economic dependence, class discrimination, violence and sexuality which is part of Gems's larger interest in power and victimisation. The play also uses certain conventions in characterisation which reappear meaningfully in many of Gems's works. Gems only develops Marie with the kind of thoroughness associated with realist theatre, whereas though Fran and Berthe emerge as distinct individuals, it is not to the same extent. No attempt is made to present most of the male characters as anything but abstractions of power, desire and/or rage.

While Gems does use abstract characterisation in *The Treat*, she frequently offsets the abstraction with heightened artifice<sup>†</sup>. By calling attention to the play's construction, she insists that the social relations it dramatises also be evaluated as constructs. *The Treat*'s powerful last scene exemplifies Gems's skilful manipulation of visual imagery to offer concise stage metaphors. The play, with its almost impressionistic vignettes, also offers further insight into the innovation with form, style and subject that characterise Gems's career. As with other playwrights, it is unfortunate that only the

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<sup>†</sup> The Mayor is depicted as an abstraction of power. Yet, in his rape of Marie on the banqueting table in the final scene, the abstraction is heightened by the ridiculous and grotesque references to his appetite for food and sex. The cake smeared on Marie's body during her rape symbolises the heightened artifice in the Mayor's abstract characterisation.



most commercially successful of Gems's plays have been studied. At this point there is still a need for more extensive consideration of her entire contribution to the theatre.

### **Aunt Mary (1982): Male/Female Gender Dichotomy**

*Aunt Mary*<sup>41</sup> was produced by the RSC at the newly refurbished Warehouse Theatre, London.<sup>†</sup> The production opened to coincide with Gay Pride Week on 24 June 1982, and ran until 24 July of the same year, with a cast featuring Timothy Spall as Martin and Alfred Marks as Mary. The play was directed by Robert Walker and designed by David Fielding. (See Appendix)

In *Aunt Mary*, Gems explores images of maleness and femaleness, in a play about male cross-dressers. Mary and Cyst, a male transvestite couple, decide to wed. Mid-ceremony, they extend this already unconventional arrangement to include a third party - an elderly woman. Like the three characters in *Loving Women*, Mary, Cyst and Muriel and the rest of the cast of *Aunt Mary* seem rooted in dramatic realism: each emerges as a distinct and complex personality grounded in psychological detail. But Gems moves beyond the parameters of dramatic realism in this play to evoke a somewhat surrealist atmosphere. She calls for a set blending neon, turn-of-the-century costume, a willow tree and “*an ornamental pond in the Japanese style.*” (14) The juxtaposition of non-illusionist and illusionist theatrical devices coincides with the juxtaposition of male bodies

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<sup>†</sup> *Aunt Mary* was chosen as the play to re-open the Warehouse Theatre, London (formerly the Donmar Warehouse) which staged many experimental RSC productions. On the RSC's move to the Barbican during this time, the Warehouse fell empty. Ian Albery, an independent producer who already controlled four West End theatres in 1982, took on the refurbishment project of the Warehouse and created “one of London's most attractive small (240-seat) playhouses.” John Barber, ‘*Aunt Mary: Review*’, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1982, p. 26. For Michael Billington, this theatre signified a “new regime” of theatre-going: “more accessible, more welcoming, highly comfortable and a foyer bar... this is what a theatre should be. Nothing was more elitist than the old Warehouse in which only front-row spectators had a proper view.” Michael Billington, ‘*Aunt Mary: Review*’ *Guardian*, 25 June 1982, p. 18.



and female attire in the transvestite experience. In the spirit of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979), where women play men and vice-versa, *Aunt Mary* plays the biological and superficial components of sexual identification off against one another, thereby calling attention to the gulf between them.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler views transvestism as a form of parody - "the parodic repetition of gender" (92) - and is the means by and through which the constructed nature of gender identity will be revealed and opened to subversive intent. Butler would say that Mary and Cyst are used by Gems to offer a gender identity beyond the coercive frame of compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>†</sup>

In correspondence, Gems acknowledges that *Aunt Mary* was originally intended as a low budget lunchtime play to be directed by Bill Pryde. She wanted to focus on the isolation of minority groups following her personal abandonment by friends after the birth of her handicapped daughter. Her thoughts naturally turned to her two transvestite neighbours, May and Wen, who took the trouble to befriend the Gems family during those difficult times. Gems refers to them as her "sanity"<sup>42</sup> and thus they became the inspiration for the character of Aunt Mary. Originally Gems wanted to make Cyst and Mary black in order to include a racial perspective in the plot. This came out of staying a while in Handsworth, Birmingham at the time of the race riots and witnessing local racial prejudice at first hand. However, as the dramatic material increased, misfortune struck when Pryde stood down as director and Wen was tragically killed in a car accident in Spain. After that there seemed little reason to include such a token gesture, which might

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<sup>†</sup> Butler links the parody of transvestism with performative theory, "I describe and propose a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 92.



have been deemed patronising, so Gems altered the characters' race and re-wrote them as Caucasian.

The play was optioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, but there were delays because of the RSC's move to the Barbican. Gems explains the further misfortune which followed:

... Then all the dates went wrong. A new production of *Queen Christina* at the Tricycle, had to be brought forward as their scheduled piece was delayed. This meant we had to share our director with the Half Moon Theatre, it also meant that Robert Stephens, our original Aunt Mary, was rehearsing with us during the day and playing the Half Moon every night. After a wonderful ten days of rehearsal, when he brought complexity and sexual danger to the role of Mary we lost Robert through indisposition. Alfred Marks came in and brought his benevolent humour to the role, but on the first night, the audience was cold. We got terrible notices.<sup>43</sup>

Although the critics were unkind,<sup>†</sup> Gems was not altogether surprised as the play's polemical treatment of male transvestism did not particularly lend itself well to a conservative audience. Anne McFerran offered an interesting insight:

This is a witty, respectful piece, charged with outrageous incident; unfortunately the production isn't sufficiently focused or paced, rendering many of the performances patchy and the play often confusing.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> The first criticism of the play concerned its originality: "In 1959 William Douglas Home wrote a comedy, *Aunt Edwina*, about a man with a taste for drag. Pam Gems has now written a comedy, *Aunt Mary*, about three men with a taste for drag. Paradoxically, her play is about a third as amusing as his." Francis King, 'Aunt Mary: Review', *Sunday Telegraph*, 26 June 1982, p. 31. "Tennessee Williams, *The Birthday Party*, *Easy Rider*, *Camino Real*, even Jonathan Gems but certainly not Pam Gems." David Roper, 'Aunt Mary: Review', *Event*, 27 June 1982, p. 40.



Its problematic nature is borne out in the play with Mary and Cyst abandoning conventional male dress in order to find contentment in their identities; and yet, ironically, this abandonment must ultimately include the surrender of male privilege in exchange for the identity of societal freaks. So defined, they quickly find themselves preyed upon by an opportunistic television producer, Alison Armitage, who sees a “wonderful programme” in all these “amazing weirds.” (25) Alison reveals mainstream society’s blatant disregard for the dignity of those it has marginalised and provides a telling indictment of the British media. Gems’s decision to make a female character represent the status quo suggests her suspicions about women who respond to power by emulating the very value systems which have led to sexual oppression. Alison attaches herself to Martin, a poet who is one of Mary and Cyst’s friends. When he refuses to help her capture Mary and Cyst on tape, she, in a line echoing *Loving Women*’s Crystal, fumes:

ALISON What’s the matter with men nowadays ... they’ve lost all their balls

*Aunt Mary*, I. (p 26)

Alison’s ugly opportunism contains an element of the violence which frequently underpins discrimination. Because transvestites fall outside accepted social norms, Alison has no qualms about forcing herself upon Mary and Cyst and making them mere commodities in her career advancement. A later passage in the play treats the themes of violence and marginalisation more directly. Jack, a recent convert to transvestism after a long struggle with his identity, recalls the time he spent in “the bin”:

JACK Yeah. It’s pretty bad for the dimmies, the handicapped ... they ain’t got the bottle to get out the way. Give ‘em a kick, they grin, get kicked for grinning ... start to cry, get kicked for that. One old boy, every time he saw a white coat he’d take his teeth out, ready to have his head kicked. Some of the nurses got off on making them piss and shit themselves so’s they could really lay into them. You gotta laugh. Back home at night to the kiddies and the *Muppet Show*. Cruellest bloody country in the world, England.

*Aunt Mary*, II. (32)



This monologue, particularly chilling in light of Gems's personal situation with a handicapped child, makes a subtle connection between the blatant disregard normative society has for people like transvestites and its more pronounced mistreatment of the handicapped.

Alison, an emissary from the outside world, is one of the play's two female characters. She is offset by Muriel, the elderly woman whom Mary and Cyst marry in the play's second act. Muriel fits quite naturally into the transvestite community Mary and Cyst have created. Like Martin, and in contrast to Alison, she readily accepts Mary, Cyst and Jack for who they are, enjoying their offbeat humour and their love for theatre, literature, gourmet food and the occult. Also like Martin, whose bohemian style and unaggressiveness make him something of a social misfit, Muriel, by virtue of her age and sex, represents another group of people most often relegated to society's margins. As long as youthful appearance and fertility remain the standards for defining female attractiveness, women beyond the childbearing age are particularly vulnerable to sex discrimination. Though not in a context specific to Muriel, Gems notes in her correspondence that, "There's nothing more sneered at than a post-menopausal woman."<sup>45</sup>

The characters in *Aunt Mary* represent an alternative community which parallels, and yet also provides a contrast with, the all-female community which Gems portrays so vividly in *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*. As Cyst explains in Act I Scene 3, "We've evolved a perfectly rational infra-structure here," in which a group of non-conforming individuals can create a world in which they are as free as possible to pursue their feelings and interests. The fact that this play was disliked and dismissed suggests that audience and



critics alike wanted Gems to conform to an identifiable model of Feminist Theatre writer.<sup>†</sup>

For the central characters, Cyst and Mary, the distinctions between life and art are infinitely flexible - as are the distinctions between gender roles, lifestyles and indeed their choice of dress. The play is an anarchic and mischievous tease in which the playwright draws on the acceptable theatricality of fairly high camp - for men - to play with various dichotomies. However, the world Mary and Cyst create is one which is vulnerable to the incursions of the outside world, mainly through the dangerous categorisations of the media; it has to find ways to defend itself, and in the process of this mini-crisis, *Gems* draws a nexus of relationships which are full of compassion as well as high risk. It is a witty play, managing to combine earthiness and sophistication in a highly original and idiosyncratic fashion. It is also very specifically about men - the myths surrounding masculinity, homosexuality and bi-sexuality challenged at a grass roots level. Perhaps this is another reason which explains its lack of success, yet it is interesting and provocative to receive these myths via a heterosexual, female playwright turning attention to experiences refracted through male perceptions. Thus, *Gems's* insight is harnessed into a continually entertaining but serious explanation of the relationship between art and life, appearance and reality, and sexual identity.

*Aunt Mary*, then, while not overtly about women or feminism, fits into the larger pattern of *Gems's* concerns about the social values and the power and abuse cycles which perpetuate sexism. Both *Aunt Mary* and *Loving Women* critique the systems of social

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<sup>†</sup> "In plays like *Piaf*, and *Queen Christina*, Miss *Gems* proved she is a feminist dramatist of rare if occasionally undisciplined power, a feminist writer who can both touch and break an audience's heart. In *Aunt Mary*, she turns her hand to comedy and her gifts seem to have deserted her." Charles Spencer, '*Aunt Mary*: Review', *Evening Standard*, 25 June 1982, p. 20.



hierarchy which at best, breed divisiveness between individuals, and at worst, justify violent hatred between them. The tacit implication that women should have easier access to individual dignity gives these two plays a grounding in the liberalist feminist dynamic, while the more explicit critique of culturally constructed gender biases evokes materialist feminist thought.

### **Loving Women (1984): Subverting Male Homosocial Desire/Readdressing Female Relationships**

CRYSTAL Anyway ...this Harry ...asks me out for a burger ...nips in for a six pack on the way home, I think iyiy ...back to the squat, he sits me down ...and I think we-ell, he smells all right ...you know, clean - anyway, I get a bit of a cuddle, I'm just relaxing, fishing round for it when all of a sudden he puts his mush in me ear and whispers, "What would you like me to do Crystal?" ...I thought of a thing or two, I can tell you. "Look," he says, "I'm not one of those geezers that jumps a gal ...I'm not the wham-bam, thank you ma'am type." I said, "What?" Got out the bloody cigarettes!  
*Loving Women, I, I (161)*

*Loving Women*<sup>46</sup> was first presented at the Arts Theatre, London on February 1st 1984 by David Jones and Jonathan Gems.† The latter also took the role of designer, and the play was directed by Philip Davis. The original cast included Marion Bailey as Susannah, David Beames as Frank, and Gwyneth Strong as Crystal (see Appendix).

*Loving Women* is a reconstruction of an earlier play by Gems entitled, *The Project*. This was first produced at the Soho-Poly, London in February 1976 by the Women's Playhouse Trust as part of their Spring lunchtime season. The play was directed by Ed Berman. Gems liked the concept of *The Project* very much, and after

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† Jonathan Gems is Pam's son - a playwright and successful Hollywood film writer in his own right. He recently scripted the film *Mars Attacks!* (1998) For *Loving Women*, he constructed a "beautifully designed 1970's set where the Mao poster gives way to Mark Bolan. Lou Reed forms the soundtrack, the bead doorway and Indian carpet ceding to the arrival of the period drinks trolley." Michael Coveney, 'Loving Women: Review', *Financial Times*, 2 February 1984, p. 9. The set was taken from his play, *Naked Robots* (1980).



being influenced by a play written by her son, Jonathan, called *Naked Robots* (1980),<sup>†</sup> Gems set to work on its adaptation.

*Loving Women* begins to suggest the revisionist impulse behind many of Gems's efforts: it remains within the parameters of dramatic realism while transforming the popular love triangle which is often at its centre. The plot follows three characters (Frank, Susannah and Crystal) over the course of ten years. The original love triangle, with Crystal encroaching upon Susannah and Frank's relationship, shifts and transforms itself. At the play's end the two women make plans to set up house together in a platonic but eagerly anticipated variation on their original partnerships with Frank.

Though Gems maintains that her primary objective while writing the play involved lambasting social workers (and Susannah's patronising attitudes as a social worker do deliver a resounding blow to the profession), it is most notable for its suggestions about female friendship. In refreshing contrast to the pervasive images of women competing for male attention, Susannah and Crystal join forces despite vastly different personalities. Crystal, the hairdresser is fascinated primarily by night-life, sex and fashion and seems worlds removed from Susannah, the socialist social worker taking herself and virtually everything else with utmost seriousness. Gems brings both characters together in a conclusion reflecting not only tolerance for, but celebration of, divergent understandings of female identity. While dramatic realism may not offer a vehicle for the most radical feminist revisioning, *Loving Women* certainly makes revisionist strides within the realist form. Whereas many traditional realist narratives interchange characters of the same sex

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<sup>†</sup> *Naked Robots* explored a comparison of lifestyles in the 1970's with what would be in the 1980's. "Jonathan concluded that capitalism would be fine. I had different ideas. I took his model, benefited from his design advice and invested the contemporary comedy of manners with some stirring emotional insights. *Loving Women* was born." Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 4 February 2000.



to shape movement toward conclusions inevitably coupling opposite sex characters, Gems subverts this design; the two women displace the man, not one another. *Loving Women* also treats Frank somewhat sympathetically to avoid - as with *Aunt Mary* - the simple redistribution of sexist images for which Gems faulted Margaret Atwood and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Negating any implication that women alone are noble victims; Gems suggests that men who try to break free from traditional gender roles run up against the same biases that frustrate feminists. Women who refuse to conform to traditional images of femininity are often attacked as being sexually frustrated if not sexually undesirable; when Frank tries to re-think his masculine identity, a similar dynamic occurs. Crystal calls the men he associates with a bunch of "limp dicks"<sup>47</sup> before rushing out of the house to a night club while he remains behind with their two children, as has become the norm in their home. Ultimately, the play offers an affirmation of women's unity against the odds which frustrate it, but it reveals how these same odds (narrow definitions of femininity and masculinity) create barriers between men and women.

To sum up this survey tour of Gems's less-known plays, we see that *The Treat* and *Guinevere* expand upon the themes of social violence from a perspective which foregrounds the oppression and objectification of women. Graphic images of male violence against women reflect the cultural feminist strain in Gems's thinking, while reference to social artefacts (social class in one play and legend in the other) refutes any wholly essentialist perceptions of sexism. In further contrast to *Loving Women* and *Aunt Mary*, these two plays abandon realist strategies of characterisation: male and female characters become less fully realised individuals and more generalised abstractions of their



gender identities. What is striking overall is Gems's pursuit of aesthetic and feminist plurality, her search for a theatre which is committed but non-exclusive.

### **Pasionaria (1985): Gems and the Political Female**

*Pasionaria*<sup>48</sup> represents a markedly different type of revisioning. Here Gems does evoke history and in contrast not only to *Guinevere* but to the five major plays I shall consider later, she approaches her subject with a spirit somewhat akin to documentary. While not assuming the objective facade of realism and while clearly creating relationships and situations not supplied by historical sources, Gems seems primarily interested in documenting Delores Ibaruri's achievements. Her other biographical plays, as we shall see, take somewhat less reverential approaches to their subjects.

*Pasionaria*, written in 1985, has received little critical acclaim or attention. The main reasons for this are, firstly, that the play still remains an unpublished manuscript and secondly (as Gems now admits) a problem of timing. The play was first produced by the Women's Company at the Newcastle Playhouse (13 - 27 May 1985 - see Appendix) and coincided with the troubled conclusion of the miners' strike. Considered to be too left wing and socially unpalatable for the time, the play was not well received by the critics in spite of "a dazzling performance"<sup>49</sup> by the lead actress Denise Black. Black, a close friend of Gems, was at the beginning of her career when offered the part of Delores Ibaruri. Gems considered her to be perfect for the play and fought hard with the director, Sue Dunderdale, in order to secure her. In an interview, Black shed light on the part Gems played in the production of *Pasionaria*:



*Pasionaria* was a huge challenge for me. I had oceans of lines and had to age from 14 to 42. Pam took a back seat in rehearsals, as a playwright must. It wasn't until the end of the rehearsal process that she chipped in with a few ideas. Often writers aren't welcome in rehearsal: it's all credit to Pam that she was absolutely wonderful to have around in that situation. She backed the director to the hilt but she shed light on areas that were still a little sticky for me ... Like all good friends, she gives you support, but challenges you.<sup>50</sup> †

*Pasionaria* stands as an important manifestation of Gems's belief that "women really do have to chart and explore their own history."<sup>51</sup> Study of this play and of *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* enables some prefatory observations on the interrelation of theatrical form, feminism and the historical referent which will assume a central position in subsequent discussions.

Dolores Ibarruri, born into a Spanish mining family, took *Pasionaria* ('Passion Flower') as a pseudonym while writing for a small newspaper in 1918. The name remained with her as she became an increasingly vocal presence in Spain's Communist Party during the twenties and thirties. In 1933, she led the formation of the Group of Anti-Fascist Women. The following year, she took part in the Asturian Miner's Revolt, a movement which has been described as "one of the great proletarian uprisings of modern history,"<sup>52</sup> and played a crucial role in anticipating the Spanish Civil War fought between July 1936 and April 1939. In 1936, Ibarruri represented Asturia as a delegate during the national elections. She exiled herself to Moscow in the forties and remained an active force in Party politics until she died there at the age of ninety-four. Ibarruri, a brilliant orator who made frequent radio broadcasts and rally speeches, fought for the rights of

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† Initially, I intended to give *Pasionaria* (as a play taking its female protagonist from history) a more prominent place in this study. My decision to give it more cursory treatment stemmed, in part, from the different approach apparent in Gems's characterisation. Because the unpublished script is not wholly legible and little else has been written on its subject (Dolores Ibarruri, 1895-1989) in English, it was not possible to consider the play with the thoroughness reserved for *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Camille*, *Marlene* and *The Snow Palace*.



peasants, prisoners and children. The depth of Gems's admiration for Ibarri is apparent in a letter of 1998:

The fact that a woman, in that Islamic-influenced country, and a peasant woman at that (when I first went to Spain in the fifties, women were still, in the evening, behind the fretted windows while the men promenaded) should become a member of the Spanish government seems only lately to have been honoured for its achievement. I'm not of her political persuasion, but seen against her background, four out of her six children dead before the age of five, from poverty, it is understandable that she was hard-left. And she never seems to have been doctrinaire, though tough.<sup>53</sup>

*Pasionaria* is a sweeping epic, featuring one of Gems's largest casts, twenty named characters and a chorus. Each of its two acts begins with a procession and monologue, delivered in each case by Emilia, setting the scene. Throughout the play, songs break up and comment upon the action. Unlike the use of songs in traditional musical theatre, Gems's are not integrated 'organically' into the action nor presented as a logical outgrowth of a heightened emotionality rooted in the situation. The songs, rather, occur at regular intervals to disrupt the easy flow of events. However, while Gems uses a pronounced theatricality to call attention to the play's construction and thematic concerns, her characters, particularly Dolores, and the narrative line resemble those associated with dramatic realism. This combination of contradictory theatrical modes and devices emerges frequently in Gems's plays about history. Approaching historical materials with duelling forms and abandoning the pretence of an objective chronicle, Gems openly embraces the simultaneity of fact and reconstruction inherent in the theatricalising of history. *Pasionaria* spans approximately twenty years - beginning in 1915 and following Dolores's career into the 1930's - and contains crucial juxtapositions

characteristic of Gems's overall treatment of women's history and biography. Her Dolores emerges as both a victim of discrimination and an agent of change, not only steering the course of her own life but influencing the political environment of the small mining community and then the nation in which she lives. Gems also juxtaposes Dolores's particular experiences of poverty and class oppression with images of an implied universal female experience.

For example, two first act exchanges engage in an analysis of class and gender. As a young woman, Dolores works in the home of Senor and Senora Lopez, a wealthy couple with an ugly prejudice against miners. This prejudice takes different but complimentary forms for the husband and wife; the Senor fondles Dolores freely just as readily as the Senora assumes that, as a lower class woman, Dolores is a "vulgar, common slut."<sup>54</sup> Both eagerly remind her that there are many poor young women to take her place, and she does not remain long in their employ. (She does make off with the meat they intended to eat for supper, a true luxury for the peasants with whom it will be shared.)

After Dolores has married, given birth to five children and buried three, she receives a visit from a girlhood friend, Dona Sebastiana. As the scene continues, it becomes apparent that she has been sent to buy her friend's silence about the poor working conditions in the mines with the promise of a more suitable home and income. Dolores refuses, in testimony to her selfless devotion to the good of her comrades. She becomes enraged because of Dona's calculated attempts to appeal to her as another woman, a Catholic and a mother. She charges, "They've made a lackey of you" and



understands that, in the end, the fact that Dona has “the smell of butter,” and can “drive about in cars and gloves”<sup>55</sup> eclipses any common ground they may share.

Gems contrasts the unsatisfactory relationships Dolores has with Senora Lopez and Dona Sebastiana with the constant companionship she finds in Emilia. As daughters, wives and mothers, these characters share a bond unmatched in any of their relationships with men; and indeed although the offence Dolores takes at the Dona’s ploy offers Gems’s critique of an essentialist vision, the importance the playwright ascribes to Dolores’s identity as a mother qualifies this critique. Gems roots Dolores’s growing political passion in the anguish she experiences as a mother who hasn’t the nourishment to lactate and must watch her infants die. A speech Dolores makes during a Communist rally early in the second act exemplifies the strong connection Gems makes between Dolores’s maternal experiences and her activism:

DOLORES I speak as a woman.

I say human beings have four basic rights. We are all born on equal terms, that is naked and helpless, to share the earth’s resources.

Right number one. The right to clean air to breathe.

Right number two. The right to clean water to drink.

Right number three. The right to feeding grounds ... nowadays, a fair share of the means of existence.

Right number four ... the right to breeding grounds - the right to a den, a home ... the same as any other animal on this earth.

The rest is a social contract.

But the four primitive rights - air, water, food and shelter ... these are the bedrock, not of society, but of humanity ... of life itself ... give or take the mosquito ...

*(She swats herself irritably.)*

And what of our rights? The people of Spain? Look around you. The foxes, the wolves, the rabbits - even the rats have a better chance of rearing their litters to maturity than the majority ... the majority, friends, of the people in this country.

I bore six children. How many do you see standing there? *Pasionaria, II . (p 5-6)*

Through Dolores, Gems asserts a vision of women as history’s nurturing force - perpetuating and ensuring the survival of all peoples.



Gems notes that she found surprisingly little information about Ibarri's life and that she "formed the opinion it was because of her sex."<sup>56</sup> This statement combines with Gems's great respect for Ibarri to suggest something of an impulse to 'rescue' her subject from the shadows of historical discourse and to emphasise women's competence in the public arena. Dolores consistently emerges as a catalyst for the men around her - challenging her father to throw off the menial labour which degrades him, provoking her husband into joining the miner's revolt, crying down the union representatives who would obscure the worker's plights, deftly manoeuvring the course of party action. While *Pasionaria* encompasses divergent perceptions of feminism and history, the general admiration for Ibarri and the association of her with mothering combine to foreground an image of female transcendence over destructive male systems. In some ways, Gems's treatment coincides with Gerda Lerner's definition of the 'history of notable women.' But because it situates Dolores squarely in terms of her family situation, the play also accounts for the ways in which women's experience in public roles has been moulded by their private ones. For Gems, Ibarri's passionate convictions did undoubtedly spring from her family situation. As the grand-daughter, daughter, wife and sister of miners, she had to watch them being victimised by abhorrent working conditions before seeing her own children die in poverty.

### **Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi (1976): Writing a Diverse Female Community**

*Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, which first established Gems's reputation, takes a more direct look at public and private roles, traditional images and current ambitions. Here she creates a forum for exploring images of maternity and of women's past and



present involvement in male political systems. The four characters of the play's title share not only a London flat but various personal struggles and often conflicting philosophies. Their experiences combine to create a spectrum of gender-related dilemmas which closely mirrors the female community explored by Maureen Duffy in *Rites*, (1969).<sup>†</sup> Both *Dusa* and *Rites* present an all-female cast, and explore, through dramatic juxtaposition, women's attempts and failures to find viable ways of living as personal and political beings.

Gems wrote the play (under the title, *Dead Fish*), in 1974, after finishing *Piaf*. She was keen to write a contemporary theatre piece and for this purpose chose to write in shifting, synaptic sequences. Thus the play is set simply in “a space, not naturalistic”<sup>57</sup> and unfolds through a series of short scenes punctuated by musical interludes as a way of criticising the mass media. The result of Gems's experimentation appears almost post-modern in its fragmentation: the dialogue remains dry and ‘superficial’ while the songs intermittently carry the emotion. However, the play evolved in significant ways which would help to define what was expected of Gems's work.

The original production by the Women's Company was first seen at Kundry's Theatre in 1976, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, directed by Caroline Eves, with Lesley Joseph as Stas. By December of that year, Nancy Meckler mounted a new production at the Hampstead Theatre Club, eventually moving to the Mayfair Theatre, London in February 1977 (see Appendix). By this time, the play had the revised title of *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (its previous title was felt to be too much of a give-away), and this version seemed to be an improvement. A new cast was brought in (Brigit Forsyth was especially

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<sup>†</sup> Maureen Duffy's *Rites*, (1969) was a powerful lead into post-1968 women's theatre. Set in a public lavatory, it explored gender roles and the creation of scapegoats (the figure of the lesbian), even within an all-female community.



praised for her performance as Dusa) and the songs were replaced by contemporary radio clips to give more distance and objectivity to the close scrutiny of the female community. This alteration also encouraged a focus on the female characters as individuals as well as as a collective. For example, Dusa fights to reunite with the children her estranged husband has kidnapped. Dusa (ironically, a Greek word which originates from the verb 'to give') derives great satisfaction from her children; but, living in a sexist society in a marriage which mirrors society's subordination of women, she lacks status and financial autonomy. Her fight to be with the children for whom she has been responsible exposes the double bind which idealises women in traditional roles while depriving them of the rights which would empower them to truly protect their children.

Through Dusa, Gems offers not only a critique of social systems but also a very firm celebration of parenting. Perhaps echoing the playwright's own expressed desire to have eight children, Dusa insists:

DUSA I wish I were a cat or a horse. I'd have one [baby] a year. Your body wants to go on. Once you've got the hang of it. *Dusa, I . (p. 52)*

However, Gems very carefully detaches this hymn to childbearing from Dusa's identity as a wife. Dusa, her identity in flux, experiences an awakening feminism and evaluating the sacrifices she made in her conventional marriage, fumes, "Nobody could have worshipped his cock more than I did. I ask myself ... where does it all get you. Where?" (51)

In opposition to Dusa is the young Vi, presenting herself as a tough survivor controlled by neither men nor pregnancy. Vi jokes about abortion - "I was seven months, it was ever so strong ... you could hear it crying all the way to the incinerator" - while



Dusa “*takes out a small picture of her children, sets it by the divan.*” (50) Later, Dusa tells Fish:

DUSA Look, somebody has to take time off and have the kids ... she [Vi] chucks hers in the fire.  
*Dusa, I. p. 51*

Vi's alleged abortions, anorexia, chills and generally poor health counter stock images of female fecundity, but despite her cavalier facade, Vi's lifestyle offers a less than satisfactory alternative to the traditions she lambasts. The third character, Stas, also frees herself from an identity linked to husband and children. She works by day as a physiotherapist and by night as a prostitute. The contrast in Stas's daytime and night time lives (punctuated by on-stage costume changes from the practical white lab coat to bejewelled and colourful glamour) makes for a dramatic juxtaposition of female roles.<sup>†</sup> While there may be an implicit judgement in the fact that Stas sells herself to men in order to finance her ambitions as a marine biologist, prostitution gives her an emotional detachment from men, and in some ways she appears the most stable of the four characters. A scientist with first-hand experience of true need, Stas embraces a pragmatic materialism which is offset by Fish's abstract idealism. Fish, born into financial security, fights for the rights of the needy. In terms of images of reproduction, Fish stands between the extremes represented by Dusa and Vi. After some consideration, Fish has decided she wants to have her lover Alan's child: Alan, like Fish, devotes himself to class reform. Their relationship - seemingly based not on the 'cock worship' Dusa decries, but on mutual interests and respect - should offer a more satisfactory outcome. In the end, however, it does not, and this is crucial for the play's final statement. He ultimately

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<sup>†</sup> Margaret Llewellyn-Jones considers the dressing and undressing of Stas as she switches between her roles as being in accordance with Irigaray's notion of mimesis: "These are visual moments that, in Irigaray's sense, mimetically demonstrate the process of image construction in a way that is critique as much as reflection.", *British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958*, ed. by Trevor Griffiths and Margaret Llewellyn-Jones (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 32.



seems threatened by Fish's ambitions and deserts her for a woman who will accept a more traditionally subservient role in his life. Gems suggests the larger implications of Fish's situation by establishing a connection between Fish and another heroine of twentieth century revolutionary politics, Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg's experiences reflect the complex interplay between issues of class, gender, public and private struggles which Gems re-enacts in her characterisation of Fish. Though Luxemburg fought to empower the workers, she was somewhat removed from them. Despite the financial struggles occasionally attending her father's business ventures, she did spring from the mercantile class and was both well-educated and well-travelled, and, for example, Richard Abraham describes her as:

... suffering from a degree of intellectual snobbery, avoiding direct contact with the daily lives of working people and entirely failing to comprehend the Eastern European peasantry.<sup>58</sup>†

Luxemburg's life offers a model for the class contradictions of Fish's experience, and raises certain questions about the place of women in male political systems. Luxemburg not only devoted her energies to class conflict, she derided focus on gender inequality; she faulted her friend Clara Zetkin, who edited a feminist journal, *Die Gleichheit* (*Equality*), as "ensnared" in "female questions," and therefore unable to "get through to general questions" (55). While never attacking feminism, Fish emulates Luxemburg by committing herself to political activity revolving around class concerns and her monologue, carefully positioned in the play's centre, makes Luxemburg's relevance to the

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† There is also a parallel between Fish, Rosa Luxemburg and Buzz Goodbody, the first woman director of the RSC and the founder of the Other Place Theatre, which was to become a home for Gems's plays.



play explicit. It offers one of Gems's most comprehensive statements about the interplay of historical and current feminist concerns.

The monologue begins with Fish referring to Luxemburg as:

FISH ... a Pole, working in Germany ... a foreigner therefore ... a Jewess ... short ... crippled ... and a woman. Not good-looking either. Plain. *Dusa, I . (p. 54)*

Fish stresses the particularities of Luxemburg's life, depicting her sex as one component of a multi-faceted identity. She next identifies the areas in which Luxemburg took issue with Lenin (she favoured control by the masses where Lenin looked to the central Party), and insists that Luxemburg: "saw that it took the unemployed to know about being unemployed ... believed that the mistakes made by people doing things for themselves was more valuable than any theory coming from an elitist committee." (54)

In light of Fish's own abstract relationship to the workers and Luxemburg's similar detachment, these claims become somewhat ironic, but nevertheless do establish Luxemburg in opposition to Lenin and suggest a female-male dichotomy which becomes increasingly clear as the monologue continues. Fish goes on to contrast Lenin's approval of World War I with Luxemburg's call for "immediate cessation of the war" (54).

Gems evokes a cultural feminist dichotomy in which women are regarded as essentially peace-loving while men are regarded as prone to war. This creates a backdrop for questions about women's roles in male political systems. As the Fish monologue resumes, she moves again from a particularised understanding of Luxemburg to thoughts on women in general:

FISH Rosa constantly demonstrates that the emergence of women thinkers in politics modifies Marxist theory as we know it. It's not enough to be told that we may join ... that they will let us in ... when they need our labour force. To be outside may be oppression. To be inside may well be total irrelevancy.  
*Dusa, I. (p. 55)*

The assertion that Luxemburg made a feminist impact on Marxist theory is dubious; in 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State,' Catherine MacKinnon<sup>59</sup> sees Luxemburg as exemplifying the obfuscation of gender which feminists generally objected to in Marxist thought. Nonetheless, Gems uses Fish's Luxemburg monologue to suggest how women might strive to change, not simply be assimilated into, male systems. Through this speech, Gems asks, "Is feminism to be an increasing power elite in given existing structure?"<sup>60</sup>

The monologue makes one last connection between Luxemburg and Fish. With reference to Leo Jogiches, Luxemburg's lover and fellow revolutionary, Gems suggests how women's drive to work alongside men and their desire to have these men's children often become mutually exclusive:

FISH Rosa never married Leo. She never had the child she longed for. The painful hopes in the letters from prison were never to be realised. She writes to him from Zurich about seeing a fine child in the park, and wanting to scoop him up in her arms and run off with him, back to her room. Usually when people write about her nowadays they leave all that out. They are wrong.  
*Dusa, I. (p. 55)*

At this point in the play, Fish still believes that she will have Alan's child and continue her career as an activist. In other words, Fish thinks she can blend the desires which Luxemburg did not, and that men are ready to accept women as both equals in the public sphere and the mothers of their children. The play's conclusion, however, insists that



certain solutions remain as problematic for modern women as they were for Luxemburg. Fish butts up against a cold reality when the equal partnership she envisioned proves beyond reach. Unable to reconcile her leftist political ideals and her yearning for Alan and their child, Fish commits suicide. In her last act, she identifies not with people who share her class concerns, but her flatmates: other women with diverse backgrounds and widely divergent styles. She leaves behind a suicide note which asks, “My loves, what are we to do?” (70).

Because Gems establishes an element of trust between Fish and her flatmates early in the play, the character does not appear to turn to women simply out of desperation. Throughout the play, and despite their frequent clashes, the play’s four characters prove ultimately loyal to one another. Both Susan Carlson and Helene Keyssar see *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* as a positive reflection on women’s community. In her essay, ‘Contemporary British Theatre and its Communities of Women,’<sup>61</sup> Carlson groups *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* with what she sees as a positive new trend in theatre: plays exploring “the uncharted dramatic possibilities of multiple female heroines.” (255-56) Similarly, Keyssar includes *Dusa, Fish Stas and Vi* in her chapter ‘Communities of Women in Drama’<sup>62</sup> and argues that one of the play’s most remarkable characteristics “is the attendance of the characters to each other’s words and needs.” (133)

Fish’s suicide note has echoes from her first act monologue. As Stas reads it with Dusa and Vi at her side, their community opens up in space and time to include Luxemburg. Running parallel to the description of Luxemburg’s experience of “seeing a fine child in the park and wanting to scoop him up in her arms,” Fish admits, “I wanted so

much to sit under a tree with my children and there doesn't seem to be a place for that anymore." (70)

The Luxemburg monologue posed questions about the precise nature of the feminist contribution, relations between men and women, and the elusive balance between public and private roles in the lives of women. The suicide note resumes this inquiry, only to suggest that these questions remain unanswered:

FISH See Alan for me. Tell him not to grieve. He couldn't come with me and there it is. Perhaps, in the end we do have to fight. But I don't want that. I never have. It's not right ... not for me. I've been seeing him everywhere. ... My loves, what are we to do? We won't do as they want any more and they hate it. What are we to do? *Dusa, II . (p. 70)*

True to Wandor's misgivings about the play, expressed first in her interview with Gems and again in more comprehensive form in *Carry on, Understudies*, there is an element of defeat implied through Fish's suicide. But this suicide represents not, as she suspects, failed political ambition, but the death of naiveté about change in men and women's relationships.

In her correspondence, Gems elaborates on the difficulty most men have accepting feminism on anything but an intellectual level, recalling the frequency with which marriages failed when women first started identifying themselves as feminist. She explains:

Fish's lover betrayed her in a most classic way. he had gone for a supportive number two, a woman who was not suited to be a protagonist. Which I think is very classic.<sup>63</sup>



Gems points out that her suicide also shows a “failure of love between men and women” adding that, “actually the failure is from the man.”<sup>64</sup> Fish envisioned the possibility of being a ‘protagonist’ in her own terms. Inscribing herself into a script, including Alan and children, however, proved elusive; for he, an ostensibly liberated male, continued to script his own life and was not yet willing to surrender or even share protagonist status.

Much to Gems’s surprise, Fish’s suicide aroused some controversy. It was argued, by some critics that this action was a slur on the Left and that the play was therefore bourgeois and individualistic, with such a depressive ending striking the wrong political note. But Gems was concerned that the critics had missed the point. She explains her intentions for the play’s conclusion:

The play is about the irresolvable contrast of the female role(s). Fish, the pathfinder ...the woman attempting to break out a new equitable way of living ...and finding resistance ...and Fish, the upper class woman who can give help but who is unable to receive it. Just like Rosa Luxemburg, she took both roles in a head-on fashion. And gave her life for it.<sup>65</sup>

At the time of writing *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, Gems was convinced that all women have to choose a devious compromise between irreconcilable roles and that sometimes the only solution is to pay the price of survival. However, in more recent years Gems’s attitude towards Fish’s dilemma has mellowed and she has accordingly amended her theory:

I now think that the reason for Fish’s decision not to live was the failure of love. Fish had tried for a new, sharing life with her lover. He didn’t want it ...he felt better off in a traditional relationship. And she couldn’t, wouldn’t fight. Fish does not want a fight. Not in the name of love. And without love, she dies.<sup>66</sup>

Gems makes an interesting comment. The argument has been put that by not allowing women to fight, men are able to romanticise combat into gallantry and protection. A feat which is deemed unacceptable for women to achieve in society.

Fish's predicament, as a woman desiring both new freedoms and traditional relationships, focuses the play's central concerns. *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* offers a canvas for exploring the dilemmas peculiar to feminists who choose heterosexual relationships while refusing their traditional restraints. Married, and a believer in the kind of commitment marriage represents, Gems does not advocate abandoning this challenge. She does, however, emphasise its magnitude.

To conclude, the play's setting and structure demand that the lives contained within the story not simply be accepted as a 'slice of life,' but examined. With the inspiration that she finds in Luxemburg, Gems sets the stage for plays looking to history for metaphors about women's experiences and for an understanding of the inter-relation of history and the present. Through Luxemburg and each of the play's four modern characters, Gems establishes a dialectic between a life's uniqueness and its commonalities. When, she asks, is it appropriate to speak of a generic women's experience, and what role must be assigned to individual circumstances? Through the play's varying images of reproduction, Gems begins to consider the role biology plays in women's lives.

During the nineties, *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* is one of the few lesser known of Gems's plays which has benefited from a revival. In 1994, a production by the Masque of Angels Theatre Company opened at the Etcetera Theatre, London and ran from 15



March to 3 April of that year. The play was directed by Lisa Napier, (see Appendix). The fact that the play enjoyed a revival so many years after it was first written, not only acknowledges the play's enduring popularity but also serves to credit Gems's earlier writing.<sup>†</sup>

One notion articulated in the Luxemburg monologue (if not satisfactorily explored in the play's action) will become central in *Queen Christina*. Fish claims that, "to be outside may be oppression. To be inside may well be total irrelevancy" (55). Gems suspends Christina between exactly such oppression and irrelevancy, as she makes a more probing enquiry into the victim/agent dichotomy in myth and women's history.

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<sup>†</sup> "*Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* is very popular in regional repertory, suggesting that the question of woman's status in society is still one that appeals to a less radical audience, providing that it is not played as an overt challenge." *British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958*, ed. by Trevor Griffiths and Margaret Llewellyn-Jones (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 32.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Endnotes

1. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, unpublished manuscript, 1 February 1998.
2. Lyn Gardner, 'Precious Gems', *Plays and Players*, 32 (1985), 12-13.  
Hereafter this article will be referred to as 'Precious Gems'.
3. Michelene Wandor, 'Women are Uncharted Territory: Interview with Pam Gems', *Spare Rib*, September 1977, pp.10-12, (p. 12). (Hereafter, this article will be referred to as '*Spare Rib*').
4. Michelene Wandor, *Spare Rib*, p. 12.
5. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, unpublished manuscript, 12 March 1998.
6. Lyn Gardner, 'Precious Gems', p. 12.
7. Ann McFerran, 'Interview with Pam Gems', *Time Out*, October 1977, pp. 21-27.
8. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 12 March 1998.
9. Pam Gems, 'Gender and Imagination', in *On Gender and Writing*, ed. by Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 148-51.
10. David Isaacs, 'The Calm Gentle Woman Pressing for Change', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 9 September 1977, p.16. (Hereinafter referred to as 'David Isaacs')
11. Susan Carlson, Interview with Pam Gems, April 22nd 1986. Taken from, Susan Carlson, 'Process and Product: Contemporary British Theatre and its Communities of Women' *Theatre Research International*, 13, 1988, 249-263, (p. 258).
12. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 1 February 1998.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Michelene Wandor, *Spare Rib*, p. 12.



18. Claire Colvin, 'Earth Mother from Christchurch', *Plays and Players*, 13 (1982), 9-10.
19. Michelene Wandor, *Spare Rib*, p. 12.  
The sense of isolation described by Gems is eventually written into her play *The Snow Palace*, which focuses on the alienation encountered by the solitary female writer.
20. Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987) pp. 200-10.
21. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Research Press, 1988).
22. Pam Gems, 'Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi', in *Plays By Women: Volume One*, ed. by Michelene Wandor, 10 vols (London: Methuen, 1982) pp.45-73 (p.72). (Hereafter this text will be referred to as 'Dusa').
23. Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 26.
24. Michelene Wandor, *On Gender and Writing*, p. 135.  
It does seem that Gems's English working class background and general class awareness influences the critic to identify her according to British feminist ideology rather than American or French schools of feminist thought.
25. Pam Gems, *Dusa*, p.72.
26. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 1 February 1998.
27. Claire Colvin, p. 9.
28. Michelene Wandor, *Spare Rib*, p.12.
29. Betsko and Koenig, p.205.
30. Lyn Gardner, 'Precious Gems', p.13.
31. Pam Gems, in Michelene Wandor, *On Gender and Writing*, p.150.
32. Ibid.
33. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 12 March 1998.
34. Pam Gems quoted in Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 291.
35. Pam Gems, in Michelene Wandor, *On Gender and Writing*, p.151.
36. Ibid.

37. Pam Gems, *Guinevere* (unpublished manuscript\*), 1976.
38. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, March 12th 1998.
39. Ibid.
40. Betsko and Koenig, p.207.
41. Pam Gems, 'Aunt Mary', in *Plays By Women: Volume Three*, ed. by Michelene Wandor, 10 vols (London: Methuen, 1984), III, pp. 14-48.
42. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 1 February 1998.
43. Ibid.
44. Anne McFerran, 'Aunt Mary: Review', *Time Out*, 27 June 1982, p. 13.
45. Betsko and Koenig, p.207.
46. Pam Gems, 'Loving Women', in *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille and Loving Women* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 154-217.
47. Michelene Wandor, *On Gender and Writing*, p. 135
48. Pam Gems, *Pasionaria* (unpublished manuscript\*), 1985.
49. Vera Lustig, 'How We Met: Pam Gems and Denise Black', *Independent on Sunday*, 8 June 1997, pp.65-67.
50. Ibid.
51. Betsko and Koenig, p. 205.
52. Herbert L. Matthews, *Half of Spain Died: A Reappraisal of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1973), p. 56.
53. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 12 March 1998.
54. Pam Gems, *Pasionaria*, I, p.11.
55. Ibid.
56. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 1 February 1998.
57. Pam Gems, *Dusa*, I., p.49.
58. Richard Abrahams, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life for the International* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), p. 4.



59. Catherine MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory', in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. by Michelle Rosaldo and Barbara Gielpi (Chic. Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1981) pp. 1-30 (p. 6-7).
60. Pam Gems, *Dusa*, I., p.55.
61. Susan Carlson, 'Process and Product', p. 255
62. Helene Keyssar, 'Communities of Women in Drama', in *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (London: MacMillan, 1984), p.133.
63. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 12 March 1998.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.

\*All unpublished manuscripts received through written correspondence with Pam Gems  
agent: Sebastian Born  
c/o Laura Campbell  
The Agency  
24 Pottery Lane  
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W11 4LZ                      (0171) 727 1346

Gems's hand-written production notes on copies of unpublished plays made available for reference at: The Shakespeare Institute  
University Of Birmingham  
Mason Croft  
Church Street  
Stratford Upon Avon  
Warwickshire (01789) 293138

**CHAPTER TWO**

**PAM GEMS**

***QUEEN CHRISTINA***

**‘A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY’: REVISIONING THE MYTH  
OF QUEEN CHRISTINA THROUGH GENDER**



## Introduction

As Gems's *Queen Christina*<sup>1</sup> opens, the audience is confronted with the following dramatic scene:

*A SMALL CHILD crouches in a huge fireplace, lit by the glow from the fire. TWO MEN, one dressed as a soldier, pace. Off, there is a prolonged screaming then a pause, then a howl of anguish.*  
*Queen Christina, I. 1. (17)*

The child is the young Christina and she hears the piercing cries of her mother giving birth to one in a succession of stillborn baby boys. The men (her father the King and the Swedish Chancellor, Oxenstierna) await the news and when it comes, the former queries: "What is it with women?" And in reply to his own question, he proclaims, "Weak!" (17)

At this point, the Queen begins a "*low sobbing sound*" offstage which underscores the remainder of the scene. In a series of short, clipped lines, the King informs Oxenstierna of his decision that, given the Queen's inability to produce a proper heir, he intends to "make a man" of his daughter Christina and groom her for the Swedish throne. The Chancellor leaves and the King turns to Christina:

KING What did you think of that... were you listening?

CHILD Why is Mama crying?

KING We're going to make a queen of you.

CHILD (*flinches*) No, I don't want to.

KING Don't worry, not like your mother ...like me, like a king.

*Queen Christina, I. 1. (17)*

This brief exchange embodies the play's opening image: to be a woman is not only to know great pain, but to be of no consequence (the child's question about her mother does

not warrant so much as a simple acknowledgement). A far more attractive possibility exists and thus, a rare twist of fate bestows this possibility upon Christina; she severs her resemblance to her mother to follow her father.

From the outset of *Queen Christina*, Gems's protagonist finds herself in a highly confusing position, at once female and yet distanced from the female. At the scene's end, she remains alone on stage, ironically hugging her doll (a token of her girlhood and, at this moment, a reflection of herself, an object in the hands of larger and more powerful others.)

The rest of the play follows Christina's struggle to assume agency in a life script that often reduces her to a pawn; her battle with the alienation and confusion wrought by her upbringing; and finally her realisation, too late in life, of the toll these struggles have extracted. Images of motherhood serve as bookends for the first scene - the sounds of the Queen in childbirth and the little girl clinging to her doll - as Gems takes up the investigation of biological possibilities and social mechanisations, historical lives and contemporary filters.

*Queen Christina* represents Gems's boldest critique of rigid sex socialisation. Her Christina does not experience the oppression typical to women who are excluded from male systems; however, within these power systems she cannot move beyond being irrelevant. And, as later analysis will detail, narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity are what immobilise her. Finding no stable place between the male and female constructs of identity, while pressured to assume both, she slips into madness and isolation.



In this and subsequent chapters, I shall explore the relationship between Gems's dramatic studies of women from history (and modern myth) and some of their 'factual' or overtly fictional biographies. In some cases these texts were direct sources or starting points for Gems's work, in others they help to define a canonical cultural image or myth which Gems is disputing. In the case of *Queen Christina*, her play challenges narrow, mutually exclusive constructions of male and female identities, whereas other treatments (including biographies in the traditional sense by Sven Stolpe<sup>2†</sup> and Georgina Masson<sup>3</sup> and plays by August Strindberg<sup>4</sup> and Ruth Wolff<sup>5</sup>) use Christina's story to uphold the need for these constructions. In each of these works, Christina emerges as an abhorrence against a just and proper order.

Gayle Rubin's influential article 'The Traffic in Women'<sup>6</sup> helps us unveil the full significance of the distinction between Gems's play and other interpretations of Christina's life. Rubin explores how cultural constructs of gender become enshrined as desirable and inevitable components of human existence. She identifies a series of taboos which help institutionalise the "sex gender system" intrinsic to social organisation:

...a taboo against the sameness of men and women, a taboo dividing the sexes into mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and therefore creates gender. (178)

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† Stolpe's biography provides the first detailed biographical account of Queen Christina written in English. It was published in 1966 (see endnotes for full reference), the year in which a great exhibition detailing her life took place in Stockholm. Organised by the Council of Europe, the project took ten years in preparation and needed a catalogue of over 600 pages. Stolpe wrote his biography as a result of his visit to the exhibition. His ability to translate Swedish into English meant that his was the first account of her life to include information of the previously unseen exhibits. A full account of the exhibition is detailed in: Dudley Glass, 'Christina, Queen of Sweden', *American-Scandinavian Review*, 54 (1966), 385-391.



In other words, gender is naturalised by a touted synonymity with biological sexual identity, and the ideas, images and arrangements which violate social sexual norms become stigmatised, construed as “unnatural”.

Masson, Stolpe, Strindberg, Wolff and even Rouben Mamoulian’s 1933 film version of *Queen Christina*† uphold the equation between biological and cultural definitions of male and female. Through varying strategies, they construe Christina’s violation of female norms as an affront to a united nature and culture. Gems’s play, exposing the liabilities inherent to narrow concepts of masculinity and femininity, reverses the cause and effect pattern it inherits from other biographies of the seventeenth century Swedish queen. For Gems’s *Christina*, social dictates affront her natural impulses.

To make full sense out of the contrast between the varying approaches to Christina’s biography, it becomes necessary to introduce the key players and events from her life. The following paragraphs attempt to provide a simple summation of Christina’s experience. The chapter then turns to a detailed consideration of the heritage Gems confronts as a revisionist biographer and, finally, to an analysis of the precise mechanics of her revisioning.

### **Queen Christina: Revisiting the History Book**

The centrality of gender issues to Christina’s life is strikingly apparent. Gender became an issue for her even before she was born. Her mother Maria Eleonora’s

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† In 1933 Rouben Mamoulian directed the film version of *Queen Christina*, with Greta Garbo (a cinematic myth in her own right) being chosen to play the legendary queen. Garbo’s physical perfection, glamour and classic beauty cast *Queen Christina* as a totally different figure to the ugly, masculine and disabled queen of the history books. Thus, Garbo was directly responsible for offering a mythical ‘filter’ through which to view Christina, the mythical filter proving more popular than reality. There is further discussion of this later in the chapter.



childbearing history had been marred by three brutal disappointments including miscarriage, stillbirth and the death of an infant daughter. Astrologers predicted that her fourth pregnancy would produce the male heir Sweden longed for. According to Christina's own diary, the midwives attending her birth initially mistook her for a male.

She wrote:

I was born with a caul and my face was pallid. Only my face, arm and legs were free. My body was entirely covered with hair, and I had a deep, loud voice. This led the midwives attending me to take me for a boy. They filled the castle with shouts of joy, without reason; but for a time the king was deceived. Hope and expectancy combined to lead everyone astray, and great was the confusion of the women when they discovered their mistake.<sup>7</sup>

As Gems's scene first suggests, the King opted to make the best of the situation. He replied, "I hope that this girl will be worth a son to me," and he added, "she should be clever, since she has deceived us all."<sup>8</sup>

Maria Eleonora took the news less heartily. Christina contended that, because she was a "girl" and "ugly," her mother mistreated her, even to the point of physical injury (cloaked as an accident) which left Christina with a deformed left shoulder throughout her life. Whether or not this was the cause, Maria Eleonora and her daughter never seemed to have a harmonious relationship. However, Christina did seem to have enjoyed a happier, though abbreviated, relationship with her father. He died when Christina was six but she kept warm memories of him throughout her life.

Christina's childhood seems to have been a fairly happy one. She spent three years separated from her mother, whom her guardian Oxenstierna regarded as a harmful influence. She lived with her uncle, Count Palatine John Casimir. There she met two cousins who became key figures in her life: Charles Gustavus and Maria Euphrosyne. Christina was later encouraged to marry Charles and produce a male heir. She resisted, but Charles did take the throne she abdicated. Maria, a girlhood confidante, later married Magnus de la Gardie (one of Christina's favourites as queen and an alleged love object of her adolescence).

One description of Christina's youth recurs in all accounts of her life: she was a female "raised as a man". To facilitate his hope that she may prove "worth a son," the King stipulated that she receive the education of a prince, and be schooled in none of the traditionally feminine pursuits other than "virtue and modesty."<sup>9</sup> Beyond a strict regime of formal education (in which the young Christina excelled) she spent hours learning how to hunt and ride, priding herself on a stamina that matched any male.

Christina took the throne in 1644 in the middle of uneasy peace negotiations to bring an end to the Thirty Years War (the war that had claimed the life of her father.) One of Christina's first objectives as Queen was to steer those negotiations toward resolution, an objective at odds with that of her former regent, the still powerful figure Oxenstierna. This marked the beginning in a series of conflicts between these two strong personalities. From an early age, Christina demonstrated leanings grossly at odds with Oxenstierna's fundamentalist Lutheran beliefs. This conflict came to a head in Christina's eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism.



The key point of contention between the Queen and the Chancellor involved her marital status. Swedish landowners rallied against the tradition of primogeniture, and one logical way of countering their threat lay in the presence of an attractive (i.e. male) royal heir. Christina needed to marry and produce a strong son whom people could look forward to seeing on the Swedish throne. Christina adamantly refused to comply. Instead, she manoeuvred the appointment of Charles as her heir, paving the way for her renowned abdication in 1654.†

Unburdened by the crown and disguised as a man, Christina fled her homeland. Her destination was Rome and an audience with the Pope, but she found herself impeded by diplomatic and financial obstacles necessitating extended stays in the Netherlands, Brussels, Hamburg and Spain. Wherever she travelled, gossip followed and she became the subject of a number of inflammatory pamphlets accusing her of everything from androgyny to licentiousness to blasphemy.

Christina's formal acceptance into the Roman Catholic Church took place not in Rome before the Pope, but in Innsbruck in 1655. Only then was she able to realise her dreams of Rome. Although her conversion must have been a decidedly mixed blessing for the Church, lavish ceremony attended her arrival at the Vatican. While the Pope proved a gracious host, it was another representative of the Church, Cardinal Decio Azzolino, who made the greatest impression on the Swedish guest. The Cardinal and Christina spent long hours in fervent discussion of politics, religion and philosophy. Their relationship gave fresh impetus to the intrigues which surrounded the Queen and survived as long as they were both alive.

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† The biographical information in this summary, unless stated otherwise, is taken from: *Christina, Queen of Sweden: A Personality of European Civilisation*, ed. by Magnus von Platen (Stockholm: National Museum Press, 1966), pp. 380-468.



Christina struck up another important relationship in 1655 when travelling through southern Italy. There she met Marchese Gian Rinaldo Monaldeschi, an adventurer and soldier of fortune embroiled in a struggle to undermine Spanish power in Naples. Embittered by the treatment she had received in Spain and apparently somehow drawn to replace the crown she had surrendered, Christina was highly amenable to suggestions made by Monaldeschi and France's Cardinal Mazarin that she manoeuvre herself on to the vacant Neapolitan throne. She began plotting to do just that, but her schemes collapsed when the Marchese proved to be a traitor (in ways the source material does not altogether make clear).†

When Christina discovered the Marchese's deceit, she sentenced him to death. The proceedings and execution were drawn out and brutal, giving rise to renewed assaults on Christina's character in a storm of pamphlets and public outcry. The Pope and Azzolino remained loyal. Any hope, however, of her continued campaign for the Neapolitan throne perished with Monaldeschi. In 1666 she fought for a kingdom of her own, this time in Poland, but had lost all public credibility. Christina finally retired to Rome's Palazzo Riario in 1668. There she spent her time enjoying at leisure the theatre and art which had fascinated her since youth; she died in 1689.

As even such an abbreviated account attests, Christina's life has all the makings for a good story. Moments of high drama punctuated it: her turbulent family situation, her renunciation of a throne and a faith, her travels across Europe, her embroilment in

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† In their biographies, Stolpe and Masson do not give significant evidence to prove why Christina's plan to take the Neapolitan throne failed. This event is significantly glossed over in both. However, von Platen's study suggests that Christina was betrayed by the Marchese in a secret love affair. Her only course of revenge was to sentence him to death for treachery and this made her very unpopular with the Neapolitans.



political intrigue, her retirement to a sumptuous palace in Rome. Her life also offers a fascinating cast of characters, from the mother who kept her dead husband's heart in a box at her bedside, to the devoted if dissolute cousin Charles who would be King of Sweden, to the beautiful Ebba Sparre, Descartes, the complex Azzolino, and the treacherous Monaldeschi. Christina, herself the most fascinating of characters, lived (both during and after her reign) at the heart of contemporary political, religious and intellectual conflicts.

Beyond the good story and the glimpse at a distant past that Christina's life offers, however, is the forum her life provides for exploring gender and power in a historical context. Raised as a boy, ruling and rejecting a kingdom, involved in what appears to be a series of complicated relationships with men and women alike, Christina has provoked a number of telling analyses. She has been compared to Pandora<sup>10</sup> and Sibyl.<sup>11</sup> She has been lambasted as a freak of nature, celebrated as a volatile genius. She has been characterised as frigid, as a nymphomaniac, as a lesbian. I now wish to explore some of these characterisations more fully with a view to discovering how far the biographical heritage of Queen Christina has perpetuated the gender myths surrounding her.

### **Queen Christina: The Biographical Heritage**

A survey of the biographies in English alone attest to the diverse interpretations given to Christina's life. A volume written in 1863, *Memoirs of Christina* by Henry Woodhead,<sup>12</sup> takes a highly defensive stance, striving to reveal "her genius and, and the services she rendered to art, science and learning [which] have not hitherto been acknowledged in any popular work" (vi). For her biography of Christina, written in 1931, Faith Compton MacKenzie, writing from a theatrical perspective, chose a revealing



title: *The Sibyl of the North*.<sup>13</sup> Christina, in later years, did dabble in potions, but MacKenzie's title seems a more general reference to the considerable mystique which surrounded Christina as a woman of gender anomalies. MacKenzie's biography, however, did not offer a very colourful portrait of the Queen or, in fact develop the gender issues which her title suggests, but recounted events in a rather simplistic fashion.† Later works, written in and since the 1960's<sup>††</sup> by such authors as Lewis<sup>14</sup>, Stolpe and Masson, reveal clearer agendas in relation to the gender issue. For example, Lewis's *The Queen of Caprice* was written in 1967 and his title alone feeds into generalisations about women as impulsive, irrational, recklessly emotional and thereby unfit to rule. Early in the biography, Lewis argues that Christina's father was the single greatest influence on her life, a claim which wobbles in light of the fact that Gustavus Adolphus died when Christina was barely six years old, but which maintains an image of the Queen as male-identified.

For our purposes, Masson and Stolpe's biographies are the most important. In her Foreword to *Queen Christina*,<sup>15</sup> Gems notes that she drew her material from these works and adds that she found the former "very good," and the latter "not very helpful" (1). Masson does provide more detailed information and is somewhat more interesting than Stolpe, but a key distinction between these two works lies in their organisational strategies. Masson adopted a traditional narrative form, recounting the events of

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† Faith Compton MacKenzie (née Stone) was the wife of the celebrated author Compton Mackenzie. Fascinated by the theatre, she wrote a biographical account that kept factual detail to a minimum in order to focus on the idea of Christina's gender in terms of dramatic masquerade and witchcraft. Her research and writing of *The Sibyl of the North* is featured in her husband's memoirs. See Compton Mackenzie, *My Life and Times*, 9 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), VIII, p. 39.

†† These are more detailed in their analyses, partly as a result of the Queen Christina exhibition of 1966. The event introduced researchers to a wealth of new biographical material which caused a Christina revival in artistic and literary circles (the reason why several biographies were published toward the end of the 1960's).



Christina's life along chronological lines. While Stolpe adhered loosely to chronology, he took a more openly thematic approach and created various categories, using such chapter headings as 'Christina as a Woman', 'Why Did Christina leave Sweden?' and 'Christina and Love'. This encourages an unnecessarily emotive reading of the text. These distinctions aside, the two biographies have an important similarity: basing their arguments on assumptions about innate sexual differences, Stolpe and Masson both characterise Christina as a freak of nature and refuse to embrace the concept of female plurality. They impart authority to assumptions about female identity through references to medicine and psychology, and their biographies stand as bold examples of how the "taboos" (referred to by Rubin) creating gender are presented as natural and necessary conditions for human survival.

Stolpe states his boldest conclusion about Christina early in the book. He relates the confusion which surrounded her sexual identity at birth as a starting point for his thesis about Christina's identity:

Christina's story clearly shows that the mid-wives who delivered her (no doubt women of great experience) had taken her for a boy. What she said of her hairiness, the caul and her deep voice is of no importance. It would hardly have been possible to give greater weight to the error about her sex (and we must remember how everyone at the court longed intensely for a male heir) had Christina's later development not shown clearly that her physical and intellectual characteristics were rather those of a man. She was, in fact, so masculine that ... she never aroused any erotic interest in a man, but on the contrary, aroused an aversion in many. In later pages we shall come across many examples of her masculine characteristics and physical condition. A medical expert, presented with these facts, and taking into account the process of Christina's birth and the curious misunderstanding about her sex, would hardly



hesitate in this diagnosis: she was a pseudo-hermaphrodite (not to be confused with a real hermaphrodite).<sup>16</sup>

Stolpe, adamant about this theory, goes on to explain how Christina's identity as a "pseudo-hermaphrodite" manifested itself throughout youth and adulthood. He notes her preference for and achievement in "men's pursuits," her disdain for women and "everything that women like to talk about and do." (40) He describes her appearance and manner as decidedly masculine though "she really was a woman" owing to the fact that she had, for example, "regular menstrual periods, though it should be added that menstruation occurs sometimes with pseudo-hermaphrodites." (41)

In the spirit of this 'medical' commentary, Stolpe turns to a consideration of seventeenth century beliefs about the biological line between male and female. In addition to the most obvious genital distinction, scientists of the time believed in a basic difference between male and female temperaments. Based largely upon the 1573 work of a French physician, Ambroise Paré, 'De la generation de l'homme,'<sup>17</sup> women were believed to possess a "cooler" temperament than men. Menstruation occurred because this coolness prevented the proper digestion of food. Rather than turning into "good blood" as it did when consumed by men, food was excreted in the form of mensus. This process also allowed women to shed humidity. A "normal woman" thus had a dry as well as cool temperament and only this combination facilitated childbearing. (165)

While taking a somewhat tongue-in-cheek approach to this example of seventeenth century science, Stolpe relies on these same beliefs to support his own hypothesis about Christina's 'abnormality.' He cites a number of occasions on which either she complained of the heat or was described by others as 'hot' and 'dry'. Neither



truly male nor female, the Christina of Stolpe's account lives without sexual contact. Stolpe suggests that Christina's apparent fascination with women such as Ebba Sparre did not extend beyond mere aesthetic appreciation. He implies that Christina desired sexual contact with men but - not a 'true' woman - repulsed men like de la Gardie and Azzolino.

Stolpe leaves the reader with an image of Christina as a freakish anomaly (not really a woman, man, or even a sexual being). Masson also characterises Christina as an anomaly and tries to support her characterisation by making references to psychology and medicine. Rather than trying to prove that Christina was a "pseudo-hermaphrodite,"<sup>18</sup> Masson identifies lesbian tendencies as the clearest indication of Christina's 'abnormality.' The implications are ridiculously similar: Christina's presumed lack of sexual interaction with men is put forth as certain proof of an identity that falls short of legitimate womanhood.

Masson, like Stolpe, refers to Christina as "hot and dry."<sup>19</sup> This reference becomes a springboard for her own 'medical' analysis. She asserts that the year 1646 represented a turning point in Christina's life. During that year, Christina began to suffer monthly bouts of headaches, abdominal pain, fever and convulsions. Masson believes that these maladies were symptomatic of an emotional crisis. When Magnus de la Gardie and Marie Euphrosyne announced their engagement, Christina lost both her trusted female confidante and hopes for a love relationship with de la Gardie. Shortly after the news of Magnus and Marie's engagement came another important event in Christina's life: the beginnings of a life long friendship with Ebba Sparre. Masson uses the events of 1646 to introduce one of her boldest assertions (and unleash the full extent of her homophobia). She argues that Christina "replaced Magnus" with Ebba where "the



normal reaction of a pretty young woman, conscious of her own physical attraction, would have been to turn to some other man.” (81-82) Christina, however, began to demonstrate what Masson clearly sees as her ‘abnormality’:

Christina seems to have been innately conscious of her own lack of sexual appeal so now, with all the added intensity engendered by unreciprocated love, she found consolation in the companionship of the gentle and affectionate Ebba... Such a situation is familiar to modern psychologists as one of the initial stages in the appearance of lesbian tendencies to which girls with a neurotic family background such as Christina’s are particularly prone.(82)

From here, Masson, offers more bizarre theories in identifying Christina’s physical symptoms as indicative of spastic colitis and claims that this condition is “practically limited to highly strung nervous people, particularly intellectuals, and it is also far from uncommon in homosexuals.” (84)

While associating Christina with lesbianism, Masson is carefully evasive about Christina’s actual sexual activity. She simply asserts that her relationship with Ebba was “widely believed to be physical.” (85) She is equally evasive about Christina’s relationships with men, only relating what contemporary gossip maintained about Christina and the various men people suspected were her lovers, yet Masson’s implications are as brazen as her details are sketchy. Like Stolpe, she insists that Magnus would have been unreceptive to Christina’s advances because he found her physically abhorrent; lesbianism is thus construed as a reflection of Christina’s failure to lure a man, as a sign of her innate shortcomings as a woman. Masson reports that Christina once confided in the Queen Mother: “Faith, Madam, it vexes me to be a woman, it spoils the most tender pleasures, if I was a man, it would be a very different matter.” (188) Yet



Masson consistently upholds the very double standard Christina's statement decries: she describes Maria Eleonora's predilection to depression as "feminine emotionalism," (16) and later, addresses what she sees as Christina's feigned disdain for elegant dress and coiffure by insisting that "no woman can scorn these things." (79) She describes the way Christina manipulated others when forced to an impasse in political negotiations, and writes, "Christina seems to have reserved her masculine traits for her private life. Her diplomacy was thoroughly feminine." (101) And in a series of concluding remarks, Masson posits that "not even a crown could compensate for the lack of feminine attraction she affected to despise." (372)

Masson also attaches Christina's apparent disdain for the idea of childbearing to her deviance from female roles. Feeding into assumptions about women's presumably "natural" maternal instinct, she writes that Christina was only known to have treated a child with affection once and proposes that "such behaviour confirms the existence of lesbian tendencies." (84) Masson affirms a construct of women foregrounding reproductive capacities and nurturing roles and exemplifies how homophobia grows directly out of such constructs. To quote Rubin, "Compulsory heterosexuality is a fundamental component of the sex-gender system."<sup>20</sup> Masson demonstrates how the stigma attached to homosexuality facilitates the naturalisation of compulsory heterosexuality.

For both Masson and Stolpe, the liberties afforded by a modern conceptualisation of biography and the authority wielded by 'science' fuse in a particularly potent combination. The poetic licence allowed them as modern biographers removes the burden of proof from their suppositions, while the 'medical' and psychoanalytical jargon



they employ works to suggest informed analyses. In lucid reflection of the repressive norms of mid-century western society, Masson and Stolpe upheld ideals of femininity and masculinity as just, desirable and necessary, reaching across time.†

For all their biases, however, neither Masson nor Stolpe suggested that Christina was entirely unfit for the throne and they did try to come to some understanding of the reasons behind her abdication and conversion. Stolpe granted Christina intellectual credibility and even a creative adeptness in political matters, but suggested that her sex made her unfit to actually lead. He linked Christina's religious conversion to her sexual attitudes and contended that the Catholicism's valorisation of virginity and celibacy held special appeal for her. Masson saw Christina's refusal to marry as central to her decision to abdicate, but also portrayed her as feeling increasingly stifled by the intellectual atmosphere of Sweden. She demonstrated how Christina strove to bring foreign ideas to her country, and her responsibility in bringing Descartes to Sweden. In part, Descartes appealed to Christina because he managed to reconcile reason and Catholicism and one prevalent theory identifies Descartes as influential in her decision to convert. Masson resists a wholehearted acceptance of this idea but does indicate that Christina believed becoming a Catholic placed her in a generally more sophisticated intellectual world, where she could enjoy a kind of freedom withheld by her father's strict Lutheranism. The deeply entrenched gender attitudes on which both biographies rest, however, temper the insights they offer into Christina's life. The fact that August Strindberg's much earlier play from 1907 (also entitled *Queen Christina*) anticipates their sexual politics is perhaps the most telling indication of Masson and Stolpe's overriding conservatism.

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† Masson is not renowned for her biographical works: her only other biography written in 1957 concerns Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. However, Stolpe is a celebrated writer of Swedish biography and folklore. He has written at least three biographies on Queen Christina, only one of which has been translated into English. His last biographical work focused on the French writer, Jules Lemaitre.



## **Queen Christina: The Dramatic Heritage**

As my analysis moves from Masson and Stolpe to Strindberg and Wolff, certain contrasts between prose and dramatic approaches to biography need noting. Due to the constraints imposed by production (i.e. an audience can only be expected to sit still in the theatre for so long) the dramatist generally must practice a higher degree of selectivity than the author writing prose biography. This necessity often leads to the projection of more compact statements about a life's significance. Where Masson and Stolpe might frequently diffuse their general philosophies in a mass of particularised details, Strindberg and Wolff offer a more consistent statement about gender and power. They do not have the luxury of extensive references to science nor the space to recount minute details. Yet both employ realist dramatic form to create both the impression of detailed rendering and the semblance of authoritative understanding.

### **August Strindberg: *Queen Christina* (1901)**

Strindberg's naturalism carries the objective pretence of dramatic realism to an extreme. By focusing on a limited period of time, by arranging plot incidents in cause and effect patterns along a chronological line, and by working for a heightened sense of the vernacular, Strindberg naturalises the events contained within his play. In the true spirit of naturalism, he considers these events and logical steps in a process akin to scientific experimentation and Christina's life as a study in a conflict between 'natural order' and 'unnatural circumstance.'

In his *Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre* (1907), Strindberg offers a problematic description of Christina:

... a woman reared to be a man, fighting for her self existence, against her feminine nature and succumbing to it... She includes among her lovers even Holm, the tailor, but I did not want to do that... Christina was so genuine a woman that she was a woman hater. In her memoirs she says frankly that women should never be permitted to rule. That she did not want to get married I think is natural, and that she who had played with love was caught in her own net, is, of course, highly dramatic... The strangest creature God ever created.<sup>21</sup>

Many treatments of Christina acknowledge her enjoyment of theatre and the other arts. For Strindberg, however, theatricality becomes a central metaphor. He posits a connection between Christina's theatricality and her inability to rule. Christina emerges as a woman acting the part of a ruler, while lacking the effectiveness to actually lead. She relishes the trappings of her role, but neglects its important responsibilities.

The Christina that Strindberg presents to us at her first appearance is a queen who varies from moment to moment, from place to place, from person to person, and from situation to situation. Strindberg emphasises her lack of moral principles or scruples which could serve as a control over her behaviour; her disrespect for anything other than power and distinction; her false ideas of her own nature; her lack of ambition and reasoned plans; her ignorance of official duties, all of which are, for her, parts of a game; her resentment of both her geographical and human environment; her preference for surrounding herself with people whom she can control and manage or who can entertain her; her willingness to play off one party against another - usually to forward her own immediate ends; and her keen desire to be amused. Hence, she develops her



own acting ability to the point where she acts not only before others but for herself as well, in order to always be the centre of attention, the determining factor in her environment - and, in the process, to cover up what Strindberg saw as her very real ignorance of, and lack of interest in, the serious affairs of state.†

His portrayal of Christina as a child caught up in a game she cannot understand compliments the images of her as a performer. One very illuminating exchange between Christina and Magnus de la Gardie occurs in the first act when he likens her approach to ruling to child's play:

DE LA GARDIE (*Sincerely, heartily*) Poor Kerstin, you're involved in something that doesn't befit you!

CHRISTINA Yes, it is too binding. (*Changes her manner*) But it is interesting! (*Childishly*) And it's fun at times!

DE LA GARDIE Playing with dolls!

CHRISTINA Exactly! Big dolls!

*Queen Christina*, I. 5. (30)

Similarly in Act Two, de la Gardie uses Christina's childhood nickname and admits to being "always kind to little Kerstin. Always unkind to the big, nasty Christina!"(32)

Similar exchanges take place in Act Three. In one scene, Christina quizzes her cousin about the financial matters which elude her. While uncertain about how tax purchases actually work, she can provide a detailed description of the paper on which they are printed. Like a child, Christina has no patience for complicated meanings, but a fascination with superficial design.

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† In 'The Play of Truth and State', Matthew Wikander considers, albeit somewhat crudely, Strindberg's treatment of Christina as, in part, a working out of the playwright's marital frustrations, an 'understanding' shared by Walter Johnson in *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*. Johnson describes Harriet Bosse (Strindberg's wife) as a "great actress ... who never let Strindberg forget it." (139) and claims that Strindberg found a compelling connection between Bosse and "what the sources said about Queen Christina's generally artificial, theatrical behaviour." Much writing on Strindberg is as crude and misleading as some of the biographical material on Queen Christina herself.



In a later scene, Oxenstjerna confronts Christina with her ignorance about financial matters and Sweden's involvement in war. At first, he approaches her harshly, but by the end of the scene (after stage directions describing Christina as "*frightened*" and speaking "*childishly*") his tone becomes more "*conciliatory*." (62) She falls to her knees begging for his forgiveness and he speaks to her as a reprimanding father to daughter: "Christina, little child, get up ... I will help you, but you must never do this again." (62)

In Strindberg's play, male characters treat Christina with tolerance when they see her as a child, tacitly resigning themselves to her natural inability to lead. What they (and by extension, Strindberg) refuse to tolerate is the adult woman, a calculating figure who uses her power to utmost personal advantage. Though inept in the public arena, her authority there, enables her to become deadly in private. She uses her power to place her lovers in high office, to condemn her enemies, and to satisfy every whim of her vanity. Wanting an elaborate new costume, Christina forces the court tailors to work on a national holiday. She has a court ballet staged, oblivious to war and a city in revolt against her.

In the process of honing this dichotomy between the public/child and the private/adult, Strindberg deviates from many ideas which emerge consistently in more orthodox biographies. Most accounts stress Christina's failure to conform to standards of feminine beauty, but Strindberg portrays her as something of a *femme fatale*. Unable to match wits with men, she disarms them with her physical attractiveness. Strindberg portrays Magnus de la Gardie's marriage as something the Queen actively arranged, while characterising her abdication as something forced upon her. Other treatments of



Christina suggest that de la Gardie's marriage came as a bitter shock for her, while she struggled with nearly insurmountable resistance to her abdication.

Strindberg reinforces his image of Christina by carefully manipulating the play's other characterisations. Only three other female characters appear in the play, and each has only a minor role. Strindberg gives Maria Eleonora a few brief scenes to portray her as a caring woman, "satisfied with being the great King's wife, and [Christina's] mother." (64) In the world created by Strindberg's play, she emerges as the model Christina would have done well to emulate, whereas most biographies portray Maria Eleonora in a vastly different light, focusing on her instability and remarkable eccentricities. Ebba Sparre de la Gardie and her mother-in-law appear only briefly in the play, which is notable given that most sources see the enduring friendship between Ebba and Christina as a major factor in the Queen's life. Such a friendship, however, contradicts Strindberg's vision of the Queen as "so genuine a woman that she was a woman hater."<sup>22</sup> Strindberg's ends are better served by surrounding his title character with women who either do battle with her or who exist as products of her manipulative ways.

Strindberg also exercises a telling selectivity in the play's male characters. Rather than include three of the most celebrated men in Christina's life (Descartes, Azzolino and Monaldeschi) in his cast, Strindberg turns to lesser-knowns. Two of these characters, Anton Steinberg and Klaus Tott, warrant but passing reference in most biographies: by including them and excluding others, Strindberg underscores his characterisation of Christina as a ruler who brought men close to the government simply because she had a passing affection for them. Steinberg, who once rescued the Queen from drowning, proudly boasts a "von" before his name despite an otherwise undistinguished background.



Christina's relationship with Tott - a romantic man several years her junior, whom she lures with the promise of high office - becomes pivotal in the play.

It is Tott who ultimately releases Christina from the circumstances which have kept her a destructive child and put the kingdom in chaos. While Strindberg's Christina has had many male lovers, her love for Tott emerges as singularly pure and noble. She tells Magnus, "With this love the Queen is dead, now the woman is born." (60) Though Tott initially returns her love, he ultimately rejects her. The pain of unrequited love completes Christina's education.<sup>†</sup> She renounces her destructive ways, abdicates the throne she has abused, and sets off alone.

The coupling of pain and knowledge in this resolution is indicative of an element of masochism running throughout the play. In an early scene, she strikes herself with a riding crop (39) and she humiliates herself before men throughout the play. But she suffers the key humiliation before Tott. Christina has arranged for a display of pageantry to accompany her declaration of love for Tott. Theatricality, however, turns against Christina. Instead of the beautiful tableau she had arranged, a screen drops to reveal a "crowd of staring people, all of them motionless, silent, pale-faced." (73) The sight of this crowd, Christina's neglected subjects, provokes a violent reaction in Tott. He tells her that the pain he sees on these faces is "a terrible judgement" and he turns on her, calling her a "whore." She "staggers backward," (74) Tott exits and leaves Christina subjugated on bended knee.

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<sup>†</sup> This idea of education, whereby Christina's life can be interpreted in terms of significant teachings and rites of passage, is fully embraced by Gems, who uses it as the structure for her play, *Queen Christina*. and this will be discussed in greater detail further on in this chapter.



As part of her theatrics-gone-astray, Christina wears her new costume in the scene with Tott. It is the costume of Pandora, giving bold emphasis to Strindberg's vision of the Queen as a woman who responds to opportunity by letting great pain loose upon the world. In keeping with the legend he evokes, Strindberg does reserve hope. The play's final moments reflect a new-found harmony, extended even to Christina whose words display a more mature sensibility:

CHRISTINA ...my faith will not let itself be bribed ... and isn't to be sold either!...Are you threatening me? Then I appeal to the spirit of my great father; I, too, for he gave his life, not for a faith forced upon anyone, but for freedom of faith, for tolerance!

(OXENSTJERNA and CARL GUSTAV bow their heads and are silent.)

*Queen Christina*, IV. (80)

From her first appearance, Strindberg has carefully prepared for just this change: Christina is all along a growing, developing individual who finally becomes emotionally and intellectually an adult. Rejected by Tott largely because of her past and his amazingly sudden Strindbergian insight, Christina is at the end of the play a solitary woman well on the way to being capable of analysing herself and other people, and a woman who needs no longer act to herself.

By demanding dignity as the daughter of a great king, and humbling Oxenstjerna and de la Gardie by referring to her father's greatness, Christina leaves with head held high. She regains her dignity because balance has been restored to Strindberg's world. Power is back in the hands of men. Christina has assumed what Strindberg believes to be her rightful place - as dutiful daughter; as reckless female child who has matured into adulthood by suffering heartbreak and humiliation; as woman who embraces public powerlessness. The crowned actress, the awakened woman and the human being are at last reconciled in Christina, who is finally beginning to understand herself and her

limitations within a patriarchal environment. With its modern dialogue and portrayal of the Queen's gamut of emotions, the final act crystallises Strindberg's interpretation of a woman who fascinated him in spite of his personal objections to her record as a ruler.

With *Queen Christina*, Strindberg offers an unambiguous attitude toward women's agency. In his play, all the players seem victimised when power is in the hands of a woman. Though his Christina does exercise her authority, there is an overriding sense that she, as an impulsive and passionate woman, lacks full responsibility for her actions. Female agency emerges as unnatural, dangerous and destructive. His Christina, exemplifying myths about female masochism, seems released at the end of the play just as she releases those around her.

### **Queen Christina in 1930's Hollywood**

Hollywood's treatment of the historical figure almost never lets us know what the real person was like in any sense, but its portrayals of heroines tell us a great deal about what audiences wished or feared about the women of the day. Despite the occasional good intentions of certain stars and directors, or the studio's justification of a film on its instructional merits, most historical-films of the thirties did not appear to be successful in accurately revealing the past.

Rouben Mamoulian's 1933 treatment of Queen Christina provides a typical model of the two-way influence of the star on the role and vice versa. Mamoulian was well aware that it was Garbo's appeal, not the historical figure's charisma, that would draw the audiences to the film. At the same time, Garbo's playing of the role added masculine



resonances to her very feminine image. Charles Affron commenting on her performance said that:

Garbo hovers in that area between male and female, leaning into her identity as a woman, to be sure, but not abandoning the richness of her compound being.<sup>†</sup>

This quotation suggests Garbo carried a certain image and expectation, at least as far as her fans were concerned, and for this reason she had to remain as Garbo rather than become a homely Swedish queen.

According to David White and Richard Averson, Mamoulian's version of Queen Christina would have been much less glamorous had Garbo had her way. Garbo wished to sacrifice her star image to the demands of realism, but Garbo's wishes were largely overruled by Mamoulian and her studio.<sup>††</sup> Naturally, Mamoulian ignored the expectations of the Swedish people, following the financial expectations of his producer.

Despite the studio's insistence on conventional make-up Garbo's portrayal is distinctly androgynous, primarily because of her movements, voice and manner. Although these elements are written into the script, Garbo's masculinity resides in herself - in the brusqueness of her movements, the long stride, the forceful hand gestures, the tone of her voice and the angularity and big-boned quality of her frame.

The emphasis throughout the first scenes is on the masculine elements of Christina's personality. Her clothing is masculine through the first third of the film, and her relationship with a court lady, Eva is very much that of lover and mistress. Christina

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<sup>†</sup> See Charles Affron, *Star Acting: Gish, Garbo, Davis* (New York: Dutton Press, 1977), p. 180.

<sup>††</sup> "Garbo wished to appear with a large nose and massive, masculine eyebrows. She said that Sweden would expect a real portrayal of Christina." See David White and Richard Averson, *Sight, Sound and Society* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 99.



never loses her androgynous quality, but the rest of the film shows her transformation from a feminine male to a masculine female. The turning point in Christina's metamorphosis is the inn sequence, in which she, disguised as a man, decides to give up her disguise and stay with the Spanish ambassador, Antonio. As Christina decides to spend the night with him (while he believes her to be a man), she lightly touches her hand to her breast, exposing the outline of her feminine form. She is still dressed as a man, but there is a gentleness of expression and a classic pose of feminine seduction. Charles Affron comments on the femininity Garbo brought to the scene:

In the inn sequence, Garbo progresses through various stages of sexual ambiguity and leads an audience to a new level of perception ... Until this point in the film, the fun and high spirits of Garbo's androgynous tomboy radically tamper with her glamour-girl image. (179)

Film renditions of the lives of masculine women almost invariably disguise the elemental with the glamorous.<sup>†</sup> The point of my discussion is not to bemoan the fact that Hollywood distorts history. Rather, it is to underscore the notion that star vehicles are exactly that. The studios deliberately pick historical figures that will add a particular flavour to the mystique of their stars, and vice versa.<sup>††</sup> By association with a great historical figure, the star will take on the exceptional attributes of that historical figure and vice versa. As much as stars battled against being typecast, the studios encouraged it because they saw typecasting as a distinct advantage in most cases. This may perhaps

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<sup>†</sup> Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of Arc* (1948) was sensual simply because the camera focused on her youthful beauty and passionate expression. Similarly, in *A Song to Remember* (1945) Merle Oberon, one of Hollywood's most beautiful actresses, was a far cry from the plain and ordinary George Sand.

<sup>††</sup> I use the present tense here as I believe that this notion of star vehicles still informs the casting of certain stars for certain roles. Indeed, this idea goes some way to explaining why Gems chose Elaine Paige for the role of Piaf and Sian Phillips for the role of Marlene. Further discussion of this and the star system can be found in subsequent chapters.



explain why only four years later Garbo went on to play another historical female - Marguerite Gautier. Rather than depend solely on the script and acting to provide adequate characterisation, the director could rely on all the associations that attached themselves to a particular actress as a result of previous roles.

Mamoulian's *Queen Christina* idealised, glamorised and sexualised the masculine female, but with the self-imposed Hays Code the sexual aspect was suppressed. Between 1933 and 1934 the Legion of Decency launched an effective campaign to clean up Hollywood films.<sup>†</sup> Scenes of enforced intimacy continued, but the acknowledgement of the sexual element disappeared, thus making Garbo's seduction sequence impossible to copy after 1934. Thus, Hollywood's historical figures of the late thirties and early forties were rendered even more inaccurate than a glamorous Garbo playing Queen Christina, because they were allowed no sexuality whatsoever.

Rebecca Bell-Metereau writing in *Hollywood Androgyny* offers a suitable conclusion to this section. She asserts that every film about a historical masculine heroine has its own purposes, but studios almost invariably exploit both the historical figure and the actress to deliver a strong message concerning politics, economics, or sexual roles. Her theory lends itself well to a final analysis of *Queen Christina* as a film of its time:

The very existence of a strong female historical figure in a story reduces the escapist quality of the film and gives the work an added element of social relevance to be manipulated at the movie-maker's will. The appeal to precedent gives the chosen message a ring of authenticity. (80)<sup>††</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> See Ruth Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 122-23.

<sup>††</sup> See Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1985), pp. 79-80. This text will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.



## Ruth Wolff : *The Abdication* (1969)

Ruth Wolff has written five historical plays about great women: *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (about the twelfth-century queen who married two kings), *The Fall of Athens* (a reinterpretation of the story of Antigone), *George and Frederic* (about George Sand and her affair with Chopin), *Empress of China* (about Tsu Hsi, a concubine who became a ruler) and *The Abdication*. Very often considered Gems's American counterpart, Wolff's primary concern was also to focus on the female role. This is reflected in her discussion of women's theatre:

I was never sure Cleopatra or Joan of Arc would have acted the way Shakespeare or Shaw said ... These were men of great vision and insight, but I often feel their heroines are boys in disguise ... Only when women can see themselves through other women's eyes will we know who we are... I want to create major roles for actresses - I see that as my function.<sup>23</sup>

In researching *The Abdication*, Wolff† read the letters Christina sent to her peers and loved ones. As a result Wolff concluded that “Christina is the most disturbed of the women I've written about ... the most in conflict about being a woman.” (341) The play's first English production was staged at the Theatre Royal, Bath by the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Company and ran from 2 - 10 May 1972. The play was directed by Jan Fielding who later collaborated with Wolff on adapting the script for a film version. Eventually, the film version, also entitled *The Abdication*, was completed in 1973 and

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† After *The Abdication*, Wolff wrote a screenplay for Ellen Burstyn about Loretta Velasquez, who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Two of Wolff's plays, *Folly Cove* (1980) and *Still Life with Apples* (1981) were presented at the O'Neill Theatre Centre, and *Arabic Two* (1984) was performed on Broadway. *Eden Again* (1985) was commissioned by the Kennedy Centre for the Bicentennial.



starred Liv Ullmann and Peter Finch. Both the play and film failed to make a significant impact on British audiences. This is mostly due to the fact that Wolff was writing from an American, middle-class feminist perspective, which does not always translate into a successful British play. By contrast, Gems writes from a very British, working-class feminist perspective and writes with a strong awareness of British audiences.

Ruth Wolff's *The Abdication* initially seems to subvert not only the gender biases enshrined in Strindberg's play, but its realist conventions. Unlike him but like Gems's *Queen Christina*, Wolff suggests that a more complex problem (a social structure based on female subordination) is the source of women's subjugation. Legal and economic discrimination are merely effects of this deeper structural system.

Wolff uses flashback scenes and ranges freely between Christina's first days in Rome and her youth in Sweden. Through one of her most compelling devices, she represents Christina as three different characters. The adult Christina is offset by the adolescent Chris (representing the masculine gender that Christina acquires from her upbringing) and the child Tina (representing the patriarchal feminine ideal of passivity and submission.) Together, the ongoing conflict between the three identities demonstrates the incompatible and unresolved elements of her personality. The function of this device is to portray gender as socially constructed, and so the tension between Chris and Tina is viewed as the friction between diametrically opposed constructions. Unlike Strindberg, who confines Christina to a limited image of femininity, Wolff juxtaposes images of traditionally male and female identities in her character. Thus Tina is the fragile and timid 'doll Queen', responding to Oxenstierna with a slave-like servility; and Chris is the bold ruffian defying all the traditional trappings of girlhood.

Furthermore, confused by her gender, this Christina also abhors the female, claiming ‘I want ... not to be a woman. I want to tear out the feminine parts of me.’ (437) Eventually, she admits that the contradictory demand that she be a ‘manly queen’ and a ‘womanly woman’ led her to abdicate the throne. Again, this implies that by demanding that a woman reproduce for the state, the social order is responsible for Christina’s subjugation and ensuing happiness.

*The Abdication* is far less explicit in its aims than Strindberg’s play; and in contrast to Strindberg’s open misogyny, Wolff is genuinely committed to revising oppressive images of women in theatre. An article Wolff wrote for *Ms.* magazine in 1979,<sup>25</sup> for example, makes a very clear claim for feminist revisioning:

For the audience to get its kicks, there has to be someone threatened, someone looking scared, and that someone has usually been female - (the woman tied to the conveyor belt coming closer and closer to the buzz-saw, the hero dashing in to save her. I don’t think I’m the only woman who consistently identified with the male in these set-ups. It was only later that I began to realise that, being female, the role I’d be asked to play was that of a sacrificial lamb. (36)

*The Abdication* initially seems in keeping with these ideas, but gradually moves away from a truly feminist revisioning.

The play opens with Christina’s arrival in Rome. From the beginning the Queen demonstrates an assertive streak, demanding an audience with the Pope despite the objections of Dominic, the priest who greets her. Accompanied by her dwarf, Brigito, dressed in men’s clothing and carrying a riding crop, Christina obviously does not conform with Dominic’s image of a queen. Christina ignores his lack of hospitality and



makes herself at home, sitting in the only available chair and “throwing one leg over the arm.”<sup>25</sup> Dominic expresses his horror, but Christina remains unabashed in spite of learning that only the Pope can sit in his own antechamber.

Christina never meets with the Pope in *The Abdication*. She spends her time with Azzolino, who has been sent to take her confession. During their long discussion, Christina reveals her life in a series of flashbacks while gradually falling in love with him. By the end of the play, Christina emerges as a woman transformed by love (a resolution bearing a resemblance to Strindberg's.)

A main focus of Wolff's play is the psychological background leading Christina to abdicate and travel to Rome. The flashback technique enables Wolff to dramatise their conditions which withheld personal fulfilment from Christina. She incorporates a number of key events from Christina's life into the flashback scenes: the unhappy relationship with her mother, the engagement of Magnus, the pressure to marry her cousin Charles whom she could not love. True to the psychoanalytic nature of Wolff's characterisation of Christina, sexual conflict figures prominently in the play. Wolff enunciates this conflict through Chris and Tina. Chris boldly insists that she will subject herself neither to intercourse nor childbearing. She sees intercourse as degradation and declares, “Me? Submit to that from a man? The sovereign Queen of Sweden go down on her back and be ploughed like a field?” (398) Tina also abhors the idea of intercourse, but from a contrasting perspective. She associates it not with degradation but violence. Tina channels her sexual passions toward the Catholic Church. She fervently proclaims, “I am dedicating my maidenhead to God.” (419)

In a pivotal scene, Tina's romantic attachment for Catholicism metamorphosises into Christina's love for its flesh and blood representative. Wolff stages the conversion as a waltz. Missionaries, hoping to lure the Queen into their ranks, dance with her and answer the questions she poses about the Catholic faith. Azzolino plays the role of these missionaries as Christina reveals the circumstances of her conversion. The role-playing breaks down and the present overtakes the past when Christina expresses her longing for Azzolino.

CHRISTINA (*holding him closer and closer*) Tell me about the visions of the saints. (*More and more aroused*) Tell me about joy! Love! God! Tell me about ecstasy! (*Holding him, she throws her head back in rapture*) Oh, I do want to convert! Yes! Yes!  
*The Abdication, II. (422)*

In this context, Christina's reference to conversion must be read as *double entendre*; conveying not only her religious conversion but also her decision to overcome the prejudices of Chris and Tina and engage in intercourse.

This sexual conversion provides a turning point in the play. Christina expresses a kind of desire which has thus far been latent, and Wolff clearly sees this expression as redemptive. Christina's sexual experience has been limited to some form of contact with Ebba and a disastrous, voyeuristic episode involving Ebba and Magnus.

The flashbacks establish Christina's struggle with conflicting feelings towards Ebba. She envies Ebba's beauty, telling her that "when I think of you, I feel so ugly" (337) but she tells Azzolino "I loved that woman more than I have ever loved a man." (378) A horrified Azzolino interrupts Christina's admission of sexual experience with Ebba:



CHRISTINA Aren't men's bodies strange, Ebba? So oddly made! How can we ever know what they're feeling? When I touch you, I know your body's secrets. Know how it echoes me. When you share my bed ...

AZZOLINO This is mortal sin!

*The Abdication*, I. (378)

Later, eager to satiate her curiosity about sex, Chris convinces Ebba to let her watch her make love to Magnus. Magnus apprehends her, and outraged, accuses her of having ambiguous sexual preference, of coldness, an inability to really love and, ultimately, of not being a woman. (403-404)

Obviously functioning as the crisis of the first act, Magnus's assault on Christina's character surfaces as a driving force behind her escape to Rome. In Act Two, she breaks down and confesses, "I have ... never ... loved!" (440) When she experiences love for Azzolino, she feels salvaged from the legacy articulated by Magnus that she had come to believe. Such a conclusion tends to discount Christina's relationship with Ebba, associating the lesbian experience with the whims of a restless youth that she seeks to overcome through Azzolino. This dynamic reflects the play's movement toward a more traditional image of women than that suggested by its opening. Through love for a man, Christina resolves the conflicting components of her personality to find self-knowledge.

Visual images support this reading of Christina's life. Her second act costume provides high contrast to the jodhpurs and riding boots of the first act: "*No longer is she wearing the clothes of a man. She is dressed instead in a beautiful gown ... whose décolletage leaves no doubt as to her gender.*" (409) This gown symbolises Christina's triumph over both the male facade of Chris and the modest virginal one of Tina, and the revelation of new-found self.



Christina's self-knowledge brings her to terms with the reasons behind her abdication. She expresses these in neither the timid voice of Tina nor the bombastic rhetoric of Chris. Tina wants to hold on to the throne for its "glory" and the chance to be an "example of goodness for the entire world to follow." (435) Chris does not want to relinquish the throne's power nor the "firmness and dispatch that makes [her] the equal of any man living." (435) Christina overrides them and insists:

CHRISTINA I am unfit for this occupation. The months go by. I don't know where they're going. In these days, I face one crisis after the next. In the nights, I scream out with dreams whose horrors multiply when I awaken. Shall I choose the hard way or the soft way? Shall I rule with a hand of iron or a heart of love? I think of love. I want to break into the servants' bedrooms. Treaties are read to me, I hear only the voices of the speakers. I am asked to choose emissaries. I choose them by the colour of their eyes. *The Abdication, II. (437)*

Wolff's Christina ultimately considers it impossible to be both a woman and a ruler. At the height of her agony of indecision over the abdication, Christina cries out:

CHRISTINA Look at me! I am a grotesque! A freak! Look at my man-woman brain, my man-woman heart, my man-woman body! Look at me! Two sexes! Both at once and neither! I'm being torn apart! *The Abdication, II (437)*

Christina's description of herself is not a flattering portrait yet it is the clearest picture Wolff offers of Christina as an actual leader. Tina's description of herself as a Queen whose country "lives in peace and joy held together by sheer love of me" (435) is clearly fantasy collapsed by the abdication alone. Chris's claim to victory in power games generally played by only men rings just as hollow. During a second act flashback, Oxenstierna, Magnus and Charles bring news of the war between France and Spain. Chris meets their pleas for decisions about Swedish involvement in the war with frivolous banter about wine-drenched snow and men in military uniforms (425). This scene nearly mirrors one from Strindberg's play where the frivolous Queen fails to respond appropriately to the serious obligations of her post. Susan Bassnett-McGuire, in her



essay 'Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre',<sup>26</sup> offers an interesting analysis of these final scenes. She argues that the play's conclusion is making a very traditional statement about women's identity, for the juxtaposition throughout is between the public, seen as the male part of Christina's consciousness, and the private, which is the female part. She continues:

*The Abdication*, is really about the conflict of love and duty, and in perceiving these as opposites and as sex-determined opposites, Ruth Wolff is actually reinforcing the Garboesque vision of Christina rather than attacking it. The given frame of reference may seem to be different, but the treatment of the material is highly conventional. (450)

While Wolff approaches Christina with far more sympathy than Strindberg, she ultimately offers a similar interpretation of the Queen's life. In both plays, Christina discovers her identity by falling in love with a man, surrenders an authority she finds unmanageable, and finally embraces a more traditionally feminine role. In equating the acceptance of this role with maturity and new-found harmony, Strindberg and Wolff join Masson and Stolpe in endorsing a rigid understanding of gender. All four treatments of Christina also conform to a modern concept of biography as interpretative act, but by grounding their interpretations in the pretence of a scientific framework, they naturalise them. In each case, Christina is projected as a unified, historic individual whose experiences unfold along an inevitable and logical course. Gems responded to this dramatic heritage as well as the cinematic heritage of Queen Christina by writing a play challenging both assumptions about gender and presumptions of the realist frame.

## Queen Christina and Feminist Ideology (ies)

Both Gems's *Queen Christina* and Wolff's *The Abdication* reject traditional oppressive gender ideologies - both reflect a radical feminist ideology, or rather both protagonists experience psychological/ideological shifts which represent the variance/plurality within radical feminism.<sup>†</sup> However, they pursue different alternatives. As we shall see, after abdicating the throne, Gems's Christina explores an assortment of ideologies in search of identity.

First, she rejects the French feminists' philosophy of segregation and male-hatred. Then she battles with the Church, appreciating its principles of love and peace but loathing its position on abortion and birth-control as a perpetuation of the oppressive social structure. Finally, she decides it is good to be 'Woman', whom she redefines as peaceful, loving, nurturing and possessing other attributes "yet to be written." (75) In contrast, Wolff's Christina simply dismisses her gender confusion when she falls in love with Azzolino. Rather than embracing a feminist ideology, she requests admission into the Catholic Church (and searches for identity through Azzolino, asking **him** to determine whether she is worthy of the Church), and hence, as Bassnett-McGuire suggested earlier, she really gains no individual identity at all.

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<sup>†</sup> Both *Queen Christina* and *The Abdication* share some of the tenets of radical feminist ideology, which are identified as follows:

In both plays, Christina discovers that she is oppressed as a woman because she is a woman and that her oppressors are male. Secondly, in the arena of the royal court, Christina learns that sexual divisions prefigure those of class and that male oppression has primacy over all other oppressions, for which indeed it provided the template. Both Christina characters also share a common goal of wanting to annihilate traditional gender roles, a goal which is pertinent to radical feminist ideology. See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectics of Sex* (London: Cape, 1971), p. 20 and Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Sphere, 1971), p. 12.



Gems offers a similar analysis of the problem of women's subjection. However, after explicitly pursuing ideologies/identities propounded for her by visiting philosophers, French 'blue stockings,' and the Pope, this Christina will ultimately confront gender differences directly, celebrating the womanly qualities of care and peace. Gems at once critiques the social construction of gender and exalts the moral superiority of women.

### Pam Gems: *Queen Christina* (1977)

In 1977, with *Queen Christina*, Gems became the first woman playwright to be produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. The play opened on 9 September 1977 at the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, and ran until 25 April 1978. The directors were Ron Daniels and Penny Cherns. *Queen Christina* was played by Sheila Allen (see Appendix). Or, to put it in slightly different terms, Susan Bassnett-McGuire viewed the production of *Queen Christina* as:

A play by one of the of the most established British women playwrights, directed by one of the few women guest directors of the RSC, was performed by Britain's most prestigious company, in the theatre set up as an alternative playing space to the conventional Stratford theatre largely by the efforts of another woman, the late director, Buzz Goodbody.<sup>27</sup>

It is possible, therefore, to see the production of this play itself as indicative of changes in the approach to 'women's theatre' by the 'establishment'. Indeed, in his book on changes of RSC policy (i.e. the proliferation of small playing spaces as opposed to the traditional large scale space and the wider range of performance texts undertaken by the company) Colin Chambers goes so far as to describe Buzz Goodbody as the catalyst for change.<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Chambers describes Goodbody as the person "who provided the all-important bridge between the RSC and the fringe, combining its excitement and social challenge with the Company's classical strength and tradition of excitement." Colin Chambers, *Other Spaces, New Theatre and the RSC* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 7. In this context, it seems understandable that Gems would base the character of Fish in *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* as a tribute to Buzz Goodbody.



Reviewers were more apt to be uniform in their praise of Sheila Allen's performance as Christina than in their regard for Gems's script. Some critics, including Irving Wardle<sup>28</sup> and B. A. Young,<sup>29</sup> faulted the play for its "sprawling" episodic structure and "diffuse focus." Peter Carne argued that "too many subtleties are assumed," whereas "too many banalities are painfully explained."<sup>30</sup> Gems was not, however without her defenders. Michael Billington described the play as a "dignified theatrical love letter."<sup>31</sup>

The criticism levelled at the play, as well as pressure from the RSC, forced Gems to revise *Queen Christina*.<sup>†††</sup> The revision process took five years owing to Gems's commitment to other plays she had written in the meantime. Her biggest obligation during this time was to *Piaf*, which had not only made its debut at Stratford-upon-Avon and London, but had also embarked on its run in New York (see Appendix). However, in 1982, the revised version of *Queen Christina* opened at The Tricycle Theatre, London on 27 May 1982. Again, it was produced by the RSC and this time a female director, Pam Brighton was chosen. Chrissie Cotterill starred as Christina<sup>††</sup> (see Appendix).

The revised version seemed to suit the Tricycle Theatre. Rosalind Carne makes an interesting observation:

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<sup>†</sup> As she had achieved the enviable accolade of being the first woman playwright to have had work commissioned by the RSC, she felt obliged to "make *Queen Christina* count and prove my worth." Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 4 February 2000.

<sup>††</sup> Chrissie Cotterill was not first choice for the role of Christina. Originally, (under Gems's insistence) it was offered to Miriam Margolyes. "Unfortunately, she [Margolyes] had to commit to another production, but I had revised Christina with her in mind. Thank goodness, Chrissie was so wonderful." Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 4 February 2000.



This is one of the few recent productions to be launched by the Tricycle, and it amply demonstrates the potential of the fine, traditional, well-proportioned space.<sup>32†</sup>

Beginning with a four year old child and ending with a middle-aged woman, Gems's two act play covers a greater span of time and place than either Strindberg's or Wolff's. She creates a series of compact scenes identified by titles to encapsulate and anticipate their central concerns. This episodic structure is used to trace the infamous Queen's life and gives special attention to the conflicting messages Christina confronts in regard to her sexuality and gender identity; for example, the first scene, revealing the King's decision to "make a man" of Christina is entitled 'Succession.' Most of the play's characters lack the dimensionality associated with realist theatre and Gems underscores this by stipulating that a cast of nine play the twenty-five roles. Ironically, only the actress appearing as Christina would not play multiple roles.

While Christina is the play's most fully realised character, the nature of this realisation contrasts with both Strindberg and Wolff. Gems's Christina does not emerge as a discrete individual fixed in time and place, but as a social/historical being rooted in seventeenth century Sweden whose dilemma is shown to have significance for Gems's contemporaries. In a preface to the play, Gems explains:

*Queen Christina...* is not a documentary, thus characters have been concertinaed and some events changed. All plays are metaphors and the dilemma of the real Christina, reared and educated as a man for the Swedish throne, and then asked to marry and breed for the succession, is perhaps not irrelevant today.<sup>33</sup>

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† Benedict Nightingale makes a similar point: "Queen Christina turns out better at the Tricycle than expected: sharper, crisper, more comprehensible. Altogether, better and swifter than Stratford." Benedict Nightingale, 'Queen Christina: Review', *New Statesman*, 28 May 1982.



In the play's 'Afterword,' Gems explains Christina's relevance for modern women more precisely. Like the Queen, Gems asserts, modern women are encouraged to pursue careers and statuses traditionally reserved for men while simultaneously pressured to maintain the more traditionally female realms of reproduction and domestic arts.<sup>34†</sup>

Gems sustains the modern reference through dialogue written in boldly contemporary vernacular while relaying a considerable amount of biographical information about the actual Christina's life. A Brechtian influence is apparent in this juxtaposition. Where the realist frame works to create the illusion of unified historical setting, Brechtian theory advocates a "historicisation"<sup>35</sup> which foregrounds the gap between past events and present perspectives. Historicisation contributes to the emotional distancing Brecht sought by challenging audiences to focus on the particular processes through which human relations involve. In his essay on Brecht, Arrigo Subbiotto<sup>36</sup> suggests the implications this focus on process holds for epic theatre characterisation. His analysis proves particularly useful for understanding Gems's treatment of Christina, stressing that Brecht's theory rests on the belief "that nothing is determined, absolute and fixed, but subject to influence and change" and notes:

Brecht attacked the prevailing conception that the hero (and all human beings) possess innate characteristics that cannot be altered by circumstances, a nature that determines his behaviour ineluctably. The consequent irresolvable conflict between the 'fixed' hero and the world, which is the stuff of classical drama, was rejected by Brecht as inappropriate and unrealistic; in its place he posited a hero subject to alteration and development, adapting to society, but also by his actions changing society. (32-33)

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† The mixture of influences on Christina is reflected in her dress. Chrissie Cotterill's costume consisted of "ball gown over combat trousers and boots with a crown perched on punkishly short hair." Ros Asquith, 'Queen Christina: Review', *City Limits*, 29 May 1982, p. 21.



In keeping with the Brechtian goals of flux and process in characterisation, Gems's Christina emerges as an individual shaped by social forces.<sup>†</sup> Where Strindberg's and Wolff's Christina seem innately disposed to conflict in the midst of a presumably natural order, Gems's character is revealed as both a victim of social constructs of gender and as an agent contributing to their maintenance.

Gems's first two scenes establish both the centrality of gender and a dialectic between victimisation and agency in the protagonist's experience. In the first scene, as we have seen, the child Christina learns of her father's intent to "make a man of her."<sup>37</sup> She becomes part of a scheme she can neither comprehend nor control. Christina's mother, merely treated as a reproductive vessel for supplying a male heir, has had another stillbirth, much to the frustration of the patriarchal retinue. The King and Axel Oxenstierna view her trauma with detachment and an unashamed lack of emotion. Christina, the female heir, is ignored precisely because of her gender and is left a bewildered little girl, crouching by the fire.

In the second scene, 'Betrothal,' Gems characterises Christina as an aggressive young adult, in control of her own destiny and boldly defying images of female passivity. In 'Betrothal,' Gems uses one of her most effective theatrical devices to introduce the adult Christina. As this scene opens, Axel Oxenstierna discusses the possibility of royal

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<sup>†</sup> Brecht's most famous female individual shaped by social forces is Anna Fierling, the female protagonist of *Mother Courage and her Children* (1941). Anna is a small businesswoman struggling to keep her self and her children alive as they follow the armies of the Thirty Years War across Europe. Armed with gritty humour and the ability to haggle she becomes a fearless scavenger. While there are many differences between Christina and Anna, they are both victims of the Thirty Years War. In their determination to escape from their predicament, they blind themselves to the inevitable fact that in matters of war/religion/abdication/gender, ultimately, there are no winners.



marriage to Christina with a German prince and his ambassador. Although she is being trained to be a king, Christina's mythical femininity and beauty - Garbo's Christina in effect - are verbally promoted in order to entice the suitor, so much so that it comes as a shock for Axel to hear of "Her Majesty's beauty." (18) Thus, her femininity is to be accentuated and underplayed according to the wishes of the royal court (symbolising patriarchal order). Taking a deliberate sideswipe at royal protocol and etiquette, Gems has the Prince crudely ask for "the wench" (18) Of course, this is Gems's way of injecting humour into the play by subverting the idea of a traditional, elevated, historical drama, and it does work if played in a comic fashion.† Moments later, a "*beautiful young woman enters, ... She smiles as she approaches*" and "*the PRINCE, enchanted, moves forward, smiling in delight.*" (18) The Prince, the Ambassador and probably the audience (conditioned to have very select expectations about heterosexual romance) believe the heroine has arrived. A battered figure in riding clothes enters next, however, and she turns out to be Christina; the beautiful woman is Ebba. Gems's visual trick deflates idealised images of a royal betrothal, and Christina's dress, manner and general physical appearance all contrast with the romantic image of a Swedish Queen whose "*pale ringlets*" frame "*a beautiful but thoughtful face*": the actual Queen is a **he**, moving "*louchely*" and appearing "*slightly crippled.*" (18)

Christina's behaviour, as well as her appearance, violates expectation about gender. Far from passive and demure, she provokes her would-be suitor to draw his sword against her. She also "*thumps*" him "*genially on the shoulder*" to "*send him*

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† However the comic dialogue seems to have fallen flat in the first production upon the play's opening. It is little wonder that this play received such harsh reviews. Critics and indeed the RSC, seem to have misunderstood Gems's aims and objectives, and the note of irony and even burlesque in the text was missed. The 1977 season was dominated by self-consciously sober productions of *Henry VI* and *Coriolanus*, and the RSC's casting did not favour Gems's iconoclastic approach to historical drama.



*reeling*,” and links her arm through his and assumes a “*wifely stance*” in a mockery of the intended union.(19) The mockery includes as much self-disparagement as defiance. Understanding the disappointing figure she strikes next to Ebba, Christina consoles the Prince: “I suppose they’ve been showing you some fancy-assed painting ...think yourself lucky we weren’t married off by proxy.”(19)

Christina’s sensitivity to her appearance surfaces throughout the play and, bound to the gender theme, is a major component of Gems’s revisioning. In the ‘Afterword,’ Gems writes about the Garbo film and its image of Christina:

I had the idea, like I suspect many people, that Christina had been a shining, pale, intellectual beauty, who had romantically, chosen freedom. The reality is harsher. The real Christina was a dark, plain woman with a crippled shoulder. (47)

Gems’s Christina remains acutely aware of how she falls short of the romanticised image. Gems uses this awareness to highlight Christina’s sense of being an awkward misfit, of belonging to neither the male nor female gender class. In ‘Images of Women in Modern English Theatre,’ Katherine Worth<sup>38</sup> notes that “Garbo’s Christina could easily shed her masculine role and, simply by looking herself (i.e. Garbo), attract the man who attracts her.” (8) Garbo’s Christina goes all to pieces when she falls in love (with a man) and is metamorphosed into a bejewelled, befrilled feminine version of loveliness, who abdicates in order to marry her lover - who is immediately killed in a duel, leaving her tragically alone and kingdomless to make her way in the world. Gems, however, “conveys in crude bold terms the agonised writhings of the woman/man”(8) and in so doing cracks the

Hollywood glamour myth wide open with this deformed, plain and grossly uncouth figure, 'outmachoing' all the men.<sup>†</sup>

As Worth suggests, Gems's Christina struggles with the conflict between male and female constructs of identity. While cavalier about wearing male clothing, and partaking in activities traditionally reserved for men alone, Christina also experiences a profound sense of alienation for failing to conform to ideals of female beauty. Alone with Ebba, Christina admires her friend. She explains, "God, when I'm with you I forget, you become my mirror, I see **your** face, **your** eyes." (20) When Ebba counters that "beauty isn't everything" (an easy statement for a beautiful woman to make), Christina wonders, "Isn't it?" (20) The fact is that Christina is significantly more intelligent than Ebba, and yet this seems to count for very little in the Court. Gems, at this point, almost falls into the traditional narrative trap of focusing on the stereotypical beautiful woman, but Christina's self-consciousness about her appearance is offset by a cool confidence in her intellectual capacities. Here, the play contrasts most notably, not with the film, but with Strindberg's *Queen Christina*. Gems turns Strindberg's image of Christina on its head (and the implications are profound). Whereas he portrays the Queen as a seductive beauty adept only at the superficialities of her role, Gems makes her an intelligent and thoughtful ruler whose difficulties derive from superficial ideas about male and female identity. He implies that women are too superficial to lead; she argues against the superficial values which dictate women's experience.

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<sup>†</sup> This comparison between Gems's Christina and Garbo's Christina is borne out in the reviews: "There is obvious comparison to be made with the only other Christina, Garbo's, and instead of her ever-suppressed, ever-simmering passion, this Christina is a volatile bundle of anger, lust and intelligence." Ros Asquith, 'Queen Christina: Review', *City Limits*, 29 May 1982, p. 21.



In the first scenes of the play, it seems that Gems's Christina might somehow rise above these narrow sexual dictates. She asserts herself boldly in the presence of male leaders. In the 'Betrothal' scene, for example, she speaks aggressively about Swedish and German affairs. She warns the Prince to expect "no more troops," (19) a first indication of her struggle to bring an end to the Thirty Years War, and later in the scene Christina explains her attitude toward the war to Ebba, revealing how seriously she takes her responsibilities. This discussion unmasks the philosophical side of her nature, establishing a contrast between Christina's pacifism and Oxenstierna's interest in continuing the war. Christina questions the very rhetoric of warfare, pacing the stage and exclaiming, "Christian war! ... connote me that phrase!" (20), and when Ebba tries to reassure her that she only does her duty, Christina balks: "Another word of unfathomable meaning." (20) Christina, at this point in time a fit adversary for men, rethinks existing structures and ideals.

In *Women in Dramatic Place and Time*, Geraldine Cousins<sup>39</sup> views Christina's 'maleness' as a map; a way of seeing and being in order to operate in the world. Christina is constantly searching for other "intellectual and metaphysical maps" (154) which will enable her to orientate herself in the world of ideas and spirit. Whilst still in Sweden, she was already in quest of this map. Sometimes it seems to her that such a thing must exist, and that, if she could discover it, she would become a cartographer of meaning. "Why are we given life?" she speculates (20). Then, overcome by horror at the kind of God who could deliberately construct the world with all its brutality and pain, her hope is that no map existed: "Pestilence ... the murder of children - by design? Better no meaning at all." (21) Contemporary ideas about the physical world, however, offer her



new ways of charting the universe and the world of ideas. This point is well illustrated in her matching of wits with Oxenstierna. She has no difficulty in arguing her viewpoint on any topic, indeed Christina even seems to relish the fight. She refuses to submit to the pressure to marry and handles the succession question with rhetorical finesse. Axel chastises Christina about her association with the Catholic Church, her marital status and her treatment of the Swedish nobility, but she refuses to tolerate his condescension.

In one exchange with Axel, Christina acknowledges the demands made on her to be both male and female. Unlike Wolff's character (who also acknowledges this confusion), she expresses a determination to live on her own terms, rejecting Axel's 'map':

CHRISTINA (*loud*) Don't bully me! I grew up with it. Your stinking sweat, bellowing in my ears for as long as I can remember.

AXEL Fulfilling my duty.

CHRISTINA Why didn't you leave me in the parlour with the rest of the women, it's what you want!

AXEL Not at all. Your unique position demands both the manly qualities of a king, and the fecundity of a woman.

CHRISTINA Well, you can't have both.

AXEL Why not? For twenty years I have prepared you for it.

CHRISTINA And how? By making a man of me. A man, despising women - just like you!

*Queen Christina*, I. 5. (29)

A few moments later, Christina demands that Axel "respect the man" he has created and explains:

CHRISTINA You've done your job too well. I love men! Their company, their talk ... the smell of them in the saddle! I love them in the bone ... in the flesh ... the wildness ... the prickly insolence. The truth that is in a man takes him where his flesh decides. The flesh chooses! Do you think I am going to pollute that, the only truth I know?

*Queen Christina*, I. 5. (30)

Christina claims to despise women and love men in very specific contexts (abhorring the social construction of the female and savouring the freedom society traditionally reserves for the male.) She rejects any identity which conjures images of



women's passivity in the parlour. She relishes the power to act, associating this power with men through a series of images referring to mobility and sensation. She understands that a man's flesh alone guides him whereas women must subject their flesh to the control of others. For Christina, her mother epitomises the identity she abhors. She describes Maria Eleonore as "banal" because of the biology which dictated "eighteen pregnancies, stillbirths, premature drop... dead infants in the churchyard, unnamed corpses, flesh of her flesh, torn, cut out." (37)

In fact Gems greatly exaggerates the number of Maria Eleonore's pregnancies and their attendant horrors to emphasise women's lack of control over their bodies. Throughout the scene in which mother and daughter are first brought together, Christina complains of menstrual pain, doubling over, groaning and holding her abdomen. Evidently inspired by Masson's description of Christina's monthly difficulties, Gems associated her malady with menstruation and in so doing was breaking theatrical taboos.<sup>†</sup> Gems is unashamedly candid and outspoken in her intensely physical treatment of menstruation. Firstly, she forges a link between menstruation and the Thirty Years War:

CHRISTINA I'll end this bloody war if it's the - ahh! (*She groans pressing her abdomen.*) My bloody period. Of all the ludicrous patterns in nature, hens are better off.

*Queen Christina*, I . 2 . (19)

Then, later on, Christina again emphasises the physical nature of menstruation as she challenges the Pope in conversation:

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<sup>†</sup> August Strindberg was one of the first playwrights to break theatrical taboos by acknowledging menstruation in *Miss Julie*, (1888). However, as a contextual point, Strindberg was also a male playwright, whose work was frequently noted and criticised for its hostility to women. It could be argued that *Miss Julie*, merely offered 'lip-service' to an exclusively female experience through the purely male filters of perception. By contrast, in *Queen Christina*, Gems was one of the first female playwrights to incite controversy by openly demonstrating the physical aspects of menstruation, rather than remaining content just to make a passing reference. When questioned on this matter Gems asserts that: "It is not my wish to make audiences comfortable, I prefer to make them think. As a female playwright, I cannot easily detach my gender from my writing. I make no apologies." Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, unpublished manuscript, 4 February 2000.



CHRISTINA And what of a woman's flow? A child a month, deceased. And a man's ejaculation?  
Whole armies, whole populations denied breath. Nature is wasteful, Pope. We must look to  
ourselves. *Queen Christina*, II . 2 . (37)

Christina's violent and physical reaction to her own biology (a resentment forced on her out of duty to the Court) embodies a staunch rejection of the glorified female suffering epitomised by Maria Eleonore. Her mother's suffering is captured in her dialogue, which is preoccupied with her physical deterioration. Maria Eleonore appears as the aging damsel in distress (a similar character to the mature Dietrich in Gems's *Marlene*) - delicate and feminine (scarcely recognisable as Christina's mother) but tired and haggard due to the aging process and the rigours of multiple pregnancies. Mother and daughter maintain a dysfunctional relationship owing to Maria Eleonore's conditional love - whereby her daughter's lack of beauty and offspring are equated with lack of worth - and Christina's masculinity is a direct reflection of her mother's deteriorating beauty.

Though Gems's Christina has scant regard for her mother, feels victimised by her own body, and tells Axel she resembles him in despising the female realm, the playwright leaves no question of the love Christina feels for Ebba. Their intimacy is not matched by any other relationship in the play. After the first exchange between Christina and Maria Eleonore, Christina turns to Ebba. Stage directions stipulate that she "*dives at EBBA roughly, going for her breasts like an importunate baby. EBBA lets her nurse briefly. CHRISTINA becomes calmer.*" (20) It is significant that Gems first uses nursing to suggest lesbian contact in her play. Following what has obviously been a typical clash between mother and daughter, the nursing suggests Christina's need to be nurtured and Ebba's role in replacing the absent maternal bond: unlike Wolff, Gems depicts lesbianism as a positive force here.



When Ebba becomes engaged to Magnus de la Gardie, however, Christina not only loses her lover but must abandon her fantasies about Magnus. The Ebba-Magnus union provides a pivotal crisis in the life of Christina in Gems's play as it does in Wolff's. Wolff's character remains passive in the crisis scene with Ebba and Magnus: quietly watching them make love and standing relatively speechless when apprehended and belittled. Gems's Christina, in contrast, unleashes her fury in reaction to their union, for she needs women like Ebba to be her mirror: both sexes seem to be colluding in her betrayal. Where Wolff's Christina leaves Magnus determined to prove she can love like any other woman, Gems's protagonist becomes increasingly determined to free herself from the emotional life she, and society, equates with femininity.

Christina discovers Ebba and Magnus's relationship in the third scene. It begins on a light-hearted note, with Maria Eleonore shamelessly flirting with an appalled Descartes. She shows him a tin holding the heart and penis of her dead husband (the idea of the physical being more sacred than the spiritual), and at this point the scene becomes increasingly burlesque. Christina, Ebba, Magnus and Karl perform a masque for the visiting guest. It is ironic that Christina should take the role of 'Peace', while Magnus plays 'War' and Ebba plays 'Venus' (the goddess of love): their roles in society seem to dictate their masque roles. Gems seems to suggest the idea that the role is something determined, not even to be escaped from through the medium of art. Christina functions as an eager master of ceremonies. She kisses both Magnus and Ebba upon introducing them and then the unexpected happens as she turns the sober Court spectacle into a revel, a celebration of her private world:

*The masque ends in a gigue. It becomes a romp as CHRISTINA, breaking the steps, twirls with MAGNUS. She shrieks with pleasure as the music ends, throwing her arms about MAGNUS' neck.*  
Queen Christina, I. 3. (23)



But moments later, Axel announces Ebba and Magnus's engagement. Christina remains quiet for a moment before jumping to her feet to declare, "Bitch, bitch! Liars! Cheats!" (29) Her mounting hysteria drives everyone from the room, except Descartes whom Christina holds back. She regains her composure to discuss the matter philosophically, resolving by scene's end to "guard the throne" (24) as it is all she has.

This scene represents a crucial stage in Christina's development as a character. At the beginning of the scene, she basks in a kind of innocence, seeming to take those around her at face value and, more importantly, to believe it possible to live outside of strict gender roles. She dances with all three of her childhood friends, kisses both Ebba and Magnus, and appears generally unencumbered by rules of conduct and gender. In one moment, this freedom vanishes and its loss outrages her. For solace, she turns to Descartes and emerges, at scene's end, determined to succeed in a game of power.

Descartes offers the pivotal point for this transition. As they discuss her situation, Christina begins by articulating responses rooted in the flesh, impulse and passion. Gems endows him with the role of the stereotypically droll, male philosopher. In keeping with the philosophy propounded by the historical Descartes and inspired by a reverence for mathematics, he counters by upholding the human prerogatives of choice, rational thought and the potential of the individual. At the end of the scene, Christina rejects the impulse to punish Magnus and Ebba savagely in favour of choices designed to strengthen her political position. She has been persuaded by Descartes' argument. Convinced that she must, after all, suppress certain facets of her identity - and, crucially, her dysfunctional upbringing - Christina chooses her mind and intellect over her body and



emotions, and she understands this choice as a movement from the socially constructed female identity toward the male. Christina's importance for Gems is the fact that her dysfunctional upbringing has denied her continuity of character, and that she is therefore the model of a woman who can and must constantly reconstruct herself. This is both agony and freedom.

In Act I Scene 4, Christina reluctantly agrees to marry Prince Karl out of public duty rather than private desire. Her mother is thrilled by the prospect, but Christina reveals a scantily-clad female under her bedclothes in order to make a statement about her ambiguous sexuality. But, in spite of her mother's cruel reaction, Christina cuddles the girl tenderly - a sign that she needs friendship and reassurance from women rather than sexual gratification - and the French Ambassador, Chanut, continues the notion of ambiguity by stating that Christina will make a "fine king," (26) in spite of the fact that in Paris she is known merely as a "rake" (a word traditionally associated with the male cad).

Where Descartes represented philosophical patriarchy, and Christina's ability to make use of it, so Chanut replaces him in this scene by symbolising political patriarchy. As Chanut and Christina debate political issues, Christina loses her male voice and addresses Chanut as a woman:

CHRISTINA We live on sufferance. To your desires. I find you a cruel sex.

CHANUT Madam, a man is powerless. Where his body stands, there must he follow.

CHRISTINA No man follows me. They follow symmetry, and all the thought in the world won't give me that. No, I'm damned if I'll breed for them. I pollute enough space as it is.

CHANUT For which I prescribe two days of fasting, followed by a diet of fruit and vegetables.

*Queen Christina*, I. 4 . (27)

Christina chides men for seeking nothing less than perfection in females, and the fact she will never attain to it; Chanut offers a prescriptive diet in order to correct and redeem her imperfections. It is interesting to note that Chanut temporarily confuses the gender of his addressee, referring to her as ‘madam’, when previously he addressed her as a male. Christina’s words speak for women everywhere, including Gems.

The modern allegory of Gems’s political agenda turns Christina into a feminist icon. Ebba talks in awe of the “blue stockings” (30) in Paris, where Christina’s opinions are highly regarded. As they both cuddle, Christina feels Ebba is pregnant and again feels betrayed by the female sex. Her immediate reaction is to abdicate and convert to Catholicism as a way of reasserting her autonomy.

Where Act One provided the action, so Act Two follows as an analysis of consequences and possibilities for ex-Queen Christina.† Scene One is remarkably calm and civilised compared with the brutal chaos of the preceding act. The Marquise and Catherine de Rohant (the ‘blue stockings’) entertain Christina with their feminist philosophies over tea. Their high-class status and sophisticated speech directly refer semi-satirically to modern bourgeois feminism, whereas Christina, happy to renounce her former status, scoffs cakes with relish in defiance of her former role. The French feminists wax lyrical about their radical ideology; however, behind Christina’s back they chastise her for being ugly and having poor taste in clothes.

CATHERINE She’s naive. And a moralist... The nobility of Rome will soon tire of an ex-queen at table, then where will she be? We recruit them all as their breasts fall.

MARQUISE How harsh you are. The Queen of Sweden is an important ally... Pity she’s so little to look at.

CATHERINE Yes. Whatever was she wearing?

*Queen Christina*, II . 1 (35)

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† Gems favours a two act structure. This seems to lend itself well to her objectives, whereby a situation/conflict is played out in Act One and the consequences for the protagonist are played out in Act Two.



Although they do not want anything to do with the patriarchy, their snide comments ironically prove their absorption in patriarchal values. If Queen Christina is a feminist, she has come to it out of sheer necessity and circumstance, but yet again her female peers betray her.

After failing to find Sisterhood, Christina travels to Rome to seek a father (the Pope) and thus she enters another rite of passage. She calls him “my lovely Papa!” (36) and he duly reciprocates by addressing her as “daughter.” (36) The scene plays out like the father/daughter relationship she never had but always longed for, and their frank religious exchange gives Gems the opportunity to take issue with the Catholic faith. They discuss sex, abortion, contraception and menstruation and Christina quickly becomes Gems’s feminist mouthpiece on these issues, rather than the raucous, uninformed queen who greeted the audience at the beginning of the play.

CHRISTINA I don't intend to defy, nor to reject. But you say that you understand ... You do not know... You use yourselves up in dealing with your frustrations, with the ruination of your body selves. And you would condemn those of us who live in the world. You speak of love, and you would destroy us... I cannot close my mouth. I seek guidance. But by brotherly, sisterly discourse... Don't disaffect me. *Queen Christina, II . 2 . (36)*

In Scene Three, Christina enters her next rite of passage by falling in lust with a married man, Monaldescho. Still assuming the royal ‘we’ (because it suits her purpose) Christina is happy to share her bed with a hypocritical cheat and likes it precisely because her intelligence renders him painfully transparent. Although the romance soon fades, Christina is aware of her superiority over Monaldescho, and does not hesitate to inform him in masculine terms: “I hold the purse. A logical man.” (39) However, as

Monaldescho's treachery is fully realised (both sexes still seek to betray her), Christina becomes confused about her identity:

CHRISTINA ...even my intuition deserts me, one becomes a sort of shifting fable. I've come to the conclusion that the world lacks meaning.... I knew who I was in Sweden - why not here?  
*Queen Christina*, II . 4 . (39)

This speech is particularly relevant to all of Gems's female protagonists: they are a group of "shifting fables", whereby their identity is continuously filtered via myth, history and tradition.

But the play's final scenes reverse the movement of femininity to masculinity. Christina will move from an exaggerated male model of behaviour to an exaggerated model of female behaviour before she finally denounces the socialisation processes which dictate all role models. These scenes also reverse the victim-agent pattern established at the play's opening which offset the timid child of the prologue with the adult victim meeting the Prince in 'Betrothal'.

Christina's execution of Monaldescho (Act II, Scene 6) reveals the heights of her intolerance for everything associated with female identity. The scene begins with Azzolino and a Captain of the Queen's guard discussing the campaign to seat Christina on the Neopolitan throne. They refer to a suspicion that a traitor works among them and to the fact of Maria Eleonore's recent death. Christina's response to the death of her mother emphasises a hostility toward women in general:



AZZOLINO I was on my way to pay my respects to you. I am so distressed to hear of your loss.

CHRISTINA Eh?

AZZOLINO Her Majesty, your mother.

CHRISTINA Oh, who cares? Stupid woman.

AZZOLINO Perhaps the simple suffer less.

CHRISTINA Not her ... always in pain or rage - miserable life.

AZZOLINO She bred you.

CHRISTINA I bolted!

*Queen Christina*, II. 5. (41)

Christina, as part of her exaggerated male facade disdains any association with her mother or female fecundity. Taking the philosophy of autonomy and independence to an extreme, she even claims responsibility for her own origins. As the scene continues, Christina remains aggressive and violent and when Monaldescho is revealed as the traitor, she slashes his throat without hesitation. Gems makes her the actual executioner here where other accounts maintain that the men in her service delivered the death blow. Christina's violence reflects back on the pacifist attitudes she shared with Ebba earlier in the play; she has become the figure of power and destruction she initially abhorred.

While the Monaldescho scene depicts Christina at her most aggressive, what follows reveals her at her most passive. She sits motionless, visited first by Lucia, a servant, who tries to persuade her to eat and then by Lucia's daughter, Angelica. After feeding her dolls, Angelica tries to feed Christina. When Christina refuses, the child admonishes her: "Naughty girl! Eat up!" (42) Christina begins to weep, the child scolds her again and exits, bidding Christina once again to "eat up." (42) The short scene ends as Christina "*slowly turns her head after the child, then slowly begins to eat.*" (42) Angelica resembles the little Christina from the first act. Her spontaneous authority and self-assurance indicate what Christina could have become if the patriarchy had not dictated her upbringing.

In the next and final scene, Azzolino visits Christina. Their discussion gradually makes explicit Christina's renunciation of the male world and longing for the female. At first, it appears that Gems is following Wolff and Strindberg in suggesting that love for a man transforms and redeems her protagonist. Christina adorns herself in traditionally feminine dress - "*an overgarment in pink, festively decorated*" (43) - and asks for Azzolino's affections. However, Gems steers the scene away from stock romanticism - news that little Angelica is choking interrupts this line of dialogue, Christina exits to the kitchen where she helps the child recover, and at her return, she muses on domesticity:

CHRISTINA So warm down there! The smell of ironed clothes ... linen ... lace ... Food ... baking ...  
And babies. The smell of babies. I like the smell of babies - can that be wrong?

*Queen Christina*, II. 7. (44)

Here, Christina drops her courtship of Azzolino to glorify the whole female realm which has been withheld from her. The slightly apologetic tone, indicated by her question "Can that be wrong?" gives way to a more defiant insistence that she has been betrayed. "This" she claims, patting her abdomen, "has been betrayed." (45). She persists, eventually pleading with Azzolino to give her a child, and lamenting: "Where's my daughter, where's my son, you've cheated me, all of you!" (46)

Christina expresses her revulsion with the male social domain just as blatantly as she champions the female one. Early in the scene, Christina clarifies the constructed association of violence and masculinity when she says:

CHRISTINA I have **been** as a man. I have commanded. I have signed death warrants, consigned regiments to the sword. All done in my name. I have even committed murder.

*Queen Christina*, II. 7. (44)



Christina later asks, “Half the world rapes and destroys - must women, the other half, join in?” (44)

Christina’s glorification of female reproductive capacity and her condemnation of men as brutalisers make it tempting to read Gems’s final scene as a cultural feminist statement. More profoundly, however, in the final scene Christina realises not simply that she has been denied children or love with a man, but that she has had to choose between the opportunity to act and the opportunity to reproduce. When Azzolino argues that she could have married, she counters, “And been denied my mind.” (45) Later she sums up the unique circumstances of her life as: “The privilege of action ... at the cost of oneself.” (46)

*Queen Christina* decries the socialisation process which dictates the mutually exclusive realms of male and female. As established by the first scene, Christina’s rearing stressed the devaluation of the female. Later in life, she rejects this indoctrination, claiming, “How wrong, how wrong I have been to condemn women for their weakness ... they have kept us alive.” (45) Azzolino insists that “no one denies this. We revere the mother.” (45). Christina responds, “But there is no respect. Who respects slavery, the dispossessed?” (45)

Here Christina makes an explicit reference to gendered power dynamics, but the final scene also involves a more general questioning of power structures. When she returns from the kitchen, she challenges the existence of “a hundred servants to wait on one woman.” (44) The kitchen becomes a microcosm for the larger world, where a select few enjoy privileged treatment at the expense of others. Christina asks, “Why do we prey on one another? - we should all be on the same footing.” (44) Later speeches identify the

groups who, like women and servants, occupy the lowest positions in the hierarchy dictated by a patriarchal order - the young, the old, conscripted men; those, in other words, without power or money.

Christina comes to an understanding of the attitudes and cycles which perpetuate oppression. Her discovery, however, occurs too late in life and Gems refuses to provide the simple emotive closure that biographical drama often supplies. By succumbing to the lures of power and intolerance, Christina has internalised oppressive attitudes and reinforced oppressive cycles in an irreversible way. Gems severs Christina from both maternal roots and maternal possibilities to add metaphorical stress to this woman's essential irrelevance within male systems. Christina rejects her mother (and the world epitomised by her) but lacks the solutions which would have enabled her to reach fruitfully into the future.

### **Conclusion**

Through Christina, Gems beckons women to move beyond the limitations imposed upon Maria Eleonore without succumbing to the liabilities inherent to the 'blue stocking's' privileged version of liberation. Through Christina, Gems contends that a women's "philosophy is yet to be written" and that "there is a world to be explored."<sup>40</sup>

The play offers certain germinal ideas on which such a philosophy might be built. Christina seeks (but never attains) an ideal of gender freedom. She wants a life of action and possibility but not, finally, at the expense of her own identity. She desires love, but comes to understand that she lives in a world where women must conform to male



standards of beauty and function as sex objects. And, finally, she realises she wants the option to have children, but not to surrender control of her biology. This point is well illustrated in Act Two, Scene Two when Christina defends the practice of birth control and abortion to the Pope, arguing “Women are in need” and “Nature is wasteful, Pope. We must look to ourselves.” (37)

A misfit in a seventeenth century world, Christina, the man who is now ‘un-man’ searches for a “map that might delineate the contours of self and of other, future women.”<sup>41</sup> For example, why must she choose between having a child and an active life? She asks Azzolino, and when he, like the Pope, cites nature as the source of gender stereotyping, she replies that nature “is us! ... It is we who change and create change!” (45)

Gems uses dress to give metaphorical visual support to her thesis about the artificial nature of gender roles. After her mother’s worry that “there is no dress for such an occasion,” Christina wears white to her abdication ceremony, “*dressed as though for a wedding.*” (32) Her choice emphasises Christina’s exchange of marriage for an uncompromised independence; in a manner of speaking, by abdicating, she ‘weds’ what she sees as a future liberated from the pressure to surrender her personal freedom to her position and dynastic marriage. After the ceremony:

*(In a whirl of movement, she rips off her dress to reveal riding clothes underneath, and boots. She throws the dress across the space onto the throne, whirls round, her arms out in ecstasy, and leaves on the run.)*  
Queen Christina, I . 6 . (33)

This image of Christina shedding her dress to reveal clothing affording her freer movement works metaphorically to support an idea about the restrictive nature of women's roles.<sup>†</sup> In short, she is breaking free from the restrictions of convention.

Christina's dress in the final scene also functions iconically. She dons exaggerated feminine attire; finally, it would seem, giving up the fight and succumbing to conformity. But, Gems quickly points to the absurdity of this image. Moments later, Christina gets down on all fours to retrieve a fallen book. This is how Azzolino discovers her - not sitting passively in pink, but on her hands and knees attending to a practicality. Her attire becomes ridiculous, making the simple task an awkward struggle.

The various changes in costume - and the attention given to matters of dress and appearance in the dialogue - underscore the image of gender as something layered on to the individual. Teresa de Lauretis in her essay, 'The Technology of Gender'<sup>42</sup> explicates such imagery and indeed relies on metaphors resembling those Gems uses in her play. In one passage, de Lauretis refers to the habitual manner in which women mark the blank before the 'F' on application forms. She wonders if the 'F' next to the little box "has stuck to us like a wet, silk, dress," and asks if it is possible that "while we thought we were marking the 'F' on the form," in fact, "the 'F' was marking itself on us?" (12)

In *Queen Christina*, Gems uses Brechtian techniques to give theatrical form to the theories outlined by Rubin, de Lauretis and others. Like them, she believes that exposing the artifice of gender construction paves the way for re-thinking the systems which

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<sup>†</sup> Using Judith Butler's ideas of performative theory, it could be said that Christina's change of clothes is a symbolic and performative act of gender "beyond the limiting and coercive frame of compulsory heterosexuality." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 92.



perpetuate sex oppression. In her 'Afterword,' Gems clarifies her highly optimistic version of this belief. She writes:

We have a lot of thinking to do. Is it possible to create a multi-society which accepts, equally in society, gay relationships, the motherly man, the fatherly woman, the chaste, the sexually needful?... We can change things. Who else? We can decide what the bottom line should be, what the demands should be. And women are the new breed. We need to put our oar in.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Gems again suggests that what is needed are 'maps' of the new terrain in which we find ourselves. To quote Cousins, the "new breed of women have to make their voices heard" (158), and what these voices say needs to include an articulation of what Christina understood when she visited the servants' quarters - the interconnection of all human beings.

However, Bassnett-McGuire remains convinced that plays about 'great women' such as *Queen Christina* and *The Abdication*, even where the context might indicate the contrary, are **not** feminist plays or even, "except in strict terms of the sex of the writer, main character and director,"<sup>44</sup> women's theatre. However, I find that her startling assertion is based on a naive concept of history that sees the past as expanses of time punctuated by the emergence of great individuals, a vision that **can** be perceived as both sexist and elitist by nature. Relating this problematic concept of history to an even more problematic notion of performance theory, she states that:

In theatre terms this pattern results in the concept of stardom, the ranking of certain actors in time and space above others, the foregrounding in performance terms of few above many. The *Queen Christina* material from Gems, Wolff etc. both reinforces a single actor in the title role. It is therefore not the stuff out of which radical theatre can emerge. (453)

Taking issue with Bassnett-McGuire, I would argue that Gems's intention as a playwright was never to be at the forefront of radical theatre, she does not want to be so easily categorised. Furthermore, *Queen Christina* is not only about one female actress, but rather, about that woman's eventual perception of the ways in which her life relates to other lives. If we are to consider Christina's life, then her complex rites of passage, "quests for maps," (158) translate themselves into our world, as a search for a blueprint for a society that would bring a variety of opportunities, needs and responsibilities, a society better suited to the needs of both men and women.

Gems concludes the Afterword with a question. She asks:

Isn't the real work towards the creation of a society more suited to both sexes, and the happiness of children?... And, if that is sentimental, long live sentimentality ... it is on our side. (48)

Christina's longing for the children she never bore, her savouring of the smell of baking bread, her insistence that "we should all be on the same footing" is nothing if not sentimental. This sentimentality contends with harsh images of murder, misogyny and political corruption in a pattern of oppositions characteristic of Gems. This pattern carries over into Gems's *Piaf*, in which highly sentimental images of a few carefully chosen relationships in the protagonist's life offset brutal condemnation of the social forces which commodify women.

During the nineties, *Queen Christina* was revived in the form of a fringe production by the Absolute Theatre Company at the Man-in-the-Moon Theatre, London: 29 October - 21 November 1992. Directed by Andrew Pratt. Laura Cox played



Christina (see Appendix). The fact that the play has enjoyed a London revival long after it was first written continues to credit Gems as one of the most established British women playwrights.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Endnotes

1. The Gems text of *Queen Christina* referred to in this chapter (unless stated otherwise) is taken from:  
*Plays by Women*, ed. by Mary Remnant, 10 vols (London: Methuen Press, 1986), V, 13-48.  
(Hereafter, this version will be referred to as 'Remnant').
2. Sven Stolpe, *Christina of Sweden* (London: Macmillan, 1966).
3. Georgina Masson, *Queen Christina* (London: Martin, Secker & Warburg, 1986).
4. The Strindberg text of *Queen Christina* referred to in this chapter is taken from:  
August Strindberg, *Queen Christina, Charles XII and Gustav III*, trans. by Walter Johnson (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955). pp. 19-80.
5. The text of *The Abdication* referred to in this chapter, and hereafter is taken from:  
New Women's Theatre, ed. by Honor Moore (New York: Vintage Press, 1977), pp. 341-454.  
(Hereafter, this version will be referred to as '*The Abdication*')
6. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', in  
*Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). pp. 157-210.
7. Stolpe, p. 37.
8. Masson, p. 21.
9. Masson, p. 38.
10. The Greek myth of Pandora (meaning 'all gifts') the first woman in the world made out of earth, suited Strindberg remarkably well in his interpretation of the queen, who not only was interested in drama and theatre but who was also well-versed in classic mythology. Furious because Prometheus had stolen fire from heaven for the use of mankind, Zeus avenged himself on man by having Vulcan fashion a godlike being from earth and water and by having the gods endow her with good and evil qualities. Prometheus rejected her, but his gentler brother, Epimetheus, married her. Their union was happy until Mercury gave her a box (Pandora's box) that she was forbidden to open, she disobeyed out of curiosity and released from it all the ills that beset man. In her terror, Pandora closed the box and thereby saved Hope for mankind. Associated with misfortune and an unconventional femininity, Queen Christina could easily be likened to a literary equivalent of Pandora. See *Concise Classical Reference Dictionary of Myth and Fable*, ed. by Alice Grandison and others (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1982), p. 964.



11. In Ancient Greek or Roman mythology, 'sybil' is the name given to a woman or group of women believed to be witches/sorceresses.
12. Henry Woodhead, *Memoirs of Christina*, 2 vols (London: [n. pub.], 1863).
13. Faith Compton MacKenzie, *The Sibyl of the North: The Tale of Christina, Queen of Sweden* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1931).
14. Paul Lewis, *Queen of Caprice: A Biography of Kristina of Sweden* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967).
15. This particular 'Foreword' is printed only in the following version of Pam Gems's text of *Queen Christina*:  
Pam Gems, *Queen Christina* (London: St. Luke's Press, 1982).  
(Hereafter, this version will be referred to as 'St. Luke's').
16. Stolpe, p. 38.
17. Ambroise Paré, 'De la generation de l'homme' (1573), repr. in *Oeuvre Complètes*, 3 vols (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints Press, 1970), I, pp.165-173.
18. Stolpe, p. 38.
19. Masson, p. 79.
20. Rubin, p. 180.
21. August Strindberg, *Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre* (London: Owen Press, 1967).
22. *ibid.*
23. Wolff, *The Abdication*, p.341
24. Ruth Wolff, 'The Aesthetics of Violence: Women Tackle the Rough Stuff', *Ms.*, 11 February, 1979, pp. 30-6.
25. Wolff, *The Abdication*, p. 345.
26. Susan E. Bassnett-McGuire, 'Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre', in *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*, ed. by Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren (Amsterdam: Benjamins Press, 1984), pp. 445-66 (p. 450).
27. *ibid.*, p. 450.
28. Irving Wardle, 'Queen Christina: Review', *The Times*, 10 September 1977, p. 7.

29. B. A. Young, 'Queen Christina: Review', *Financial Times*, 12 September 1977, p. 3.
30. Peter Carne, 'Queen Christina: Review', *Observer*, 11 September 1977, p. 13.
31. Michael Billington, 'Queen Christina: Review', *Guardian*, 10 September 1977, p. 12.
32. Rosalind Carne, 'Queen Christina: Review', *Financial Times*, 28 May 1982, p. 15.
33. Pam Gems, *Queen Christina*, 'St. Luke's', p. iv.
34. Pam Gems, *Queen Christina*, 'Remnant', pp. 47-8.
35. Pam Gems, *Queen Christina*, 'St. Luke's', p. vi.
36. Arrigo Subbiotto, 'Epic Theatre: A Theatre of the Scientific Age', in *Brecht in Perspective*, ed. by Graham Bartram and Anthony Waine (London: Longman, 1982).
37. Pam Gems, *Queen Christina*, 'Remnant', p.17.
38. Katherine Worth, 'Images of Women in Modern English Theatre', in *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.3-24.
39. Geraldine Cousin, *Women in Dramatic Place and Time: Contemporary Female Characters on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1996).
40. Pam Gems, *Queen Christina*, 'St. Luke's', p. 75.
41. Cousin, *Women in Dramatic Place and Time*, p. 158.
42. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
43. Pam Gems, *Queen Christina*, 'Remnant', p. 48.
44. Bassnett-McGuire, 'Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre', p. 453.



**CHAPTER THREE**

**PAM GEMS**

*PIAF*

**‘THE PAINS OF THE FALLEN WOMAN’: REVISIONING THE  
MYTH OF EDITH PIAF THROUGH PUBLIC/PRIVATE  
COMMODIFICATION**

## Introduction

Gems's *Piaf* is about an angry woman rather than an angry man. Piaf does not look back in anger but angrily straight ahead, making her way in a man's world as best she can.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, Queen Christina of Sweden and the French singer Edith Piaf (1915-1963) stand worlds apart - separated by far more than the distance between Sweden and France and the years between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Christina entered a world of prestige and wealth where Piaf met abject poverty. The former received an education fit, literally, for a king, while Piaf was educated by the pimps and prostitutes of the Parisian underworld. Both, however, led lives marked by extreme turbulence, accompanied by as much infamy as glory. And both have offered biographers occasion for promoting certain images of gender in a historical context.

As is the case with many celebrities, Piaf's private life became inextricably bound to her public image. The tawdry circumstances of her youth, her professional debut as a night-club singer, virtual overnight fame and its attendant sensationalism, a series of love affairs, her alcoholism and frequent embroilment in scandal - all these seemed present in the heartwrenching misery conveyed through her music. All of these circumstances congeal in the enduring Piaf legend. Piaf has become the epitome of the tortured star whose very success depends on the magnitude of her woes, the embodiment of hardship released through artistic impression, the fragile songbird struggling into the limelight to touch the lives of all who listen to her. While celebrities of both sexes fall prey to the voyeuristic fashion of their public, Piaf's legacy reveals the unique character this fascination assumes when directed toward the female star.



In response to the specific implications surfacing in the various biographies of Queen Christina, my last chapter gave particular attention to gender construction. This chapter explores the commodification of women. To understand how people (women specifically) become commodities, Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women' again offers a helpful analysis. Casting a feminist eye upon the theories of Claude Levi-Strauss, Rubin finds the concept of "the gift" most relevant and considers how women have functioned as sites of exchange between men. Such consideration helps formulate her sense of the "trafficking in women". She explains:

It is certainly not difficult to find ethnographic and historical examples of trafficking in women. Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favours, sent as tribute, traded, bought and sold. Far from being confined to the 'primitive' world, these practices seem only to become more pronounced and commercialised in more 'civilised' societies. Men are of course, also trafficked - but as slaves, hustlers, athletic stars, serfs, or as some other catastrophic social status, rather than as men. Women are transacted as slaves, serfs and prostitutes, but also simply as women.<sup>2</sup>

To look at Piaf's life is to realise the special implications Rubin's remarks have for female celebrities. In Gems's play, Piaf becomes commodified both as a woman and as the embodiment of "catastrophic social status" attached to her stardom. The Piaf mystique (to expand on Rubin's metaphor) attests to the trafficking in images of female suffering.

A consideration of psychoanalytic writings (and the myth of female masochism they uphold) offers some preliminary observations on the extent to which female suffering has been glorified. Rubin notes that:

...one can read Freud's essays on femininity as descriptions of how a group is prepared psychologically, at a tender age, to live with its oppression. (196)

In a later passage, she points out that:

... the psychoanalytic theory of femininity is one that sees female development as one based largely on pain and humiliation, and it takes some fancy footwork to explain why anyone ought to enjoy being a woman.  
(197)

What does not require "fancy footwork", however, is understanding why images of female pain have been perpetuated and even glorified in what Rubin calls the "social machinery" (198). If women are presumed to bask in pain, there is (conveniently) no cause to re-think the structures which represent them. Proceeding from the psychoanalytic framework, theories of representation and reception isolate how various media reproduce presumptions about female masochism. In *The Desire to Desire*, for example, Mary Ann Doane discusses the women's films of the 1940's while offering certain observations about the female image which seems to transcend this context. These films, she contests, thrive on the "constantly recurring figures of the unwed mother, the waiting wife, the abandoned mistress, the frightened newlywed or the anguished mother."<sup>3</sup> Suffering is the common denominator between these character types. They, and others like them, populate not just movie screens, but the pages of fiction, theatre stages, and the print and electronic media. Gems's Piaf endures both intense physical pain and mental suffering as a result of leading an erratic, high powered life in the public eye.



Not primarily concerned with feminist theory, Gloria Steinem's *Marilyn*, differs significantly from Doane or Rubin's work. Like them, however, she establishes the presence of a market for female suffering. Because she discusses a celebrity (who actually bears some striking resemblances to Edith Piaf), what analysis she does provide has particular relevance to our discussion. Steinem argues that Marilyn Monroe's vulnerability lay at the heart of her popularity. Monroe, she writes, "personified many of the secret hopes of men and secret fears of women"<sup>4</sup> Piaf, like Monroe, has also been mythologised as an idealisation of female suffering. In biographies, she was the child woman who offered pleasure without adult challenge and a lover who neither judged nor asked anything in return. The roles she played in both her public and private life embodied a masculine hope for a woman who is innocent and sensuously experienced at the same time. Women were forced to worry about her vulnerability and thus their own. What Steinem says of Monroe, can be applied to Piaf:

They [women] might feel like a black moviegoer, watching a black actor play a black role that was too passive, too obedient, or a Jew watching a Jewish character who was selfish and avaricious. In spite of some extra magic, some face saving sincerity and humour, Marilyn Monroe was still close to the humiliating stereotype of a dumb blonde... depersonalised, sexual, even a joke. Though few women yet had the self respect to object on behalf of their sex, as one would object on behalf of a race or religion, they still might be left feeling a little humiliated (or threatened) without knowing why. (14-15)

Steinem never refers directly to the idealisation of female suffering but there is a strong correlation between this and the lure of female vulnerability she establishes through her biography. An image of the woman in either misery or perpetual accessibility

connotes powerlessness and mutability. Gems strips the tortured star mystique surrounding Piaf of its sentimental appeal. In a pattern resembling her work on Queen Christina of Sweden, her treatment contrasts with that of other Piaf biographers. Where Simone Bertaut,<sup>5</sup> who knew the singer well (1971), Monique Lange<sup>6</sup> (1977) and Margaret Crosland<sup>7†</sup> (1987) either uphold or refute various aspects of the Piaf image(s), only Gems explores the very dynamic of image-making and its larger social and sexual contexts.

### The Search For the 'Real' Piaf

Given the nature of the biographical tradition surrounding Piaf, a chronological outline of her life (such as that offered in the *Queen Christina* chapter) becomes slightly elusive. The fact that Piaf herself did a great deal to promote certain images of her life compounds this elusiveness. Katherine Burkman in her essay 'Gems on *Piaf*'<sup>8</sup> notes that:

To compare the 'real' Edith Piaf with the Piaf created by Pam Gems in her play *Piaf* is a misleading project, since there is no 'real' Piaf. (1)

Thus, from the moment of Piaf's birth, fact and legend intermingle and become indistinguishable.

The details which do avail themselves for summarisation can be covered briefly.

Piaf was born Edith Gassion on December 15th 1915 in one of Paris's most impoverished

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† Although the Crosland biography of Piaf was not completed until after Gems's *Piaf* was published I have still included it in my study in order to offer a comparison with the other biographical texts. In her correspondence, Gems confirmed that her main biographical source was Bertaut. Lange's biography of Piaf was published just before Gems's work, and therefore offers a contemporaneous account of her protagonist.



neighbourhoods. Her parents were both street performers. Her father, Louis-Alphonsine Gassion, was an acrobat, and her mother used the stage name Annetta Miller as a singer. As a young child, Edith lived first with her maternal grandmother and then her paternal grandmother. When she was about eight, she joined her father and passed the hat for him during street performances. She eventually began singing during these performances and when she was fifteen began to perform without him, travelling instead with another girl slightly younger than herself, Simone Bertaut.

At sixteen, Edith Gassion married Louis Dupont and at seventeen gave birth to a daughter she named Marcelle. She left her husband shortly after the birth and resumed her street singing with the infant in tow. Marcelle was eventually taken to live with Dupont's mother and when she was two, became ill with meningitis and died.

In 1935, Louis Lepleé discovered Edith 'Dupont' singing on the street and gave her an engagement at his night-club, Gerny's. She became something of an overnight sensation and began to go by her stage name, 'Piaf'. In April 1936 Lepleé was shot and killed in an intended robbery of his home. Piaf was implicated in (but not indicted for) the crime. In the wake of bad publicity, she left Paris to earn her living in the provinces.

Piaf gradually resumed performances in Paris, working with songwriter Raymond Asso; she re-established her career and was soon engaged in some of Paris's most prestigious halls. She worked with a variety of celebrated entertainers both in Paris and in the United States. Among them were Marlene Dietrich and a nine-member singing group 'Les Compagnons de la Chanson' ('The Companions of Song'). At one point,

according to one of her biographers, Piaf was the highest paid singer in the world after Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.<sup>9</sup> According to another, Piaf popularised over two hundred songs,<sup>10</sup> crossing language and generational barriers.

In addition to her singing career, Piaf also worked as an actress. One of her most notable performances for the theatre was in Jean Cocteau's *Le Bel Indifferent*, written for her and Paul Meurisse in 1940. In 1945, in one of her forays into film, Piaf worked with director Marcel Blistene and actor Yves Montand on *Etoile Sans Lumière* (*Star Without Light*).

Piaf was romantically involved with several of the men she worked with, including Paul Meurisse, Yves Montand and Jean Claude Jaubert of 'Les Compagnons de la Chanson'. In 1947, Piaf began a highly publicised relationship with the boxer Marcel Cerdan which lasted until his death two years later. In 1952, Piaf married singer Jacques Pills. The marriage lasted for five years. In 1962, she married for a third time, taking Theo Sarapo, a Greek hairdresser twenty years her junior, for her husband.

Piaf suffered from alcoholism and other substance abuse problems, which were compounded in the 1950's when she was treated with morphine following a series of three car accidents. After an accident in 1958, she had to endure excruciating facial massages to restore the muscle tone required for singing. In addition to these injuries, Piaf suffered from liver disease, bouts of pneumonia and crippling arthritis. She died in 1963.



## **Biographical Heritage and the Piaf Legacy**

Any simple chronology of Piaf's life necessarily omits key elements. Study of the Bertaut, Lange and Crosland biographies reveal a larger story. These works suggest how the circumstances of a singer's youth, her transition from street urchin to star, and the frenzy of her personal life all accumulated to form the Piaf legacy which Gems eventually re-addresses in her play.

Simone Bertaut's allegedly first-hand and privileged account is the most detailed, most widely read and most prurient of all the biographies. Although it has been discredited (by Lange and Crosland among others) it offers information and commentary essential to an appreciation of the Piaf 'legend'. Whether or not Piaf and Bertaut, as the latter claimed, were half-sisters (sharing the same father), they did spend considerable time together as young adults. Bertaut's biography upholds certain versions of events in Piaf's life that the singer herself sought to advance. Crosland and Lange challenge Bertaut's authority and make calculated attempts to avoid sentimentalisation, but all three offer insight into the various components of the Piaf myth.

The details of Piaf's youth have been sensationalised (in large part following Piaf's own lead) to bolster their contribution to the myth's function as a 'rags-to-riches' fantasy. Three details in particular become important: the precise circumstances of her birth, an incident of temporary blindness when she was six, and an occasion when she entertained the prospect of prostitution. The way each of the biographers approaches these events helps establish her individual relationship to her subject.

### **(i.) Origins: Street, House or Cape?**

Piaf herself maintained that she was born on the street with nothing but a policeman's cloak for cover. Bertaut relishes this version of the story, making her own presence a point of reference in a book which is at once sentimental and sensational. She writes, "I was born in a hospital, but Edith was born on the street, right there on the pavement."<sup>11</sup> Lange contends that Piaf's sixteen year old mother actually gave birth "not on the pavement of the rue de Belleville as legend has it, but on a policeman's cape in the hallway of their house."<sup>12</sup> Crosland contradicts Piaf's story most completely. Writing against the myth, she states:

This story gave Edith Piaf a start in life more suitable to a novel by Eugene Scribe on Emile Zola,† but there is one drawback: it has little, if anything, to do with fact.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the birth certificate for Edith Gassion, later Piaf, states that she was born at 4 rue de la Chine in the twentieth arrondissement, which is in fact the address of the nineteenth century Hôpital Tenon.<sup>14</sup>

### **(ii.) A Question of Vision?**

The pattern in the biographies becomes increasingly clear in relation to Piaf's story about her temporary blindness when she was six years old. At the time, she was living in a brothel where her paternal grandmother worked as a cook. Piaf claimed that her sight was miraculously restored when she and the prostitutes appealed to St Therèse through a day of prayer in a candlelit room. Bertaut extracts as much sentiment as possible from this scene, declaring meaningfully that the first thing her young friend saw upon regaining her sight was the piano keyboard.<sup>15</sup> Lange, again, offers her own slightly



modified version of this story and writes that little Edith actually had an “inflammation of the cornea, or keratitis, which eventually cures itself.”<sup>16</sup> Crosland, however, maintains that the child merely had “eye trouble accompanying a rather routine bout with conjunctivitis.”<sup>17</sup> She also alludes to the purpose fulfilled by the childhood blindness scenario. “The whole incident,” she writes, “has been compared to the well known Maupassant story *La Maison Tellier*.”<sup>18</sup>

### **(iii.) Piaf as Prostitute: The Appeal of the Myth of the Fallen Woman**

The third debatable ‘event’ of Piaf’s early life coincides with the death of little Marcelle. Unable to afford a proper burial for her daughter, the future Piaf decided to take a man to her room and raise the money she needed. The story she herself would later tell coincides with Bertaut’s and concludes with a satisfying, sentimental twist. When told of the circumstances which forced Edith Gassion to solicit his business, the man took mercy upon her and freely gave her all the money she needed. What **actually** transpired remains a mystery. Both Crosland (37) and Lange<sup>19</sup> suggest this story was fabricated or at least embellished (and never state that Piaf actually sold her body), but all three writers associate their subject with the world of prostitution during this point in her life. Lange, for example, writes that Piaf “had to abide by the laws of the underworld” (33). Abiding, in part, meant paying off a pimp named Albert so she could remain safe on the streets.

The dramatic circumstances of her birth and childhood, the miracle cure from blindness, the would-be ‘client’ helping to bury her daughter - all constituted the most sensational early elements of the Piaf legend. By now, their basis in reality is of

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† Eugene Scribe’s biography of Emile Zola gave a remarkable account of the writer’s life. In spite of being criticised for its sensationalism, all details were, in fact completely true.

secondary importance, overshadowed by their function in fulfilling a sentimental need at the heart of myth-making.

#### **(iv.) Louis Lepleé & Co. Ltd.: Public/Private Commodification**

The appearance of Louis Lepleé in 1935 provides an important transition in this legend. The Lepleé-Piaf association (by any account) is steeped in emotive detail. It was Lepleé who dubbed Edith Piaf 'la Môme Piaf' (the 'Kid Sparrow') and gave her an opportunity, heralded as her first step out of the gutter toward fame. Bertaut offers the most detailed description of Piaf's debut at Gerny's. Piaf, she explains, tried to knit a black sweater to go with her ragged but passable black skirt. Time ran out and, allegedly, she went on stage with only one sleeve. Yvonne Vallée, a friend of Lepleé's who was married to Maurice Chevalier, gave Edith a scarf to wear draped across her bare arm. The disguise held until Edith's finale, when she forgot herself in the passion of the moment and raised both arms in bold gesture. The exposed arm completed the singer's waif-like image, an image Lepleé had already exploited through a sensationalised introduction and stage lighting that imitated the cold glow of a street lamp.

Two more important incidents, most comprehensively reported by Bertaut, also surface during this period of Piaf's life. Nine days after her debut, Piaf received a dinner invitation from Jean de Rovera, director of the prestigious Club Commedia. The guest list included Paris's elite, among them a cabinet minister. As the evening wore on, it became apparent that Piaf was invited purely to amuse the other guests with her unrefined ways. She did not disappoint them, drinking from her finger bowl and clearly not recognising the dishes served. Bertaut (allegedly invited at Piaf's insistence) recalls:



They had invited Edith because she was so 'natural'. In fact, these smart people were just making fun of her. From the start of the meal they urged her to talk and they laughed at her. At first, Edith thought that she was perhaps wittier than she realised, or that it didn't take very much to amuse them, which in fact, it didn't.

"She's so funny," they said. "She's priceless."...  
Even the servants in their white gloves were part of the  
general hilarity. (70-71)

Neither Crosland nor Lange discusses the de Rovera dinner, but the Lepleé murder which followed it is covered by all three biographers. These two events suggest that if Piaf's early hardships could contribute to her appeal, they could just as readily be turned against her. Piaf sprang from the world of criminals, beggars, pimps and prostitutes. None of the biographies clarify the reasons behind Piaf's implication in Lepleé's murder, but it seems her background provided, if not reason enough, a basis for suspicion. The media which had helped elevate her now preyed upon her difficulties. Lange includes reprints of newspaper photographs of Piaf being interrogated by the police, of Piaf at Lepleé's funeral. A small figure, clad in black and visibly grieving, she offered an irresistible and highly marketable subject for the journalists of her day. Her career - or commodification - had truly begun.

At this point in detailing Piaf's life, Lange and Bertaut shift slightly in their organisational strategies. Rather than ordering information chronologically or in terms of artistic trends, they begin to arrange their books through accounts of Piaf's romantic attachments - so explicitly that they actually use the names of her lovers as chapter headings. This prominence sustains an image of Piaf as male-identified, but beyond this

the specific character of the relationships they describe becomes central to an understanding of the Piaf legacy.

### **(v.) Piaf + Relationship = Male Identified Commodity**

Piaf's relationships appear as tumultuous as they were numerous. She worked with many of her lovers and was reputed to be relentless towards them in rehearsals. As she seldom slept before dawn, finding the night her most productive time, she demanded that those working with her do the same and ordered a steady ration of coffee and alcohol to keep them going. Piaf was also purported to have masochistic tendencies. To document this, the biographers compare her affairs with Raymond Asso and Paul Meurisse early in her career. Both men were established musicians who sought to mould the Piaf image. Asso beat Piaf (a treatment she allegedly encouraged and desired) but, (allegedly to her chagrin), Meurisse did not, though one anecdote, does maintain that he was seen holding her down on the pavement with his foot while he paid a taxi driver.<sup>20</sup> The play Jean Cocteau wrote for Piaf and Meurisse is generally held to be inspired by their actual relationship. In the two-character play *Le Bel Indiffèrent*† only the female character speaks. Becoming increasingly distracted when she cannot provoke a response, the heroine only receives 'satisfaction' when the male character finally slaps her in the face.

To appreciate fully the role Piaf's relationships with men played in the formation of her image as a performer, it is necessary to consider the precise nature of her stage presence. Much has been written on the Piaf style. A slight woman (a mere 4'10"), Piaf's waif-like appearance complimented songs that decried the miseries of broken hearts

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† *Le Bel Indiffèrent* was a monologue written especially for Piaf in 1940. Earlier, Cocteau wrote another monologue for her in 1933 entitled *Le Fantôme de Marseilles*.



and lives. Simplicity remained her trademark, punctuated to great effect by the strategically placed grand gesture. Because of his eloquence and enduring friendship with Piaf, Cocteau is frequently quoted on the Piaf style:

Look at this little woman, whose hands are like lizards darting amongst the ruins. Look at her Bonaparte-like forehead, her blind eyes that have recovered their sight. What will her voice be like? How will she express herself? How will she be able to bring all the sorrow of the night out of that narrow little chest? And yet, she sings, or more like a nightingale in April, she brings forth her love song. Have you ever heard a nightingale? He toils, he hesitates, he raps, he chokes, he begins and falters; then suddenly he finds the note. He sings and his voice overpowers you.<sup>21</sup>

Every time she sings you have the feeling she's wrenching her soul from her body for the last time.<sup>22</sup>

The rumours of Piaf's private affairs seemed to bear out the desperate heartbreak she so often sang about. Her reputation as a masochist, along with her apparent drive toward self-destruction manifest through alcoholism, drug abuse and a generally reckless lifestyle, coincided with the fusion of sex and exaltation that her performances communicated.

The Piaf biographers project contrasting attitudes onto this connection between public appeal and private hardship. Bertaut exploits the connection and takes full advantage of the voyeuristic fascination of celebrities. She stresses that Piaf, "broken in at fifteen,"<sup>23</sup> had numerous male lovers, many of whom she didn't even know by name. Bertaut provides many lurid examples of Piaf's masochism, and such brazen descriptions of various people that she found herself named in a number of libel suits.

Lange is the least forgiving of the Piaf biographers; she sees Piaf as a shrewd professional who seized upon the disadvantaged circumstances of her childhood and the turmoil of her adult life to shape a successful public image - a willing commodity. Lange writes:

She loved dramatic situations (most of which she created.) She never sang as well or movingly as when she was in the throes of a crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Crosland, despite her early affinities with Lange, stresses that “the voice is the essential Edith.”<sup>25</sup> This remark, carefully positioned in her opening discussion, expresses her wish to avoid the voyeuristic qualities of the other two works. She does offer more artistic commentary and generally assumes a more serious tone. She does reflect on the interplay between her subject’s private and public images, drawing conclusions which stand in stark opposition to Lange’s indictment. Crosland sums up by suggesting that Piaf’s success depended upon real turmoil in her life and writes:

Her life was spent in search for an emotional happiness she never found, but the search led to an intense professionalism in the creative interpretation of two hundred dramatic songs, a search that has prolonged her existence and continues to enrich the lives of her world-wide audience. (196)

Lange and Crosland offer an interesting contrast. Lange regards Piaf primarily as a victimiser, lashing out at the world in the anger borne out of her early struggles, who was eventually caught in her own trap. Crosland views Piaf primarily as a victim who sacrificed private fulfilment to enrich the lives of others.



Crosland, Lange and Bertaut's biographies differ in the understandings they offer of the personality behind the myth, but they all tend to accept the appeal of Piaf's reputed hardships at face value. Failing to reflect on its larger implications, they both replicate and satiate the sexism apparent in such appeal. Crosland comes closest to indicating these implications when she associates her with three other female stars. She compares Piaf to Billie Holiday, Judy Garland and Janis Joplin - three more singers who destroyed themselves as they "sang of the destruction of love" (195). She tacitly identifies the appeal of the tortured female star, but it became Pam Gems's task to lay bare the context in which this appeal is bred.

One of the most haunting images from any account of Piaf's life is that of journalists trailing her in hope that she might die on stage. This image crystallises notions about the (all)lure of female suffering, the depersonalisation and misogyny underlying the commodification of the female celebrity. Gems uses Piaf's story to explore the very dynamic of female image-making amidst the patterns of domination and submission interwoven into the social fabric. In so doing, she challenges the assumptions surrounding female suffering which other historical icons have been used to support.

### **Pam Gems: Revisioning Piaf in *Piaf* (1978)**

With *Piaf*, Gems makes no pretence of offering herself as an authority on the singer's life. She combines characters, collapses events together and writes a succession of abbreviated telegraphic scenes to disclaim 'slice-of-life' unity. She does, here, as *in Queen Christina* manage to reveal the general texture of a life lived and capture the essence of one woman's fascinating personality. Fidelity to minute detail, however,



remains a secondary concern. Gems looks to biography, not to rectify, but to find the metaphors in a life. With *Piaf*, she continues to probe the interplay between victimisation and agency, between oppression and co-operation, between social hierarchies and sexual expression. Gems is very funny and coarse in emphasising these themes rather than taking a more soothing, romanticised version of the famous French songstress. Thus, she attempts to achieve a subversion both of female stereotype as well as theatrical expectation.

### Performing Gems's *Piaf*

Gems's *Piaf* is never conventionally beautiful, but nor is she the cute little sparrow her name might suggest. She is a constant paradox - strong, but fragile, generous and needy, coarse yet strangely elegant.<sup>†</sup> The play's first production received critical acclaim, and the audience evidently loved it too: according to Robert Cushman, "the cheers that were previously stifled [for Peter Brook's *Anthony and Cleopatra*] rang out for Gems's *Piaf*."<sup>26</sup> Michael Coveney was similarly enthusiastic about Gems's writing. He welcomed this "fast and snappy account of an indomitable feminine spirit," as an "irresistible showcase for a spring-heeled company," and especially for, "a devastating performance by Lapotaire."<sup>27</sup> Irving Wardle gave an interesting account of the play as:

...a feminist document showing a woman's struggle to achieve full humanity against the obstacles of her sex and birth...Whatever points she [Gems] makes... are made by characters who have earned the right to make them. In this case, by a tough young whore who gets an accidental break as a night club singer and goes on to the career of international fame, drugs and car crashes with numerous lovers half her age.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> The first production of *Piaf* which starred Jane Lapotaire opened at the RSC's Other Place on 5th October 1978 and played in repertoire for 31 performances, before transferring to the Aldwych Theatre, London in June 1979 for a run of nearly two years. In July 1981, *Piaf* transferred to the Plymouth Theatre, New York (see Appendix).



Jane Lapotaire's central performance as Piaf naturally attracted the fullest comment.

This was Michael Billington's description:

With her slightly skinny stork's legs, her frizzy hair, her smudged lipstick, her splay-footed bottom-jutting walk, Miss Lapotaire presents a memorable image. But, more than that, with her wide-open, barn door smile, she conveys the emotional generosity of Piaf the woman and performer... Wisely, Miss Lapotaire does not attempt to impersonate Piaf, but she triumphantly recreates her spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Wardle agreed that Lapotaire's performance had "all the understudied directness of the Piaf legend: coarse, harsh, generous and passionately down to earth."<sup>30</sup>

Gems's stage-craft was also admired. Michael Coveney described the "ideal studio setting":

Ribbons of red neon light decorate a bare platform, and actors quick-change in full view of the audience behind a lively duet of piano and accordion. Howard Davies's [director] Brechtian production leaves the audience to flesh out the bare but not so brittle bones.<sup>31</sup>

This unprecedented praise meant that Gems had finally found her breakthrough play. It enjoyed continued success through the 1980's, culminating in a very successful West End revival in December 1993 when Elaine Paige took the leading role of Piaf in a particularly gritty production by Peter Hall at the Piccadilly Theatre (see Appendix). Paige's performance foregrounded the difficult balancing act required for a play which positions a famous female singer in an **acting** role where she must play the part of

another famous female singer. Casting a star with her own ready-made public persona adds an extra dimension to Gems's construction of Piaf, in that Paige brings her own stage heritage to the part. A heritage grounded in singing rather than acting. The consequences of this are that audiences and critics remember the songs and the actress, rather than the play and the playwright. This is reflected in various reviews. For example, Louise Doughty seemed to object to Gems's play on the grounds that it detracted from Paige's performance.

As each song comes to an end, you give a small sigh of despair that there are whole passages of dialogue to listen to before you get the next number. Why not just an evening of Paige sings Piaf? It would be ten times more enjoyable and save a fortune in scenery<sup>32</sup>

Taking issue with Doughty, it is important to state that *Piaf* was not intended to be a Paige concert, just as *Marlene* was not supposed to be a tribute to Sian Phillips. However, it is fair to say that both plays enjoyed considerable success due to their famous leading ladies. It is unfortunate that Gems and her script seemed a secondary consideration.<sup>†</sup>

However, Gems was adamant that Paige should take the leading role in her revival of *Piaf*. Paige was otherwise engaged with *Evita Peron* when *Piaf* first appeared. She did not see Gems's play yet Gems had seen Paige in concert when planning a first production of *Piaf* at the Roundhouse. Both Gems and Peter Hall saw a matinee of John Barry's musical *Billy* at the Drury Lane Theatre, London and were intrigued by a diminutive actress with such a powerful voice. Gems was convinced that

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<sup>†</sup> Sheridan Morley also devoted his review of *Piaf* to Paige: "Paige, by simply steeping herself in the old Piaf recordings and then redelivering them with stunning accuracy and power, achieves a dramatic concert interrupted by fragments of biography." Sheridan Morley, 'Piaf: Review', *Spectator*, 1 January 1994, p. 24.



she had found her leading lady<sup>†</sup> and Paige's enthusiasm for playing *Piaf* extended into buying the rights. She was received well by the majority of critics and production photographs recorded a studied likeness - tiny frame, little black dress, crucifix, a face of experience with its high forehead and narrow, expressive eyebrows. But it was just a physical likeness. Gems's play was too raw for her own 'clean-cut' image and Paige even chose not to adopt the tremulous French vibrato voice (a crucial Piaf trademark) preferring her own familiar lyricism. Thus, when the audience applauded Paige on her opening night at the Piccadilly Theatre, London, it would have been difficult to assess exactly who was being celebrated: were they applauding the legend of Piaf, Elaine Paige as Piaf, or Elaine Paige as star? Identities became fused.<sup>††</sup>

Yet, the mis-casting was perhaps apparent in Paige's tribute to Piaf, which seemed confused by the relationship between 'fact' and Gems's play. She stated:

... Everybody sees this terrible, tragic, degenerate life.  
But she didn't see it that way at all. She had a ball, she  
lived hard and she lived fast.<sup>33</sup>

Piaf may have seen her life this way, but Paige's showbiz optimism, ("She had a ball,") seems antithetical to Gems's project. Gems shows Piaf disintegrate through the contradiction between private and public desires - and when the gap between idol and real woman can no longer be disguised, society preserves the false image by divorcing musical soul from female body.

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<sup>†</sup> Edward Seckerson states that Gems, speaking to Peter Hall after seeing Paige in *Billy*, enthused, "Well, we've found our Piaf!" Edward Seckerson, 'Going By the Book', *Independent*, 13 December, 1993, p. 27

<sup>††</sup> "Elaine Piaf, Edith Paige, Elaine Paige, or Edith Piaf. Who cares? Paige IS Piaf without a doubt." Maureen Paton, 'Piaf: Review', *Daily Express*, 14 December 1993, p. 17

Criticism aside, Gems was more than happy with her revised version of *Piaf*, and even more delighted with Paige. In correspondence, she clarifies her opinions:

Of course, Paige would reap the glory. It is perfectly understandable. She is a fabulous and talented lady - a star! We are good friends. She outshone my play but I didn't really mind, I just wish I could have looked as wonderful as she did on that stage. Admittedly, she is not an actress...but so what? Her voice was fantastic. No one else could have played her.<sup>34</sup>

### Structure

The play stays in the memory as a two act, one woman show<sup>†</sup>, yet in actuality the script creates a large cast of characters who continually move in and around the lonely star. London critics praised its form and structure while New Yorkers damned it on the same grounds. The script is deliberately episodic and calls for constant transformations of place, time and relationships, with Gems's composite characters pushing away from the realist pretence.

Ordered in a rough chronology, each scene reveals a historical context and adds a fragment to a picture of a whole life - the war, the Occupation and peace all impinge briefly on Piaf's sexual and professional odyssey. Despite the chronology, the whole is more a collage than a montage, with songs punctuating an already fragmented structure. With each new episode, Piaf's life becomes more complex - even more than *Queen Christina* - but it does not move towards recognition, reversal or resolution. With the exception of Toine, a woman friend from the same working class background as Piaf, the others, especially the men, make brief, sharp cuts in the fabric of Piaf's life, then vanish, leaving the tear and no material substance. Critics who disliked the play found

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<sup>†</sup> The 'two act, one woman show' structure is favoured by Gems for *Marlene* and *The Snow Palace*.



this parade of characters unsatisfying. Yet many of these dramaturgical choices are familiar in the context of feminist theatre and in that context can be seen as deliberate political decisions by Gems. There is an internal logic to using songs to bridge scenes: the songs Gems selects (taken from Piaf's repertoire) are typically established as part of her performances in various Parisian and international settings. Gems exercises discretion in her musical choices, however, to create a degree of emotional distance. Critics were disappointed by her decision to use only a few of Piaf's best known numbers among the nine performed in the play, as she deliberately rejected the most popular songs. Most significantly, she does not include 'La Vie en Rose,' the song generally considered Piaf's signature piece, and as Helene Keyssar has argued, Gems thus works against the sentiment associated with Piaf. Most audiences seeing *Piaf* are likely to have some familiarity with the singer and have emotional expectations; Gems circumvents them by withholding certain songs. Keyssar comments, "Too much nostalgia in the music, too much nostalgia in the audience."<sup>35</sup>

Gems pushes against the nostalgia in the Piaf legend in the interest of a kind of feminist estrangement: she challenges the reader/spectator to look beyond the familiar sensationalism of the celebrity story to evaluate the connection between gender, power and class in the creation of an image for public consumption.

### **Gems and the Biographical Piaf**

Gems's achievement in stripping the Piaf legend of its mystique is all the more notable because, in many ways, her treatment corresponds closely with the highly sentimental Bertaut biography, and the overlap between Piaf's life and her own made first hand impression possible where, of course, was not the case with Queen Christina

of Sweden. Two key factors point to Bertaut's influence on Gems: the character Toine, Piaf's steadfast friend in the play, is clearly based on Bertaut, and certain scenes mirror passages from Bertaut's book. For example, Toine joins Theo at Piaf's deathbed in the final scene of the play and the two women share a lifetime's worth of memories. This story is contradicted by Lange and Crosland who suggest Piaf and Bertaut were estranged throughout the final years of the singer's life. However the final scene is unique in incorporating both Bertaut's account and her mood. Gems's treatment of both the de Rovera dinner and the Lepleé affair exemplify her more typical relation to Bertaut: *Piaf* generally heightens the class consciousness Gems found in Bertaut's biography and reveals how it coincides with oppressive gender attitudes.

Gems provides a snap-shot allusion to Bertaut's de Rovera dinner story. In the play, Emil, a waiter at the Cluny Club (a parallel to 'Gerny's') mocks Piaf for drinking from the finger bowl, but Piaf responds with defiance, not a sense of humiliation:

PIAF All right, clever cock. Seen me drink - now you can watch me piss.

*Piaf*, I. 3. (16)

She does so, and "*marches off*" (I:3). This radically changes Bertaut's description of Piaf silently shamed when dining amongst the elite. There is something markedly pathetic here about Bertaut's Piaf, who emerges as the passive target of a nasty joke. Gems by contrast, makes her defiantly aware of the class attitudes which stigmatise her. The moment when she lifts her skirt and urinates on stage is at once an aggressive and liberating gesture to the audience; it breaks the convention that no stage character ever urinates - except minor 'oddities' like Samuel Beckett's Krapp - and reminds us that



Gems's Piaf is an intensely physical protagonist. She refuses to be patronised and categorised by her dining companions; her gesture attempts to reassert her authority - she wants to make her own rules.

Piaf's boldness resonates throughout the play. Gems translates Bertaut's sense of Piaf's eternal loyalty to her humble beginnings into an adamant social consciousness. In the second act, even while she herself has gained wealth and its privileges, Piaf chastises her agent Pierre for buying into the value system of the rich. She insists he would "fuck his own grandmother to get that fur-collared overcoat." (63) Gems's Piaf thus retains her working class roots and a love of shocking language throughout her life and the play, but this in itself is shown as a conscious struggle. To maintain this despite her stardom, her success and her female identity is difficult and disorientating - not only for us but for Piaf herself.†

Gems's treatment of the Lepleé crime represents another important departure, not only from Bertaut, but also Lange and Crosland. In Act One, Scene Four, Piaf mingles with three new acquaintances at the 'Cluny Club.' While she seems interested only in companionship and good times, they look to her for information about the whereabouts of Lepleé's safe (information she eventually provides). Where other sources indicate that Piaf's connection with Lepleé at the time of his death damaged her career, Gems portrays it as a professional advantage: it excites a scandal-mongering public interested less in art than the sordid details of celebrity life. In the play, a tabloid

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† One of the most disorientating features of Gems's Piaf is that she speaks in cockney slang rather than affecting an 'authentic' French accent. Perhaps this is another technique Gems employs as a way of challenging the pre-conceived assumptions of the audience, and thus she further deconstructs the mythical - safely distant - Piaf.

story alleging Piaf's involvement in a menage-a-trois with Lepleé leads to overnight bookings and enhanced visibility.

### Public/Private Dichotomy

As her allusion to the de Rovera dinner and her treatment of the Lepleé crime indicate, Gems orchestrates the public-private dichotomy in Piaf's life to explore how social systems reduce the individual to a commodity. Presenting the young Piaf as a working prostitute (the greatest liberty Gems takes with the story), Gems can posit a connection between the status of the celebrity and that of the prostitute. The juxtaposition of the play's first two scenes establish this connection.

The audience initially meets her as an established singer-drunk, unsteady and incapable of performing as she staggers on stage, drunk and swearing angrily.† She lashes out at the manager who tries to hurry her off stage:

PIAF (*struggling*) Get your fucking hands off me, I ain't done nothing yet.

*Piaf*, I.1. (11)

A nearly identical line begins the next scene and 'nothing' serves as the play's refrain. Set several years earlier, this scene finds Piaf on the streets - the spotlight (symbolising the celebrity) is replaced by the streetlamp (signifying the margins) - singing to pass the time between "tricks." She warns the approaching Lepleé to stay away. The difference between these late and early moments of Piaf's life is simply a change in surroundings and (ostensibly) a shift between products. The young Piaf sells sex; later she sells her art. But the play establishes how the one permeates the other. Whether a celebrity or a whore, Piaf surrenders herself to be enjoyed and discarded at the caprice of others.



Gems realised that everyone has their own Piaf (including the audience); she ‘shifts between products’ depending on public and private desire, but there is also a ‘real’ raw Piaf, completely separate from the legend, whom Gems is keen to portray as starkly as possible.

Early sequences establish Piaf and Toine as subject to the whims of pimps and willing clients. They both have to switch off their feelings in order to turn on the emotions of the public. As Scene Four opens, Piaf is “*getting it from a LEGIONNAIRE*” (16) Toine enters and Piaf persuades her to take her place, explaining, “I’m all pegged out.” (17) When Toine agrees and the Legionnaire readily transfers his body from the one to the other, Gems gives physical form to the idea that women are interchangeable commodities. Then the play progresses, agents and audiences assume the function the pimps and hustlers fulfilled early in Piaf’s life. Lepleé discovers and names her, turning her into ‘Piaf’ (though she would prefer a more glamorous stage name like Desireé) to promote what he sees as a commodity. She then meets Paul (Meurisse) who tries to further refine this image and develop a market for it. Given that both her voice and her sexuality are commodified, Piaf’s artistic and sexual identities become hopelessly entangled. Just as Piaf assumes she owes Lepleé sex in return for the opportunity to perform in his night-club (17), she believes her audience is entitled to an expression of her sexuality:

PIAF When I go on to do a song, it’s me that comes on. They get the lot.

JOSEPHINE Sure.

PIAF They see what they’re getting - everything I got.

JOSEPHINE Sure... but learn how to save it.

PIAF Nah.

JOSEPHINE Kid, you can’t have an orgasm every single time you walk on stage.

PIAF I can.

*Piaf*, II.1. (40)

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† As Piaf is introduced on stage, her entrance mirrors that of Gems’s Dietrich in *Marlene*. However, Dietrich walks on as an icon. Piaf’s first entrance is in direct opposition to the romantic myth.

Gems makes it clear that Piaf's fighting with her fists and with her mouth (her creative vulgarity) are essential to her way of taking on a brutal world so that she can make it happen out there and be the real thing - total. And precisely because Piaf feels compelled to offer "the lot" on stage, she feels fragmented off stage. She explains the fear she experiences after a successful performance:

PIAF You don't want it to end. Show over ... you're on your own again.

*Piaf*, I. 9 (36)

Piaf's fear of being on her own reflects a growing alienation from self, occurring as others try to construct her and she strives to match the image they desire. An exchange between Piaf and Paul expresses this dynamic most strongly. Paul enters, and without a word, "*takes her in his arms and they dance ... He bends her backwards, as in the movies and kisses her.*" (24) While Paul may belong in the fantasy, the inelegant Piaf does not. Rather than matching his polished grace, Piaf "*totters as he releases her abruptly, moves away, turns and throws the carnation from his buttonhole at her.*" But despite her admission that she feels "out of place," Piaf tries to conform to the image Paul desires for her: "*She ducks, then grins soppily and bends to pick it up.*" (24)

Paul strives to cleanse Piaf of what he sees as her unacceptable lower class ways. He even chastises her for fondling him in public, insisting, "You don't have to stay in the gutter just because you were born there." (25) Attitudes about social class and sexuality, explored more thoroughly in later passages, begin to congeal in this scene as Paul tries to mould Piaf as an erotic and artistic object. In the light of Rubin's remarks,



quoted earlier, Paul's behaviour can be said to reveal the two layers of commodification governing the life of the female celebrity.

These two layers of commodification are brought together most poignantly in the second act. In the sixth scene, recalling Piaf's actual therapy after an accident, a physiotherapist massages her face. By this point in the play, Piaf has become desperately addicted to morphine, increasingly abusive in her relationships, and outrageously dishevelled. Her secretary Madeline, no longer able to bear her behaviour, leaves. Piaf turns on the physiotherapist: "Go on ... piss off after her," (58) but he remains and she launches into a tirade about her situation:

PIAF They all want a slice, even the bloody managers. Will they take the rough with the smooth, will they hell! They want the bloody product, they want that all right, all wrapped up with a feather in its ass,<sup>†</sup> but songs - what do they know about songs!

*Piaf*, II.6. (58-59)

Rather than conforming to the glamorous show-girl image she evokes with the reference to a "product ... all wrapped up with a feather in its ass," Piaf defines herself in contrast to it. Acknowledgement of the widespread appeal of such an image works to connect the depersonalisation of women to that of the artist.

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<sup>†</sup> The "product... with the feather up its ass" is a passing reference, albeit crude, to the performer Josephine Baker who is actually cast in the play as Piaf's friend, fellow performer and admirer Josephine. Baker, born the illegitimate daughter of a slave in the cotton plantations of St. Louis, Missouri was, like Piaf, a female entertainer from humble origins attempting to break out from the margins of society. Known by such names as the 'Dark Star', 'Ebony Venus', 'Black Pearl', and 'Creole Goddess', her race always predominated her identity and she sought to exploit this in her act. She caused a sensation in 1930's America by her risqué performances wearing exotic costumes (feather dresses and banana skirts) which would expose her naked form. It is ironic that Gems should draw a parallel between Piaf and Baker in her play, as they both shared the same beau in real life - Jacques Pills. In the early 1930's, Pills jilted Baker for Piaf. According to Lynn Haney, Baker was deeply hurt by this - it was alien for her to be the deserted woman. Yet, Piaf and Pills lived unhappily. Haney states that "Piaf's capacity for pulling men into her maelstrom and then weakening them by the sheer force of her emotional needs was at least the equal of Josephine's." See Lynn Haney, *Naked at the Feast: A Biography of Josephine Baker* (London: Robson Books, 1981), p. 193.



The parallel between artists and women becomes increasingly vivid as Piaf continues:

PIAF: Nah, pretty soon they're not going to want my stuff. My sort's dying out. Going extinct. What they want now is discs. Canned. In the can - well, real thing, dodgy, innit? I mean you can count discs ... stack 'em ... put 'em in containers. They don't bloody answer back! (*Again it seems as if she will settle, but no.*) Love. I'll tell you about fucking love. (*To the audience*) Friend of mine ... tart ... dropping a kid. We get an old nurse to her in the end ... dear little baby boy. And the old girl's washing her down with Dettol after. "Hullo ... where is it?" "Where's what?" says me friend. "You know, your bits and pieces," says the old biddy "... your Thingme!" "Oh ... that ..." says me friend. "Chewed off long ago."

*Piaf, II. 6 (59)*

Gems reflects on the depersonalisation of the musician before moving toward the disturbing imagery of mutilated female genitalia - of the birthing woman's clitoris "chewed off." The source of female sexual pleasure here becomes consumed in the same trend, reducing the pleasure afforded by the voice in song to something bought, accumulated and objectified.

### Value and Class

Gems reveals the hierarchical structure which governs the marketplace of women and music - complicated gradations of value and stipulations about usage. Piaf's roots in poverty govern her sexuality, first by making prostitution the most viable alternative to starvation, later by defining her in constant contrast to the refined image of the upper class 'lady'. Her experiences as a singer follow a complimentary course. Early in the play, Piaf feels grateful simply to have a voice which can be heard over the traffic (12) And after she first sings at the 'Cluny Club,' Emil comments that "at least you can hear



her over the cutlery.” (16) As she moves from the street to the most prestigious concert halls of France and the United States, the value placed on this same voice rises; as with female sexuality, questions of class and finance determine the response to ‘the product.’ Her movement from the margins to the limelight is also portrayed in her costume. Gems uses Piaf’s attire as a signifier of class, status, and shifting to public approval. While singing on the streets she is dressed in cheap, ill-fitting tatty clothes, but after gaining public applause in packed concert halls her improved status is reflected in her *haute couture* suits, evening dresses, gloves and hats. The only way she can acquire class is through buying its trappings, which are again controlled by her audiences and management. As she muses on her future purchases to Toine, her tasteless ostentation debunks her newly acquired bourgeois status:

TOINE You’re in the papers, Ede! You’re famous!

PIAF Yeah? Right. In that case ... I’m gonna get myself one of those little black skirts with the diamond panel down the front... Five inch courts ... crocodile. We’ll have to entertain, you know ... soda syphon ...

TOINE Ice bucket ...

PIAF Toilet roll ...Proper furniture! Fridge... telephone ...Bar stools... with squashy seats...

TOINE Made out of elephants’ testicles...

PIAF ... Oh well, if it’s the fashion!

*Piaf*, I . 5 . (23)

By contrasting the attitudes which surround lower and upper class women, Gems exposes how sexuality feeds into the mechanics of social organisation. In one monologue, Piaf responds to Jacko’s insistence that she “will never be a lady.” (64) Her remarks express key attitudes to social hierarchy and sexuality:



PIAF Too right. I've seen them, the ladies. Get the hots for a feller, they take it out on a day's shopping! Can't risk a bit of the other, might give the old man an excuse, wreck their investments - put themselves to better use, there might not be so many wars, not that they'd be any fucking good at it. They think they can take it with 'em, like the man who goes to see his mate and a woman comes to the door and says, "you can't seem him, he's dead." Dead? He can't be, he's got my big chisel!"† *Piaf*, II.7. (64)

The opening of the monologue reveals Piaf's sense of her own sexuality in opposition to the materialistic 'ladies'. Sexually active throughout the play, she sets herself apart from the upper class women who repress their sexuality. Mirroring the monologue about the growing popularity of records, references to the world of material exchange mingle with discussions of sexuality to establish a connection between the two.

Gems invents a relationship between Piaf and a Duke Gérard to make the class dynamic of the sexual marketplace most explicit. Gems never brings the Duke on stage, but establishes his presence in an exchange between Piaf and Josephine. Their dialogue clarifies the precise nature of the Piaf-Gérard relationship:

JOSEPHINE Listen, Gérard's a great guy.

PIAF Ever been to his place in the country - you've seen it ... all the ... books ... furniture ... paintings...

JOSEPHINE Fantastic.

PIAF (*small pause*) Most mornings ... when we're down there ... get up about two ... he has some champagne and a shower ... shaves himself. Then he comes down to the big drawing room, the one with the blue Aubusson ... rings the bell - and I come in dressed as the housemaid with me tits hanging out.

JOSEPHINE Sounds like fun.

PIAF I give him his coffee. Then he craps on the carpet.

JOSEPHINE You're kidding!

PIAF No I'm not ... big deal it's not on my face. Some poor sod of a gardener comes in to clean up after him, get the stains out ... he spends the rest of the afternoon on his knees, praying. The maids Hoover round him.

JOSEPHINE Is he nuts?

PIAF You wouldn't think so, watch him playing the market. No, I've never been taken with the so-called aristocracy - not since an old mate of mine come up before a bloke she'd been with the night before and he gave her thirty days. *Piaf*, I. 8. (33)

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† Through the phallic imagery of the chisel, male sexuality is likened to a tool used to carve out shape. As the artist defines sculpture, male sexuality defines women. While the chisel metaphor offers an understanding of sexuality as somewhat detached from the person, it works without objectifying male sexuality. The tool here becomes more than an object; it is an extension of self, a vehicle for expression, an assurance of the ability to make an impression and wield power - to be an agent. (While Piaf mocks such a value system, the man in her anecdote seems convinced that it should insure him nothing short of immortality.)



The Duke, despite his peculiar sexual appetites, remains a gentleman. Piaf, however, must don the costume of a servant - a disguise Gérard probably finds all the more provocative because of her true class origins - to make this scenario effective for him. Like the judge sentencing Piaf's friend, Gérard sustains the double standards embedded in the intersection of class and sexuality.

But Piaf's insights into oppression do not allow her to transcend the forces which have commodified her. Like Queen Christina, Piaf becomes complicit in the oppressive relationships. Conditioned by a life of prostitution, she sees her first real earnings as a performer as a means to have the man she wants. She tells Toine:

PIAF There's a little guy down at the garage. I could get him a lovely blue suit, camel coat, cuff-links, silk shirts - you could find a coupla girls so's he can make a living, feeling independent...  
*Piaf, I.5. (24)*

By having Toine line this "little guy" up with a "coupla girls" Piaf ensures that the cycle of sexual ownership will renew itself.

Later in life, the successful Piaf amuses herself with a series of affairs with younger men. As with Queen Christina, sexuality and power become inextricably bound for her. In one scene Piaf chastises Lucien, a character loosely based on Jean-Claude Jaubert, for calling her by her name.

LUCIEN (*totally confused*) What do you want me to call you?

PIAF It's Madame to you, and don't you forget it.

LUCIEN Even when we're fucking?

PIAF Especially when we're fucking.

*Piaf, II.3. (44)*

A few moments later, Piaf talks with Madeline and explains that Lucien will “do until I trade him up.” (44) The telescoping of scenes with Piaf and a series of young lovers - ever younger as the play progresses - does not serve to accentuate the grotesque aspect of Piaf trying to hang onto her youth, but rather the lonely Piaf, who never found the perfect love of which she felt deprived. What also emerges in these crucial scenes - which conflate her two marriages - is **her** attempt to treat men as commodities, her merciless training of them so that they could become her singing partners, her rather pathetic turning of the tables so that they become the whores whom she possesses and rules. There is no glorification here nor glamour in her tyrannical ploys for dominance; if anything they merely work against her. Ultimately, she cannot beat the gender/commodification system by assuming the male role. Moments later, after acting despicably, she pathetically confesses her loneliness, injects herself with morphine and vows to give her audiences more of the “real thing.” (45)

Gems uses Piaf’s car accidents as metaphorical support for a thesis that neither party can enjoy true freedom in relationships built on domination and submission. In hospital, recovering from the first accident, Piaf receives a visit from her husband Jean, who was driving the car. Gems takes a key liberty here. We learn that Jean has left his career in hotel management to be supported by Piaf, but the only husband Piaf had during this period of her life was Jacques Pills, an established performer, **not** dependent on his wife for financial support. Gems combines Jacques and the younger men Piaf supported to emphasise the destructive mutual interdependence in her subject’s relationships. Piaf suspects that Jean meant to kill her and thereby gain access to her estate; Jean insists that Piaf told him to “step on it.” (49) Driving assumes a metaphorical function. Piaf asserts her power by steering the direction of young men; in



turn, she is driven by her need to control. In a vicious circle, she equips young men with fast cars and becomes addicted to the speed. Pierre makes a telling remark when he says that Piaf “tends to be driven by young men.” (56)

Piaf would like to believe that she can become a barterer in the world of sexual and artistic commodification. But she remains, despite her money, outside the monied class. And in spite of the unique circumstances which grant her the financial independence and influence generally reserved for the men of her time, Piaf remains a woman, rendered vulnerable by the forces of a patriarchal society. These conditions combine to keep Piaf a perpetual outsider. Piaf’s success as a singer, like Queen Christina’s royalty, allows her inside; her sex and her class origins keep her outside.

But if Gems locates both Piaf and Christina in a metaphorical ‘impasse’ of gender roles, she is decidedly less pessimistic in *Piaf*. Christina gains awareness in the end (and even a kind of existential purity), but never has the opportunity to realise freedom from social constraints on anything but an intellectual level. For Piaf, however, some of the relationships on the road provide pockets of relief: through her relationships with Toine, Theo and Marcel, Gems offers a glimpse at the potential for human intimacy.

### **Female Bonding and Re-addressing the Prescriptive Relationship**

In *Writing a Woman’s Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun offers important observations about traditional representations of relationships, and the prescriptions about gender and agency which attend them. Heilbrun notes the paucity of friendships in most representations of women’s lives. When friendship between women is represented, it

takes a very specific form: confined to what she sees as “societies of consolation,” such friendships seem a clear variation on glorified female suffering and passivity:

Women nourished men as they went forth to a world of activity, and consoled one another as they waited passively and with fear, for what life must force them to endure.<sup>36</sup>

Heilbrun clarifies the link between relationships, gender and agency: in traditional scripts, women might only mingle in a shared passivity and, she argues, where “women have, rarely, gone forth to battle, it has been at the side of men.” (100)

In *Piaf*, Gems offers alternatives to traditional patterns of passivity and agency in gender relationships. Toine and Piaf realise the kind of friendship Heilbrun believes has been traditionally reserved for men; that is: “an enabling bond that not only supported risks and danger but comprehended the details of public life and the complexities of the pain found there.” (100) Piaf’s most satisfactory relationships with men also violate stereotypical imagery. When Theo becomes Piaf’s husband, he assumes the nurturing role, typically a wife’s lot. Equally Marcel ‘The Champ’ Cerdan and Piaf, as fellow celebrities, enjoy a relationship which bears a striking similarity to Heilbrun’s description of the female “societies of consolation.” While men come and go in Piaf’s life, Marcel becomes important in the play, partly as her double, for both characters know themselves as used commodities and see themselves as ageing and always on the line.

In a strategy recalling her representation of the (more fraught and unequal) Ebba-Christina relationship in *Queen Christina*, Gems attaches a stability to female friendship absent from most of Piaf’s relationships with men. When Piaf’s lovers prove



disappointments, Toine is often there to pick up the pieces. Gems privileges a belief in the triumph of a female friendship over fleeting heterosexual intimacy through her use of the composite male characters who appear but briefly and remain somewhat nondescript. Toine alone remains a support in both youth and advanced age. Gems offers an important variation on the perception of female friendships. Piaf's relationships with Toine, Josephine and others address Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of desire as outlined in *Between Men*.<sup>37</sup> But where Sedgwick perceived the love triangle between two males and one female as the most telling of male homosocial desires, Gems puts forward the idea that Piaf's heterosexual relationships with numerous males are dependent on her homosocial relationships with her female friends, and vice versa. Piaf's female sphere of intimacy, estranged from the male public sphere, is essential for maintaining her heterosexual relationships (however dysfunctional) as well as gaining a sense of self.

For example, her relationship with her assistant Madeleine in Act Two Scene Three reveals Piaf's homosocial and heterosexual needs as intrinsic to her well-being:

PIAF Madeleine? ... Rub the back of me neck for me.

(MADELINE *returns and massages* PIAF's shoulders)

MADELEINE Try to relax.

PIAF [after a pause] I still miss him, you know... I still miss him ... Marcel!

MADELEINE I know, Piaf ... I know.

PIAF Not that we'd have made it. He'd never have left his wife. He was lovely. Hate being on me own, without a feller. What do you do?

MADELEINE... Come and lie down...Let me tuck you in.

PIAF Sure...Madeleine?

MADELEINE What's the matter?

PIAF I'm lonely!

*Piaf*, II . 3 . (45)

Here Gems is also incorporating Elizabeth Abel's<sup>38</sup> theory of female friendships. Abel asserts that as a consequence of women's flexible ego boundaries, female friends define each other and themselves:

Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to another who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self.

(16)

This is made quite apparent when Toine and Madeleine engage in a frosty exchange upon meeting for the first time.

TOINE ...Who are you, then?

MADELEINE I'm Madame's secretary.

TOINE Christ. Not the hostess?

MADELEINE ...You and ... ah... Madame are old friends, I believe?

TOINE Yeah. We was on the road together. I'm a ... performer... Well, I'm retired now...So you wouldn't have heard of me...So, you're the secretary?

MADELEINE Ah, yes... I look after Madame's affairs.

TOINE Christ... Hmm. Get on with her alright, do you?

MADELEINE (fatal slight pause) Oh yes.

TOINE Humph.

*Piaf*, II . 3 . (46)

Here, as in Queen Christina's painful friendship with Ebba, Gems turns the women's flexible ego boundaries into something positively fragile, in the light of Sedgwick's theory of the 'erotic triangle', which in the case of this play has Piaf at the apex.

The final deathbed interaction between Toine and Piaf offers an important variation on familiar sex-role scripting. As the women reminisce about a lifetime's-worth of adventures, Theo the hairdresser listens supportively and without judgement: this scene concludes the play with a resounding optimism, derived both from the affirmation of female friendship and through the subversion of stock male and female roles. It is for this reason that *Piaf* can end emotively with a curtain-call performance of one of the singer's best-known and most affecting songs, 'Non, je ne regrette rien': the strengths of Piaf's battered micro-society of male and female relationships have been demonstrated and we,



the audience, have finally earned the right - through knowledge of the life behind the legend - to respond directly to Piaf the performer and star.

While Piaf's relationships with Theo and Toine offset the play's more typical images of people preying upon one another for personal gain, her relationship with the boxer Marcel crystallises the play's ideas about the interplay between human relationships and commodification. The touching last scene of Act One depicts Piaf and Marcel in a "*friendly, post-coital mood.*"<sup>39</sup> They compare their battlewounds. He has had all of his teeth removed, she contemplates having surgery to lift her bust. Both know their professions demand a kind of mutilation but share a temporary semblance of wholeness through their intimacy.

PIAF ...I think I will have these lifted... all the stars are doing it.

MARCEL What do you want to get cut for, why take the risk?

PIAF You do.

MARCEL That's different. Mind you... they think you don't give a bugger...I had a guvnor once...

greedy bugger... said he'd fix up this bout for me ...'his face is going to be plum jam, you know'

- 'Oh, we don't care what we look like,' he says, 'just so long as the money's right.' 'We.'

PIAF Christ.

MARCEL He was right about the money.

*Piaf*, I . 9. (35)

With Marcel, Gems rethinks the traditional "society of consolation"<sup>40</sup> by placing a man alongside a woman. The fighter and the singer both assume attentive 'wifely' roles, consoling one another as they wait for the public - whom they both serve - to do with them what they will. Marcel and Piaf experience the kind of shared passivity which has traditionally been ascribed to female friendship:

MARCEL I'm just a guy with a fist, Edith.

PIAF No, you're not. You're the best...

MARCEL: I'd marry you if I could, Edie.

PIAF You're the faithful sort, love.

*Piaf*, I . 9. (34-5)

The common ground Piaf shares with Marcel, despite their sexual difference, highlights the social processes through which identities are moulded and explicitly challenges the belief that women are innately drawn to suffering. Like the wives Heilbrunn discusses, Marcel and Piaf's sufferance is socially conferred. They share complimentary positions in the relations governing their livelihoods, just as many women have shared complimentary positions in the relations which determine their experiences. Marcel and Piaf become items of exchange between agents and audiences in a dynamic that parallels the exchange of women between families. The scene between them - memorable because of its warmth and its very brevity - consolidates the interplay between social dictates about relationships and the inevitability of commodification.

### Conclusion

As a fighter and as a singer Gems's Piaf resists those who would make her become a lady, or a controllable commodity, something, some thing. One can hear the Beckettian strains again in the final play of the drama's refrain: "I ain't done nothing yet."<sup>41</sup> Reminiscing about her past in the next scene, Piaf tells Toine that she "never could hang on to nothing." (70) 'Nothing' is palpable here, as it is in *Waiting for Godot*<sup>A2</sup> where there is "nothing to be done" (I.) and "nothing happens." (II.) Yet, in another sense, Piaf has done everything in this play; she has laughed, love, lost and sung. After dying, Piaf takes her curtain call, singing one of her major theme songs, 'Non, je ne regrette rien.'<sup>43</sup> - ('No, I regret nothing') - which gives to 'Nothing' its final meaning. Namely, I accept who I am, I am somebody, and I have done everything, yet "I ain't done nothing yet": all these double negatives which form the play's refrain, join with



Piaf's song so that artist and art merge in this final affirmation of Piaf as no **thing**, but rather as an anti-heroine triumphant in her pain and suffering.

By illustrating its protagonist as both victim and perpetrator of the processes leading to the prostitution of self and other, *Piaf* suggests their insidiousness. The simultaneity of victimisation and agency in the protagonist's experience represents one final important way in which *Piaf* resembles *Queen Christina*. Discussion of both plays reveals how Piaf and Christina initially respond to their acquisition of influence and power by emulating existing models. Gems links these models to men: not on the basis of any intrinsic differences between the sexes, but because men occupy the dominant spheres of influence and power.

Christina eventually renounces these models and their inherent devaluation of the traditionally female realms. In *Piaf*, Gems refrains from making such a bold ideological declaration but looks again to history to locate patterns of oppression and to suggest how they might be overcome. Both *Queen Christina* and *Piaf* challenge the spectator to recognise the structures which have bred divisiveness between the sexes. With *Camille*, Gems re-asserted this challenge. In this play Marguerite and Armand find a freedom more enduring than that represented between any of Gems's male and female characters discussed so far in this study. As my next chapter relates, however, even the freedom that Marguerite and Armand find eventually gives way to mechanics of social control.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Endnotes

*Piaf* was first published in 1979 (London: Amber Lane Press). The edition of Gems's *Piaf* referred to in this chapter (unless stated otherwise) is published in:

Pam Gems, *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille & Loving Women* (London: Penguin, 1985; repr. 1988).

Hereafter, this edition will be referred to as '*Piaf*'

1. See Katherine H. Burkman, 'The Plays of Pam Gems: Personal/Political/Personal', in *British and Irish Drama Since 1960*, ed. by James Acheson (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 190-201, (p. 192).
2. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), p. 176.
3. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 3.
4. Gloria Steinem and George Barris, *Marilyn* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), p. 32.
5. Simone Bertaut, *Piaf*, trans. by Ghislaine Boulanger (London: W.H. Allen, 1971). Hereafter, this biography will be referred to as 'Bertaut'.
6. Monique Lange, *Piaf*, trans. by Richard S. Woodward (New York: Seaver Books, 1977). Hereafter, this biography will be referred to as 'Lange'.
7. Margaret Crosland, *Piaf* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Press, 1987). Hereafter, this biography will be referred to as 'Crosland'.
8. Katherine H. Burkman, 'Gems on Piaf' (unpublished paper, 1990).
9. Quoted in Bertaut, p. 125.
10. Quoted in Crosland, p. 14.
11. Quoted in Bertaut, p. 16.
12. Quoted in Lange, p. 14.
13. Quoted in Crosland, p. 14.
14. This is an interesting discovery by Crosland (p.14), who seeks to unearth the true Piaf behind the myth of her birth.
15. The emotive passage is described in full in Bertaut, p. 23.



16. Quoted in Lange, p. 17.
17. Quoted in Crosland, p. 220.
18. Quoted in Crosland, p. 23. *Le Maison Tellier* tells the story of a group of prostitutes who close their brothel for the religious ceremony of First Communion. Maupassant's tale is described as containing "wildish, flyaway, fantastic, non-respectable humour," (Francis Steegmuller, *Maupassant* [London: Collins, 1950], p.145) and in this respect it can be compared with Piaf's extraordinary tale of her regaining sight.
19. Quoted fully in Lange, p.31.
20. This incident is recalled in both Lange, p. 75 and Crosland, p. 65.
21. Taken from Edith Piaf, *Au Bal de la Chance*, int. by Jean Cocteau, trans. by P. Trewartha and A. Masoin de Virton (Paris: [n. pub.], 1958), p. 4-6.
22. Quoted in Bertaut, p.155.
23. Quoted in Bertaut, p. 24.
24. Quoted in Lange, p. 227.
25. Quoted in Crosland, p. 14.
26. Robert Cushman quoted in *RSC 1978*, ed. by Simon Trussler (London: T.Q. Publications and RSC, 1979), p. 41.
27. Michael Coveney quoted in *RSC 1978*, p. 41.
28. Irving Wardle quoted in *RSC 1978*, p. 41.
29. Michael Billington quoted in *RSC 1978*, p. 41.
30. Wardle quoted in *RSC 1978*, p. 41.
31. Coveney quoted in *RSC 1978*, p. 41.
32. Louise Doughty, 'Piaf: Review', *Mail on Sunday*, 19 December 1993, p. 38.
33. Paige in interview with Seckerson, 'Going By The Book', p. 27.
34. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 4 February 2000.
35. Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 131.

36. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1988), p. 100. Hereafter this text will be referred to as 'Heilbrun'.
37. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 21-28.
38. Elizabeth Abel, '(E) Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women', *Signs*, 6 (1981), 16-35.
39. *Piaf*, (I.9.), p. 34.
40. Heilbrun, p. 100.
41. *Piaf*, (II.9.), p. 65.
42. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), pp. 11, 43.  
It is worth noting that Piaf's Paris is also Beckett's. Gems's whole play is in a sense a total denial of the essentialist despair and denial of action at the heart of post-war Existentialism and of so much (male) post-war drama.
43. *Piaf*, (II.10.), p. 72.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

**PAM GEMS**

*CAMILLE*

**REVISIONING MYTHS OF 'CAMILLE' AND THE 'PENITENT WHORE'**

## Introduction

‘The Lady of the Camellias’ (Marguerite Gautier), like Piaf and Christina, provides Gems with an image to reform, a set of values to be dismantled, a tale distinctly in need of a feminist revisioning. While the realities of Piaf and Christina’s lives become entangled in various assumptions about gender, the life of Alphonsine Du Plessis on which Marguerite is based has become completely metamorphosed. The Marguerite whom Gems inherits is scarcely connected to the biographical foundations, before entering the realm of myth. Gems’s play recasts the relationship between this myth and its source. In a pattern contrasting with that emerging in her work on Piaf and Christina, Gems collapses metaphor.

As we shall see, as the ‘Camille’ story moved through its various versions in nineteenth century France and Italy, details diminished. In their place, idealised rhetoric and euphemism worked to romanticise the gap between the sexes, to offer a maxim about male and female relations. In ‘Myth Today’<sup>1</sup>, Roland Barthes considers the primacy of meaning over substance as central to the definition of myth. He describes myth as “a system of communication ... a message.”(109). Explaining this further, he asserts that:

all the materials of myth [whether pictorial or written] presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.  
(110)



Gems's *Camille* undermines the presuppositions at the foundation of the myth of the 'penitent whore' to expose the harsher realities cloaked in truisms about sex and morality.

The two previous chapters used ideas from Gayle Rubin's essay as points of departure for investigating various representations of Christina and Piaf's lives. If *Queen Christina* explores rigorous gender norms operating in history (and by implication in the 1970's) and commodification is the central theme of *Piaf*, both concerns come together in exploring the many faces of Camille.

Gender norms and the commodification of women are premised upon a general commitment to emphasising the difference between male and female. Such a commitment, prevails in the interest of social organisation despite the fact that: "From the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else... for instance, mountains, kangaroos, or coconut palms."<sup>2</sup>

With *Camille*, Gems confronts not biographical tradition but imagery romanticising sexual difference and ultimately linking it to a transcendental moral order. While the preceding discussions of Piaf and Queen Christina consider differing attitudes which biographers have projected on to these figures, exploring the 'Camille' tradition requires an understanding of how attitudes can congeal into a narrow statement about gender and power. The following pages will consider how the components of the 'Camille' narrative came together in the 1840's and 1850's to offer a clear social corrective in the guise of

universal truth. Following this we shall focus on Gems's play as a revisionary theatre text.

### **The Myth of the 'Penitent Whore'**

'The Lady of the Camellias', 'Camille', 'Marguerite Gautier', 'La Traviata' ... the woman at the centre of the myth is known by many names, but she can also be seen as an urban bourgeois manifestation of an older stereotype, the 'penitent whore'. To quote Lesley Ferris, three elements are required to construct this myth:

The first is that the woman is both beautiful and that her transgressions are entirely sexual - she sells her body to men. Secondly, once she repents and asks for forgiveness, she willingly accepts, indeed embraces physical suffering and deprivation. ...The third recurrent narrative feature requires that the woman must die, and that her death be viewed as a release from physical torment and pain, a mortal resolution to a life of decadence and decay.<sup>3</sup>

This outline corresponds precisely to the 'Camille' story. Marguerite falls in love with Armand Duval, abandons her life as a Parisian courtesan and finds the only true happiness she has ever known, complete with the return of her health after suffering a fierce bout of tuberculosis. This happiness, however, threatens the social status of Armand's family, most specifically his sister's engagement. At the urging of Armand's father, Marguerite proves her penitence by making the ultimate sacrifice; she leaves Armand and returns to prostitution, where she suffers a relapse and dies.



Marguerite as 'penitent whore' captures one of the myth's most enduring and meaningful aspects: the concurrence of opposing forces, i.e. the renegade status of the whore and the virtue in penitence associated with old ideals of female perfection. Marguerite is both a sacrificial figure and a consoling one: the fact that she begins in the renegade position but proceeds to reveal herself as a more socially acceptable character equates maturation with movement, from outside to inside the confines of social respectability. By placing penitence as the most powerful end position, the myth suggests that social conformity is a condition aspired to by even the whore, supposedly the most deviant of female individuals.

A mass of ideas are generated from the myth and image of the 'penitent whore' in relation to 'Camille'. The myth often involves the descent from wealth to nothingness - accordingly Marguerite Gautier is a very beautiful courtesan who enjoys a lavish and sumptuous life. In George Cukor's film of *Camille* (1933), Marguerite, played by Greta Garbo, entertains and is entertained with style and frequency, clad in glamorous attire and expensive jewellery. She revels in public display. She attends the theatre regularly, but only in her private box. She rides through the centre of Paris in fine carriages and has several wealthy suitors to whom she needs never surrender emotionally. Yet, and equally accordant to the myth, she willingly exchanges these luxuries for simpler pleasures: a humble cottage in the country and monogamous love. The contrast between the world she first occupies and the one to which she eventually retreats embodies much of the myth's sentimental (and reassuring) appeal. Beneath Marguerite's hardened and sexually sophisticated exterior lurks a softer, domesticated female, both roles when combined forming a patriarchal ideal. She finds her true nature in nature, outside the constructed urban world which is properly controlled by men. Her discovery upholds the separate

spheres of men and women, and hence provides another explanation of the myth's popularity.

Marguerite's transformation from 'whore' to 'penitent whore', her life in the country and her love for Armand all appear as positive character adjustments, but she is not allowed to retire comfortably into this new-found happiness. The dominant myth that precedes her deems it necessary that she return to her old vocation, part with love and die young. The myth of the penitent whore, ultimately, cannot allow the fallen woman to obtain the ideals upheld by correct society - she can do no more than merely seek to aspire to them. As a means to emphasise her ultimate incompatibility with the world of social respectability, the myth provides a contrast for Marguerite in the character of Armand's sister. This virtuous woman, the beloved daughter of the patriarch Duval, stands in counterpoint to the wayward outcast. Marguerite defers to this opposition when she agrees to forsake her own happiness because it threatens the other woman's hopes for a happy future. This deference seals Marguerite's submission to normative society.

The basic 'Camille' narrative moves through a sequence of images and situations to celebrate the traditional virtues of womanhood - the triumph of simple wholesomeness, of the conquering suitor, and finally of the all-powerful father-figure. Having sketched out this essential design we must now consider how it evolved from its source through tellings and retellings. The source of the 'Camille' myth is Marie Du Plessis.



## (Alphonsine) Marie Du Plessis

She was the most absolute incarnation of Woman who has ever existed. (Liszt)<sup>4</sup>

She is, first of all, the best dressed woman in Paris; second, she neither flaunts nor hides her vices; thirdly, she is not always talking or hinting about money; in short, she is a wonderful courtesan. (Dr. Véron)<sup>5</sup>

Marie Duplessis, a Parisian courtesan and Dumas fils's one-time lover, inspired the first telling of the 'Camille' story, which became the novel *La Dame aux Camélias*,<sup>6</sup> and eventually his play entitled *Camille*.<sup>7</sup>

Du Plessis was born Alphonsine Plessis in 1824, also the year of Dumas's birth. She lived in what F. A. Taylor describes as "humble conditions in the small village of Nonant."<sup>8</sup> She lost her mother, Marie, at a very young age and her father Marin, according to Taylor, was a "drunkard and a brute" (9) who allegedly prostituted her before she reached puberty. Seeking her fortune in Paris, Alphonsine changed her name to Marie and became a high class prostitute of the demi-monde, entertaining a succession of famous lovers. Barbara Bray has described the early years in Paris as a time of refinement for Du Plessis, who traded her country demeanour for "neat clothes and city ways."<sup>9</sup> Both Taylor and Bray discuss Du Plessis's classical beauty and her status as one of the most sought-after women in Paris. Descriptions of her frequently read like a 'blazon' of the classic French beauty, equally akin to the beauty required in the figure of the 'penitent whore'. According to her passport,<sup>†</sup> she was five feet six with auburn hair, brown eyes, aquiline nose, round chin and an oval face. However, Dumas, in the 1867 preface to his play *Camille*, proved less prosaic and transformed the appearance of his

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<sup>†</sup> Information taken from Taylor, p. 23.

preface to his play *Camille*, proved less prosaic and transformed the appearance of his one-time mistress into something far more exotic. Marguerite, his fictional Marie is thus described as:

...tall, very slim, with black hair and a pink and white face. Her head was small and she had long, lustrous, Japanese eyes, very quick and alert, lips as red as cherries and the most beautiful teeth in the world.<sup>10</sup>

In the simple act of description, Dumas begins the process of transmuting biographical fact into a supposedly universal image of the feminine.

Historians have noted Du Plessis's mental acuity, her library of classical literature, music lessons and interest in the theatre.† She caught the attention of men from many walks of life, but it is said that young nobles were Du Plessis's most reliable "friends." (9) She bore one nobleman's child in 1841 and secretly wed another in 1846.

Dumas and Du Plessis met in 1844 and carried on a brief affair. Dumas had just finished school. His parents were never married, and at this time he left his mother's home to live with his father. Alexandre Dumas (pere) (quite unlike his counterpart in the narratives) was a writer of little means, moving among the "Bohemian theatre world."<sup>11</sup> The son followed in his father's footsteps, embracing what he later described as "the paganism of modern life."<sup>12</sup> This life brought him into contact with Du Plessis, who, Bray writes, expected Dumas to at least keep her in "trifles," (6) an assumption that created real difficulty for him. The couple were lovers only for eleven months and during all that time she never ceased in her vocation as a courtesan, though evidently Dumas

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† In this respect, Du Plessis's interests are very similar to those of Queen Christina of Sweden.



was certain that she would have “forsaken all others for him had he only asked.” (10) Whether or not this was the case, the two parted company sometime in 1845 when Dumas broke off the relationship with a short and civil note to which she never replied.

By 1846, Du Plessis was on her death bed. Dumas wrote her a cursory letter expressing “friendly concern, nothing more.”<sup>13</sup> Du Plessis died on 3 February, 1847. Dumas attended an auction of her belongings a few days later, which inspired him to write a short poem.<sup>14</sup> In June that year, in need of funds, he spent three weeks writing a novel inspired by his affair, *La Dame aux Camélias*.

### *La Dame aux Camélias: The Dumas Novel (1848)*

But when God allows a courtesan to fall in love, her love, which at first looks like a pardon for her sins, proves almost invariably to be a punishment on her. There is no absolution without penance.<sup>15</sup>

Dumas wrote the novel *La Dame aux Camélias*, one year after Duplessis’s death as a means of channelling his intense grief. The result is a narrative which works both to sustain and temper its autobiographical foundations. He retains reference to events, people and places which surrounded his relationship with Du Plessis, but, interestingly enough, he also employs several devices which distance himself from the text. Names are changed; Alexandre Dumas becomes Armand Duval, Marie becomes Marguerite, and the central narrative is filtered through an anonymous narrator. As the novel opens, the narrator stresses the novel’s conceit in orchestrating first hand experience and objective distance:

I believe a writer cannot create characters until he has made a long study of mankind, just as one cannot speak a language without learning it thoroughly. So, as I am not yet old enough to invent, I shall merely relate, trusting the reader to credit the truth of a story in which all the characters, except the heroine, are still alive. (15)

Dumas discloses little about his narrator. This narrator becomes involved with the story when he finds a book bearing Armand Duval's inscription during the auction of the late Marguerite's belongings. The inscription sparks his curiosity and he looks for its author. He finds the sick and broken-hearted Armand, befriends him, listens to his sad tale and helps him back to health. Dumas imbues his narrator with a benevolent and objective wisdom, bolstering the credibility of his commentary. Dumas's motives for such distancing techniques seem to spring from an element of shameful self-knowledge and from a sense of ambiguity - society forces him to condemn her past, yet the contemporary audience will enjoy the romantic luxury of pitying the fate of the 'penitent whore' to reinforce its own belief system.

The pages before Armand's entrance introduce some key concepts of the novel and of the ensuing 'Camille' mythology. For example, early on, the narrator (or is it Dumas?) admits to regretting Marguerite's death "as one regrets the destruction of a work of art." (9) He introduces an important parallel here, likening Marguerite to an artefact constructed and possessed by men - the very parallel which much later gave Gems the motivation to write her response in *Camille* and thus add to the reconstitution of the 'Camille' myth. Dumas's narrator returns to this key concept a few pages later at the auction after Marguerite's death, when he discovers a copy of *Manon Lescaut*, by Abbé Prévost. Metatextually, this book, with another 'penitent whore' for its heroine, prompts the narrator to ruminate on such women in literature and life:



Thinkers and poets throughout the ages have offered the courtesan the oblation of their mercy and, on occasion, some great man has brought them back to the fold through the gift of his love and even his name. (16)

The narrator makes an abrupt movement from consideration of the courtesan as a romantic literary figure to a reference to prostitutes in reality, and by collapsing the distance between literary representation and life, he achieves two things. He reinforces the notion of a close relationship between representation (including both Dumas's novel and Prévost's) and reality. He also offers a perception of both female characters and actual women as constructs: in literature, as in life, men's efforts to construct ensure their positions as subjects, while women remain objects, others. However, there is a problem which lies in how far one can interpret Dumas's perspective of Marguerite as 'penitent whore', given that he has employed such distancing techniques within his narrative - who is really speaking to the reader, society, Dumas himself, or the omniscient narrator? To add a further literary twist, it has to be remembered that when the 'Camille' narrative is played out in the theatre, another doubling resonates between reality and representation: the actress playing the role of Marguerite - whether Eleanor Duse, Edwige Feuillère, Sarah Bernhardt, or even Frances Barber,<sup>†</sup> - also brings with her the age-old theatrical prejudice articulated by Baudelaire in 1863:

What can be said of the courtesan can also be said ... of the actress ... for the latter, too, is a manufactured confection and a thing of public pleasure. Her business is to win general favour, not only by her physical beauty, but also by the talents of the rarest order.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Eleanor Duse played Marguerite in Dumas's play, touring throughout Europe and South America. Edwige Feuilliere played Marguerite over a thousand times between 1939 and 1952. Sarah Bernhardt was one of the first Marguerites to appear on celluloid in 1913. Frances Barber was cast as Marguerite in Gems's *Camille* when it opened at the Other Place, in Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1985.



So according to Baudelaire, and what seems countless others, behind the dramatic actress also stands an imagined prostitute, and unlike other archetypal theatrical roles for women, the 'penitent whore' fulfils the patriarchally created belief that acting women are merely being themselves. These frictions between representation and reality provided the motivation for Gems to take on this myth and reassess it. Gems is fully aware of Baudelaire's sentiment, which may go some way into explaining why such a prominent Hollywood actress as Kathleen Turner was chosen to play Marguerite when Gems's *Camille* premiered in America.<sup>17</sup> However, in spite of tackling this friction somewhat ironically in her choice of casting, Gems cannot fundamentally alter what has previously been established, she can merely offer an alternative perspective. This will become more apparent in due course, for as the 'Camille' myth gradually unfolds, it becomes more apparent that the myth is greater than any attempt at its interpretation.

The presence of the 'heroine' as whore (whether penitent or otherwise) also dictates the role of the other characters essential to the 'Camille' myth. In Dumas, for example, Armand is allowed to assume the subject position of the text, in spite of the fact that Marguerite is undoubtedly the main protagonist. Indeed, Armand is posited as the archetypal courtly lover - a conquering hero, tried and tested by torturous romance. In love, his conquest relies upon the illusion of a great gulf, separating him from the one he desires. Moreover, as a conqueror, the degree to which Armand feels a success coincides directly with the magnitude of the obstacles he needs to overcome. When his friend Gaston offers to introduce him to Marguerite one night at the theatre, Armand muses about the possibility of a fight too easily won which may mar his masculinity and reputation. He says:



...I, who would gladly have suffered for her, was afraid that this woman might accept me too quickly and give me too promptly a love which I should have desired to earn through some long delay or great sacrifice...So, had someone said to me: "You shall have this woman tonight and tomorrow you shall be put to death," I would have accepted. Had I been told: "Give her ten louis and she's yours," I should have refused and wept like a child who sees its dream castless disappear with the dawn. (44)

However, Marguerite is no ordinary "woman", in that she cannot neatly fit into Armand's plan of conquest, as other fictional heroines would. As a prostitute, she simultaneously diffuses and enhances his challenge. The ease with which she exchanges her body for pay makes her too accessible for Armand's romantic notions of pursuit, yet her unashamed practice of 'sex for hire' also works to compel Armand. Armand himself explains this predicament, but this time resorting to an ironic rhetoric of warfare:

To be loved by a chaste young girl, to be the first to show her the strange mystery of love, is a great joy - but it is the easiest thing in the world. To capture a heart unused to attack is like walking into an open, undefended city. (85)

The ultimate mark of Armand's triumph must be revealed through transformations in Marguerite's very character. When they first meet, Marguerite seems aloof, if not cynical, but gradually she allows her public facade to drop, entrusting him with an increasingly candid portrait of her existence. She acknowledges her hunger for love in a rather pitiful manner, likening Armand's devotion to the only love she has ever known:

This may sound silly, but I used to have a little dog that would look at me sadly whenever I coughed and that is the only creature I have ever loved. (128)

It is also important that she should deny the concept of female friendship. She confesses that courtesan society is only a group of isolated unfortunates:

Our lives are no longer our own. We aren't human beings, but things...We have women friends, but they are friends like Prudence - yesterday's kept women who still have expensive tastes which their age prevents them from indulging. So they become our friends, or rather associates. (113)

By tapping into her innocent girlish heart, Dumas's Armand becomes Marguerite's great liberator. He overcomes the circumstances she cannot, removes her from the life that has robbed her of both health and happiness, and transports her to the pastoral setting where she flourishes. However, her most crucial disclosure to Armand, and one which always confirms the downfall of the 'penitent whore' is the confession of her hunger for true love and happiness. The ultimate revelation is also the courtesan's downfall: then, and only then, can the narrative deal its tragic blow and leave her, as the myth commands, far from being exalted at the novel's end, dying, impoverished and lonely.

Dumas goes further and provides another layer of narrative displacement to restore normality and push the unorthodox love of Marguerite and Armand to the margins. Her denial, the final word, the ultimate curative, belongs not to Armand, but his father, Duval - the novel's patriarch. While Armand may enjoy a temporary triumph, he errs when he presumes he can carry Marguerite into the respectable society of his family. This error undermines his heroic standing in the novel and recasts him in a new role, that of prodigal son. It is his father who must assume the hero's part, and he ensures that



respectability remains exclusively the domain of women such as his own virtuous daughter, Blanche.

Duval regards his son with a patient superiority. He accepts Armand's affair with a courtesan - for "what could be better?" (160) - but gently interferes when this relationship threatens to go beyond the sanctioned boundaries of a gentlemanly amusement (for the illicit pleasures of the man-about-town and the privileged reader are not dissimilar.) He tries to reason with his son:

Monsieur, I know more about life than you do. Only women who are entirely chaste inspire feelings that are entirely pure. (161)

Armand counters: "Love always makes a man better," (163) but the two men never have to pursue this fundamental disagreement because Duval persuades Marguerite to leave his son. One father/son bond remains intact; Armand saves face while his father restores the status quo. Of course, the ease with which Marguerite surrenders to Duval testifies to her general and paradoxical eagerness to appease normative society - the crucial factor which makes the penitent whore penitent. In his essay, 'La Dame aux Camélias,' Roland Barthes<sup>18</sup> views this eagerness, central to a definition of the 'Camille' myth as one of "recognition" (89) - thus, uniting the 'Camille' myth with that of the penitent whore. Marguerite, he argues, is driven by her need to be recognised in relation to what Barthes terms, the "masters" (90) (the ruling patriarchy symbolised by Duval). She initially defines herself in terms of her alienation from these "masters", emphasising her distance from them by throwing herself wholeheartedly into the "whirlwind of the courtesan's life."<sup>19</sup> But rather than finding freedom in her awareness of self, outside the world of

respectability, she ultimately succumbs to conformist ideals, first through her monogamous relationship with Armand and then in her compliance with his father. Barthes asserts that Marguerite “follows up” her awareness of the distinction between herself and the world of social respectability by “purely servile behaviour.”(104) He clearly defines her entrenchment in a vicious circle in the following terms:

Either she plays the part the masters expect from her or she tries to reach a **value** which is, in fact, a part of this same world of the masters. (104)

Marguerite appeases the “world of the masters” when she defers to the interests of Armand’s uncontaminated sister. All she asks in return is the validation she receives from Duval. Marguerite describes her experience in a letter written to Armand from her deathbed:

When I thought that one day this old man, now imploring me for the future of his son, would tell his daughter to remember my name in her prayers as that of a mysterious friend, I was transformed, I was proud.  
(202)

Ultimately, Marguerite’s pride derives from an association, albeit indirect and temporary, with a respectable woman. She sacrifices her own happiness to permit that of another she clearly regards as her superior - the pure-white Blanche. Dumas provides a description of this virtuous daughter to reinforce the distance Marguerite perceives between her own decadence and respectable womanhood:



She had the limpid look and serene lips which show the soul has none but holy thoughts and the mouth utters none but pious words. She smiled at her brother's return, not knowing, pure and chaste as she was, that far away a courtesan had sacrificed her own happiness at the mere invocation of her name. (219)

Religious imagery, and indeed the significance of her name, conveys Blanche as an angelic presence, just as it works to establish Marguerite as a sinner who seeks redemption. Indeed, she is penitent as the myth that precedes her deems it. In recalling her interaction with Duval, as she reveals in her own writing (a letter to Armand): "Your father embraced me and I felt on my brow two tears which were a sort of absolution for past sins." (203) Marguerite tolerates Armand's cruelty after their separation and even views death with a martyr's forbearance. She stoically recalls "a series of days in which each brought a new insult from you ... an insult I received almost with joy." (204-205) Julie Duprat, the friend who takes over the letter when Marguerite becomes unable to write, relates the details of the "death agony" insisting "no martyr ever suffered such tortures." (217)

Dumas's novel establishes the general premises and themes of the 'Camille' story. The condensation required as it moved into dramatic form, however, forced him to forego certain aspects of textual detail.<sup>†</sup> His play, also entitled *La Dame aux Camélias* (1849) leaves less room, for example, for a gradual unfolding of personalities or relationships. It was thus largely responsible for formulating the simplified - indeed melodramatic - 'Camille' image which was to be disseminated further through opera and film.

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<sup>†</sup> In comparison to other mediums, the dynamic of a play requires a higher degree of selectivity and a greater condensation of images and ideas. While the reader may be expected to digest a book in portions over an indefinite period of time, typically an audience must consume an entire work in one relatively short sitting.



## *La Dame aux Camélias: The Dumas Play (1849)*

MARGUERITE Yes, it is all true. I am a worthless and ungrateful creature, who has cruelly betrayed you, and who never loved you. But the more degraded you know me to be, the less you ought to endanger your life for my sake, and trouble the peace of those you love.

*La Dame aux Camélias*, IV. (154)

The play *La Dame aux Camélias* is more concise and explicit. For example Marguerite and Armand define their dispositions and relationship almost immediately. Shortly after their first meeting, he tells her, “You are killing yourself! I wish I were your friend, your brother, even, to prevent you from hurting yourself like this.” (118) Dumas swiftly establishes the unambiguous purity of Armand’s intentions and sets the tenor of the ensuing romance. He makes Marguerite disclose her true unhappiness just as quickly. Rather than revealing herself through events and over a period of time, Marguerite simply admits that her role as courtesan cloaks unhappiness and loneliness:

MARGUERITE If I were to begin to take care of myself, my dear man, I should die. Don’t you see that it is only the feverish life I live that keeps me alive? *La Dame aux Camélias*, I. (119)

The sense of Marguerite as lonely despite a constant swarm of suitors and the company of other courtesans is essential to Dumas’s characterisation of her lifestyle in the opening scene. Her friends seem opportunistic and shallow, her relationships with them superficial and misguided. However, Dumas does create two sympathetic secondary characters, Nichette and Gustave, a couple who eventually marry and visit Marguerite in the country. They have long ago discovered the joys she is just beginning to taste and offer an understanding lost on her other friends. Not only do Nichette and Gustave provide a sounding board for the reformed Marguerite, they strengthen the play’s



corrective line by rising above the decadent Parisian underworld and by affirming the possibilities of a healthy love relationship. Nichette and Marguerite once worked together in an embroidery shop. Gustave's love seems to have saved Nichette from the path taken by Marguerite and many other young women from similar backgrounds. In a display of his chivalry (and, incidentally, of the double standard endorsed by the play), Gustave now forbids Nichette either to work or to attend the parties he does. As evidence of her respectability, Nichette is removed from the commercial workplace and certain ambiguous social spheres; conversely, Marguerite loses Armand and must return to these very worlds.

In the play's most famous scene, Armand publicly denounces Marguerite's return to her former way of life. The fourth act finds Marguerite at a party hosted by Olympe. She has broken with Armand and taken a new lover, Varville. Jealous and enraged, Armand literally showers Marguerite with bank notes. He intends this gesture as the ultimate insult. He takes advantage of the stigma attached to prostitution to shame Marguerite, to revoke any semblance of respectability she may have enjoyed as his mistress.

ARMAND Do you see this woman?... Do you know what she did? She sold all that she had to live with me because she loved me so much. It was noble and generous, wasn't it? You shall all hear how vilely I treated her! I accepted this sacrifice and gave her absolutely nothing in return. But it is not too late. I know now that I was wrong and I wish to settle the account between us. I call upon you all to witness that I owe this woman nothing! (*Throws bank notes over her*)  
*La Dame aux Camélias*, IV. (155)

The parallel incident in the novel is handled quite differently and this difference represents one of the most significant changes in the transition to the stage and into myth. In the novel, Armand and Marguerite spend a night together in what seems at



least a temporary reconciliation. Bitter feelings overtake Armand in the morning, however, prompting him to send her some money and a letter: "I forgot to pay you ... Here is your fee for the night." (196) While probably motivated by the need for economy and theatrical effect, the theatrical sequence redistributes the blame and the consequences. In the novel, Armand's action seems cruel and calculating (particularly after spending the night in Marguerite's bed), on the other hand, the exchange remains a private one. In the play, Marguerite suffers more profoundly because she endures public humiliation, but at the same time Dumas creates a more sympathetic portrayal of Armand. He now seems to act out of passionate impulse, not calculated cruelty, and appears less hypocritical since they have not just shared a bed. While both the novel and the play relay Marguerite's downfall through Armand's insult, the play heightens the didactic value of the moment. The scene creates a more definite gap between the respectability offered by a monogamous life with Armand and the shamefulness of the courtesan's life. Marguerite suffers a more severe punishment in her fall while Armand retains a greater semblance of heroism.

His father also appears more admirable in Dumas's stage version of the tale. The scene between Marguerite and Duval, only recounted in the novel through Marguerite's death-bed letter, plays out her longing for the part of virtuous daughter. She finds strength in a fatherly blessing. She asks for one kiss and swears that "this kiss, the only really pure one that I have ever received, will help me in what I must do." (141) While Marguerite might consider Duval her redeemer, lack of sympathy for him on the part of the spectator would diminish the play's corrective impact. To prevent this, Dumas contrives an eleventh-hour letter from Duval to Marguerite. Gracious and eloquent, this letter asks for Marguerite's forgiveness and tells of Duval's high esteem for her; it



renders him not a villain but a compassionate player, obliged to step into the tragedy and play his part in restoring social equilibrium. It also makes possible a death-bed reunion withheld by the novel, endowing Duval with an even greater semblance of generosity. He writes that she is “worthy of a better future” and assures her that she will have it. This passage suggests that he means to care for her in some way. Her timely death keeps him from having to make good on this promise without diminishing the nobility of the offer.

When Marguerite dies, Nichette is at her bedside to say:

NICHETTE (*on her knees beside her* [Marguerite]) Rest in peace, Marguerite. Much will be forgiven you, for you loved much. *La Dame aux Camélias*, V. (164)

Again, not only does this speech confirm that Duval has successfully played his part in restoring social equilibrium and respectability, but it also provides the curtain line, affirming Marguerite’s function as a martyr - a whore truly penitent, in keeping with her myth. This line derives from the novel, as an affinity is drawn between Marguerite and her archetype, Mary Magdalene and the narrator reminds us:

Thus he [Jesus] said to Mary Magdalene: ‘Your sins which are many, shall be forgiven, because you loved much’ - a sublime pardon which was to awaken a sublime faith. (32)

However, in the play Nichette turns this comment into an enacted religious ritual. The image of redemption through one’s own wounds is important in both of Dumas’s versions of *La Dame aux Camélias*, and is a crucial aspect of the penitent whore myth. Marguerite can only die happily when she has suffered adequately for her social

‘deviance’. The play, like the novel before it, extends a form of sympathy to Marguerite; but the fact that she becomes most beautiful and deserving and even seems most desirable on her death-bed reveals the precise nature of this sympathy. The glorification of female suffering which runs throughout the play - through Marguerite’s struggle with ill-health and misery - reaches its peak in the play’s last moments. For Dumas, Marguerite’s last gasp provides a kind of safety-valve or buffer against social criticism. She tells Armand:

MARGUERITE I am not suffering any more. I feel better, so much better than I have ever felt before ...  
I am going to live. (*Appears to sleep*) *La Dame aux Camélias*, V . (164)

Yes, he has redeemed the ‘penitent whore’, but death removes the threat that she might enjoy an enduring relationship among respectable citizenry.

Even such a qualified form of sympathy struck many of Dumas’s contemporaries as an outrage, feeling that the whore warranted nothing beyond contempt. Emile Augier, for example, wrote *Le Mariage d’Olympe* in 1855 as a theatrical counterstatement to Dumas’s play, thereby offering another perspective on the ‘Camille’ narrative, and further developing the ‘Camille’ myth.

### *Le Mariage d’Olympe*:<sup>20</sup> Augier’s Play (1855)

MONTRICHARD The bane of our day is the rehabilitation of the lost woman - fallen woman, we say. Our poets, novelists, dramatists, fill the heads of the young generation with romantic ideas of redemption through love, the virginity of the soul, and other paradoxes of transcendental philosophy...Do you know, these women have so strong a hold on the public that they have even been the heroines of plays? *Le Mariage d’Olympe*, I . (169)

Augier establishes his relationship to *La Dame aux Camélias* in the opening scene of his play. Baron Montrichard, converses with his friend the Marquis du Puygiron, who has been out of the country. Montrichard explains the recent changes he has observed in



Parisian society. He lingers on the subject of prostitution. He tells first of the prostitute's increased visibility among respectable society, her frequent appearance, for example, at the theatre; then of her appearance as a character in the plays themselves; and finally attacks her invasion of the most sacred of realms, marriage. Augier suggests that once the prostitute has been validated through theatrical characterisation, the next logical step will be her entire disruption of the social order.

This opening exchange foreshadows the entrance of a prostitute who confronts society with blatant disregard. Borrowing the name Olympe from a courtesan in *La Dame aux Camélias*, Augier reinforces his connection with Dumas. His Olympe, quite unlike the good-hearted Marguerite, is a calculating prostitute. She readily admits to seeing the du Puygiron family name as a "gold mine" (182), and has concealed her true identity to entrap the Marquis's nephew, Henri, into marriage. Once inside the family, she is reckless with money and unconcerned with marital fidelity. Henri's young cousin Genevieve provides, like Dumas's Blanche, a virtuous counterpart to the prostitute in Augier's play. But in place of Marguerite's deference, Olympe violates Genevieve's trust and threatens to blackmail her. Henri comes to the painful realisation that Olympe is incapable of understanding the "true worth of essential goodness" (199) of his family.

Underpinning the contrast between Augier's and Dumas's plays are divergent, though perhaps equally repressive, sentiments about women. Where Dumas suggests that even a woman as wayward as the prostitute aspires to purity, Augier argues that such false sentimentality about women enables their evil. When the Marquis discovers Olympe's charade, he rails; "If a man were capable of such infamy, I'd shoot him like a dog. But a woman, it seems may do anything." (223-24) As the play closes, Augier's

patriarch defies the double standard which he perceives encroaching into the audience's world by firing a bullet into the incorrigible Olympe. In a curtain line corresponding to but contradicting Dumas's, the Marquis claims, "God is my judge." (226) The master, not the prostitute, finds salvation through this death; and the larger redemption is for the society debased by Olympe, by others like her - and by those who would dignify her through art.

Augier, then, adopts an even more critical stance toward the 'Camille' figure, denying his 'heroine' the romance and sentimental glory bestowed upon her by Dumas. Thus, by the late 1850's the myth appeared to be developing toward a problematic stereotype of the fallen woman too rigidly fixed. However, when Giuseppe Verdi attended one of the first performances of *La Dame aux Camélias* in 1852 he immediately saw its musical potential. The result of his inspiration became *La Traviata*; and so the 'Camille' myth was introduced into the operatic domain, with another surprising interpretative twist.

### **La Traviata<sup>20</sup> (1853): 'Camille' Within an Operatic Framework**

Ah, pity the stray one, and send her consolation!  
Oh, pardon her transgressions, and send her salvation!  
Thus, all of life doth end.                      *La Traviata*, III.4.

In *La Traviata*, the final version of the 'Camille' myth I wish to discuss before turning to Gems's play, the religious motif grows even stronger, thus emphasising the rueful and sacrificial nature of the penitent whore. Rather than condemn the prostitute in the name of God, however, the opera portrays the 'Camille' figure as the most vulnerable among fallible mortals. Violetta, Verdi's heroine, not only stands in bold opposition to



Augier's wicked Olympe, she goes beyond Dumas's Marguerite as the embodiment of bittersweet romance.

One of the most famous passages in *La Traviata* attests to the prominent role played by religious imagery in this work. Here Violetta (the character based on Marguerite) and Alfredo (Armand's counterpart) sing to a higher love which ultimately commits their characters to a different destiny:

In that love which is the pulse  
Of the universe, the whole universe,  
Mysterious, aloof,  
The heart's cross and delight.  
*La Traviata*, IV. 1 (138)

Here it is their love itself, not simply her death, which is sacramental. Beyond placing their love in the context of something much larger (and piously acknowledging their inability to grasp these mysteries), this refrain captures the simultaneity of suffering and rapture dominant in Christian teaching, and even evokes the crucifixion. On her deathbed, Violetta tells the doctor of the comfort she has found in a visit from her priest and explains: "Religion is a relief to those who suffer." (165) Later in the scene she beckons Alfredo to accompany her to church where they might give thanks for their reunion.

However, even *La Traviata* cannot completely excuse Violetta's past, however sublime her music. Though the persistent religious motif is part of the heightened emotionalism conferred on the story by the operatic form, the most noteworthy new transformation to the storyline involves the patriarchal figure. In the scene between Violetta and Germont (Verdi's equivalent of Duval), the social imperative of their exchange is nearly eclipsed by a religious one. Germont describes his daughter as "pure

as an angel,” and “given to him by God.” (14) He assures Violetta that “it is God who inspires a Father’s words.” (146) She also evokes God to relate her circumstances, explaining that her shameful past “exists no more/ God has erased it.” (144) Violetta understands that while God may forgive her, society will not. Referring to herself in the third person, she sings: “Even if God is kind and indulgent to her/ Mankind will always be implacable.” (146)

Duval has only one relatively short scene in the play; Verdi and his librettist Antonio Maria Piave add two more scenes for Germont, both of which work to enhance the character’s sympathetic appeal. Germont arrives as his son throws the banknotes over Violetta. While the other party guests express their horror at the deed, Germont provokes his son’s remorse. The chorus chastises Alfredo as an “ignoble insulter of women,” and Germont takes over by singing, with “dignity and fire,”

A man, who, even in anger, offends a woman,  
Renders himself deserving of contempt.  
*La Traviata*, III. 5 (163)

This sequence expresses the very idea that Augier’s Marquis rejects; that women, fragile by nature, need special protection. Germont heralds this idea with the same passion that fuels his references to God. He seems, like Violetta and Alfredo, subject to the control of destiny. Indeed, by the final act, all three join together in song, bemoaning tragic fate.

This image of Germont alongside the two lovers in the opera’s final moments embodies one of the most important developments that occurred as the ‘Camille’ narrative evolved from the Dumas novel through to the Verdi opera. The patriarchal



figure becomes increasingly sympathetic and decreasingly blameworthy. Each version furthers the image of an experienced man acting because he must: he is the safeguard of the status quo, the protector of virtuous women and, by the opera's end, an emissary of God. The story's corrective line becomes intertwined in the ornate beauty of high artifice to render it more graceful: there are no true villains, just the playing out of a larger, wiser and more powerful will. Events no longer appear as random occurrences, but as inevitably and meaningfully ordered. This dynamic takes the 'Camille' narrative into the realm of myth..

Roland Barthes identified "the very principle of myth" as its transformation of "history into nature."<sup>22</sup> Such is the case with the 'Camille' narrative as Gems inherited it: texture gave way to truism, concrete analysis of individual human lives to romantic, idealised rhetoric about the human condition.

Gems greeted all this heritage with a notable scepticism (not necessarily a feminist ambivalence, as some critics have implied).<sup>†</sup> Her 'Camille' figure, inevitably perhaps, exists not in nature but in culture and society. Her lovers do not succumb to the prevailing forces of a mysterious transcendental law, they see their happiness engulfed by rigid standards of pragmatic social forces. Her play *Camille* (1984) re-addresses/re-invents the 'Camille' narrative, and most importantly, radically develops the woman at its centre.

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<sup>†</sup> Here, I take issue with Margaret Lewellyn-Jones who states that Gems writes "with an anxiety to avoid polemic and with an ambivalent attitude to feminism, so as to be more appealing to a commercial audience. Furthermore, she reflects the position of woman as victim rather than providing a critique which would imply the need for change." My discussion of *Camille* seeks to challenge Lewellyn-Jones's argument. *British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958*, ed. by Trevor Griffiths and Margaret Lewellyn-Jones (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993). p. 38.

*Camille: Pam Gems (1984) - Revisioning the Myths of 'Camille' and the 'Penitent Whore'*

MARGUERITE: [ *To Duval*] You think because I'm a woman you can come here and bully and threaten? You think I'm nothing? Something to be pulled out of the way, like a piece of wood on the road?... You have no control, no influence over us. So take your foul breath, ...rotting teeth and stinking ass out of my house. *Camille*, II. 3 (133)

Inevitably - but more openly in some respects - Gems, like her predecessors, uses the 'Camille' myth for her own ideological purposes. She examines the intermingling of class and sexual oppression, suggests how relationships falter in the midst of certain social prescripts, and juxtaposes images of victimisation and agency in the female protagonist's experience. So, on such a basic level, Gems creates a narrative which focuses very much on the **poverty** of Marguerite's origins, depicting her as a rebellious worker engaged in a class struggle. She is a woman whose carnal offerings are acts against a society she despises. Yet in spite of Gems's efforts to endow her Marguerite with a rich biography (explaining her behaviour in quasi-Marxist terms), Marguerite's illness and inevitable death are never understood by Gems as being part of this myth's deliberate conspiracy against its 'heroine'. Gems is fully aware that the story of Marguerite Gautier fundamentally cannot be re-written or re-told, thus her *Camille* merely stands as a cosmetic re-shaping of the traditional narrative of the penitent whore. Gems takes from the prescribed and ideologically loaded mythology, based upon an old romantic concept of female sacrifice and an indiscriminate confusion of moral and physical illness, to create a 'Camille' figure whose morality is quite literally ill, thanks to the severity of a hostile society.



After *Queen Christina* and *Piaf*, *Camille* moves closer to a realist form. In a sense this pays homage to the story's roots, and to the well-made-play: Gems focuses on a more condensed time period than before. However, at times she also seems to shift the chronology from the nineteenth to twentieth century by using dialogue and issues relevant to modern day Britain. Gems retains the narrative structure of the story she inherits: her play moves from Marguerite and Armand's first acquaintance, through their passion, their separation and finally, to the heroine's death. But she provides a relatively extensive exposition, to give her Marguerite dimensionality and the semblance of a unified personality.

Due to the fact that Gems maintains some grounding in traditional forms (significantly, Dumas's key character names are now restored), some feminist critics have chastised her for failing to offer a more radical revisioning. Janelle Reinelt<sup>23</sup> set out to defend the play's theatrical form in relation to its feminist project, but found a "disparity between Gems's intent to re-interpret the 'Camille' myth"(96) and the fact that the resulting theatre piece is characterised, she argued, by a "familiar nostalgia and a rather shop-worn sentiment." (102) Similarly, Katherine Worth's essay 'Images of Women in Modern English Theater,'<sup>24</sup> places Gems along with her "romantically minded predecessors," (11) glorifying the consumption of Marguerite. Gems herself had certain misgivings about approaching the 'Camille' project and, in an interview with Susan Carlson<sup>25</sup> expressed a continued dissatisfaction with the result - "regretting particularly the decision to have Marguerite die late in the play."<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> In the Carlson interview, Gems recalls her initial trepidation about revising the 'Camille' story. She met Hugh Durrant, a designer who first suggested the project, and remembers saying, "You can't mean you want a feminist version of Camille?" She struggled to omit the death scene, inserting in its own place, a "kind of stand-off" between Armand and Marguerite, but eventually submitted to director, Ron Daniels' insistence that she keep it.



*Camille* first opened on 4 April 1984 at the Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon and was produced by the RSC (see Appendix). Sensing a possible commercial success, the RSC transferred it to the Comedy Theatre, London (29 October - 30 November 1985). Frances Barber played Marguerite Gautier. In 1987, the production made its New York debut at the Long Wharf Theatre (10 February - 8 August 1987), and starred Kathleen Turner in the title role. The director was Ron Daniels (see Appendix).

The reviews of the Stratford production reveal patterns of reaction which intensified in London. Keith Gordon confessed that the RSC production brought him to tears in spite of Gems's attempts to strip the *Camille* legend of its sentimental distortions of prostitution. He called Marguerite (Frances Barber) and Armand's (Nicholas Farrell) bedroom scenes "the most beautiful I've seen in a theatre,"<sup>26</sup> while arguing that:

Gems's *Camille* is the stuff of Dumas fils' novel, of Verdi's opera seen through contemporary feminist eyes: how silly we men are, how absurd our pursuit of the orgasm, of security. (12)

With the transfer to a much larger and less intimate London theatre, many reviews similarly identified a tension between the lingering sentiment and the antisentimental impulse. For example, Graham Hirschhorn, described Gems's *Camille* as a play "hovering somewhere between the traditionally romantic approach and a blustering send up."<sup>27</sup> Like many of his peers, Hirschhorn reserved his greatest accolades for Frances Barber in the lead role.†

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† Whereas many critics commended the transfer from the small studio space to the more stately Comedy Theatre, others argue - as Henry Kroll did in writing about the New York production of *Piaf* - that the understated setting and production concept of *Camille* were at odds with the bigger theatre. James Ratcliffe, for example, wrote that the RSC production had "stayed exactly the same." There it may have been a "triumph," but on a "proscenium-arched stage as unlike as possible to the studio space for which it was devised," the production "just isn't working." (James Ratcliffe, 'Review of *Camille*,' *Financial Times*, 3 May 1986, p. 7)



By setting the play in juxtaposition with its various predecessors, its achievements seem more profound than the critiques allow. While making certain key formal adjustments, as a non-musical theatre piece working (unlike *Le Mariage d'Olympe*) with the same characters and basic plot, Gems's play most emulates Dumas. However, her most profound revisions occur in terms of content and meaning, where she challenges both Dumas and the whole tradition he helped inspire.

For all its overriding romanticism and its influence on the formulaic bourgeois writing of the well-made-play school, Dumas's play was a landmark in the evolution of dramatic realism. To quote Stephen S. Stanton:

*La Dame aux Camélias*, whatever its shortcomings, has probably exerted a greater leverage on the English and American realistic drama than any other nineteenth-century French play.<sup>28</sup>

Its grounding in true incidents, its evocation of a milieu, its subject matter, its plot causality, the vernacular language and its attempt to give characters psychological dimension - all these contributed to the development of dramatic realism. Gems apparently accepts this form but destabilises it through disruptions and shifts in the chronology. To accept stage naturalism completely would in this case be to accept the sexual and social assumptions which the 'Camille' myth had ratified as true and inevitable. Gems begins each act with a scene that occurs chronologically later than the rest of the act. As Susan Carlson has argued, this design suggests the presence of "multiple perspectives"<sup>29</sup> within this play: the scenes "framing" the action present

Armand's, or the male, perspective, while the internal scenes present contrary perspectives, "including Marguerite's," situated in a "female context" (112). These scenes remind the reader/audience that a subjective lens filters the narrative, and so Gems drops the guise of objectivity, crucial to dramatic realism. The "framing scenes" call attention to the unfolding action as a construct, and two scenes (I,2 and II,4) set in the opera-house foyer, specifically further the play's awareness of itself as constructed. Through pointed remarks about the predictable conventions of the opera in these scenes (a playful jibe at Verdi) the play sustains a vision of its own artifice and its place within a cultural history. One remark alludes directly to the tradition of which *Camille* itself is a part: Prudence does not mind leaving before the last act, she tells Janine: "I've seen it before, she kills herself." (137) The dramatic irony of this remark acknowledges the great frequency with which plot-lines culminate in the death of their heroine, as well as pointing us to the fact that the 'Camille' myth is greater than any interpretation Gems may undertake.

Gems also uses non-verbal sequences to disrupt the continuity of the dramatic action and challenge dramatic realism. In a second act interlude, for example, a lull in the dialogue is filled with calm, quiet, interspersed music as the characters relax in the peaceful surroundings of Marguerite and Armand's country home (129). Time seems to stand still in these sequences as the play works to capture an expressionistic sense of the characters' experience. All such deviations from realist conventions combine to qualify Gems's relationship with the formal design of Dumas's play. By retaining some resemblance to it, she keeps her source material in sight, so she may take issue with it in the areas she finds most problematic: the valorisation of gender construction, the



euphemistic treatment of prostitution and the use of dramatic form to celebrate hierarchical social structures.

Each interpretation of the 'Camille' story examined so far in the chapter unfolds a quest narrative. 'Masters' - fathers and sons - strive for control and redemption of the female character. As in much of literature, the image of the conquering male becomes intertwined with the malleable female: he is the active subject, she, the passive object. The boldest deviation in this pattern seems to occur in Augier's play. Olympe (manipulating her way into the du Puygiron family and sparring with those individuals who threaten to curtail her enjoyment of its advantages) seems to exercise a kind of agency withheld from the more passive Marguerite or Violetta; but precisely for that reason, Olympe is denounced as dangerous. As with Strindberg's later treatment of Queen Christina, Augier only allows his female protagonist temporary access to power to illustrate how grossly she misuses it: *Le Mariage d'Olympe* remains consistent with a vision idealising women's powerlessness. Augier implicitly condemns prostitution as a woman's outrage against moral society while the Dumas and Verdi texts use it as evidence of their heroine's weakness. Rather than focusing on the role of men in sustaining prostitution, these works privilege images of men as the prostitute's redeemers. Early in the Dumas play, for example, Marguerite receives much of her financial support from the Duke. He maintains her out of sentimental attachment alone; she resembles his late beloved daughter. The sexual nature of Marguerite's illness remains vague in the novel and play alike.<sup>†</sup> The opera delicately skirts the issue of prostitution, with Violetta seeming simply a woman with wealthy admirers.

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<sup>†</sup> For Dumas, Marguerite's consumption is a veiled symbol of venereal disease and her illness is seen as justified punishment for her vocation.

Gems's bold counterpoint to the assumptions at the heart of the penitent whore tradition begins with alternative images of prostitution. In contrast to the euphemistic concepts of the Courtesan and Fallen Woman, she treats the profession of prostitution with characteristic bluntness, casting the previously glorified 'quest' narrative in a different light. In place of Dumas's benevolent old Duke, Gems creates Le Duc, a lecherous old man who fondles a young girl at the opera, and is intent on playing sex games with Marguerite at the end of the third act. There is also the foolish Count Druftheim, tolerated simply because of his wealth, and a drunken Russian Prince (Bela Mirkassian) who keeps formality at a minimum and barks at Marguerite for being dressed before pinning her beneath him. (149)

Beyond a more frank look at the men who solicit Marguerite's services, Gems challenges the contradictions apparent in a tradition both romanticising and denigrating prostitution. She opens her play with the auction from Dumas's novel. She calls for a set to capture the romanticised beauty of a dead heroine's bedroom while undercutting this image with the ironic and fatalistic context:

*(MARGUERITE's bedroom. White, with a white draped bed and white silk damask cover... A dressing table, with crystal and silver appointments. A beautiful mirror in an ornate silver frame. Everything is labelled.)* *Camille, I. 1 (77)*

The labels contradict the set's stereotypic romantic beauty by calling attention to the bedroom as the place of bartered goods.

In another important deviation from the tradition she inherits, Gems gives her central character a sophisticated understanding of prostitution as a product of class and



gender oppression. The best her counterparts in Dumas can manage are vague allusions to their unhappiness. In the novel, Marguerite explains, “We [prostitutes] are things not human beings” (128); in a parallel remark in the play, she says: “The moment we are no longer amusing to people, they leave us.” (119) Rather than promoting an image of herself as a sad victim, Gems’s Marguerite offers a candid portrait of her past and of the situations which made prostitution an attractive alternative to the other options availed her. Gems supports this confrontational image by interjecting important details from Marie Du Plessis’s life which were pushed far beneath the surface in the story’s evolution toward myth.

Late in the first act, Marguerite shares the details of her life with the curious Armand. She tells him of the loss of her father when she was nine and her life with four brothers on an estate where her mother worked as a laundress. At the age of thirteen, Marguerite became a maid and moved into the main house. At fourteen, the owner of the estate took her to bed with him and less than a year later she bore his son. Turned off the estate, Marguerite fled to her aunt’s house where she was raped. When her assailant offered to buy her secrecy with one gold coin, Marguerite saw a way out of the destitution she envisioned for herself and her child:

MARGUERITE And there it was. I knew. All of a sudden. How to do it. How to go through the magic door. How to be warm, how to be comfortable... eat fine food, wear fine clothes, read fine books, listen to fine music. I had the key. A golden key. (*She laughs*) *Camille*, I. 6 (107)

Though Gems invents circumstances and magnifies conditions, the parallel with Du Plessis’s life is clear. Gems gives Marguerite a child where Dumas (perhaps believing motherhood would detract from the sexual appeal of his Marguerite) makes no such



reference, yet Du Plessis did have a child by the time they met.<sup>†</sup> Gems has Marguerite lose her father at the age of nine whereas Du Plessis lost her mother: this change enables Gems to use the mother's life as a poor woman to offset Marguerite's rise from poverty. Marguerite tells of an uncle who raped her in a direct evocation of Du Plessis's experience. Gems links this experience, and similar ones preceding it, to the formation of her character's sexual identity and her decision to sell herself. Looking back on her youth, Marguerite reasons: "After all, what have I got to lose? Innocence? That had gone before I was five." (108)

Marguerite continues to live with the understanding, acquired early and brutally, that two choices exist for women from poor backgrounds. They can live her mother's life - enduring "arms swollen with soda from washing stains from other people's linen" (108) - or they can sell themselves. Marguerite takes a certain amount of pride in her choice and the freedom it has afforded her. She assures Armand that she means to "guard" this freedom, insisting "God knows it has cost me enough." (112) Marguerite's understanding of her position not only articulates Gems's thesis that prostitution is a product of class oppression, it also works against the sense, prevalent in both Dumas versions and the opera, of Marguerite as pliable victim. She merges instead as an intelligent woman, making the best of social factors beyond her control. She fights not only for her own best interests, but those of her family. When Marguerite moves to the country with Armand, Prudence carries on the pragmatic line of thought about prostitution and poverty. While begging Marguerite not to "throw it all away," Prudence discloses new information about Marguerite's role in supporting her brothers and mother. She reminds her of the distance she has come and her financial independence -

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<sup>†</sup> Biographical information taken from Bray, p. 8.



“not a bad achievement for a girl who couldn’t write her name.” (127) Whereas Dumas’s heroine writes self-sacrificial love-letters, Gems’s fought illiteracy.

Gems explores the irony that a high class courtesan like Marguerite enjoys a power inaccessible to her impoverished, married relative. Several passages suggest the ways poverty robs its victims of choice, and one remark clarifies the impact of this dynamic on sexuality. When Armand, in an attempt to expose the downside of Marguerite’s choice, asks, “What about love?” Marguerite scoffs, “Love (*she laughs aloud*) Love? Seven pregnancies in nine years? Ask my mother.” (108) Poor women, the play suggests, are oppressed regardless of their involvement with formal prostitution. The mother’s marriage and reproductive history, appear mere outgrowths of conditioned acquiescence. By associating female victimisation with the so-called ‘respectable’ choices made by Marguerite’s mother, and by revealing Marguerite’s choice as one of empowerment, Gems subverts the patterns she inherits from her predecessors. Where they imply that Marguerite aspires to social respectability, Gems’s play indicts an understanding of respectability built upon glorified subservience.

Gems makes important adjustments to the central relationship which clarify her critique of the earlier ‘Camille’ narratives. The class consciousness which attends her treatment of prostitution is carried over into the ‘love’ of Marguerite and Armand. Gems’s Armand belongs not to the bourgeoisie but to the aristocracy, a change Reinelt attributes to an attempt to “sharpen the class conflict in the play.” (98) It also allows him to be blind to simple economic realities, so that she and Gems can educate Armand and the audience together. Carlson also addresses the class conflict between the two lovers and believes that “Marguerite carries with her to this love relationship realisations that

his aristocratic standing can allow him to disregard.” (112) Marguerite knows Armand cannot understand the risk that leaving Paris entails for her:

MARGUERITE Armand Duval trips and there's a goosedown pillow to break his fall. The winds blow a little harder for me... I could look over the wall at you all my life and never get to touch your coat tails.  
*Camille*, I. 6 (113)

Just as Gems foregrounds class divisiveness, she reveals some of the least savoury aspects of a perceived gulf between men and women. She achieves this, in part, through her startlingly innovative characterisation of Armand. Dumas's Armand appears idealistic and innocent from the outset, remaining conspicuously quiet at the party while the others trade in bantering gossip and lewd remarks. Gems offers a contrary image. The Armand her Marguerite first encounters is a dissolute gambler, cynic and womaniser who (in place of an idealised appreciation of Woman at a romantic distance) abuses his prey with a deadly blend of sadism and misogyny. For example, the way he taunts Sophie in Act I is all the more brutal since she is in love with him and has just endured a disastrous abortion as a result of their recent affair. When Prudence asks Armand why he mistreats women, he responds by sinking his teeth into her arm. This is no romanticised hero but a character whose first love was his father's riding master: a “short and bandy” man with “a foul tongue” who “farted a lot.” (105) If any lover is to be ‘redeemed’ in this play, it will have to be the man.

Armand sustains a vision of his own ugliness as part of a general disgust with the world and it is only through Marguerite that he begins to find relief from this disgust. In one of Gems's most invigorating twists on the traditional ‘Camille’ narrative, Marguerite



forces Armand to drop a protective facade, letting him know that she understands he is “full of grief.” (105) She does not coax him into self-awareness through the deferential nurturing often idealised in other representations of women, but challenges him as an intellectual equal to meet her on common ground.

Eventually, the two do leave Paris, negotiating the terms of their relationship with a sense of parity impossible in Dumas’s conventional plot. In return, they share an intimacy made stronger by give and take, by personal freedom, not a conscripted obligation. Where other treatments tend to valorise Armand as Marguerite’s great liberator, *Gems* distributes agency more equally between the characters. At its best, their relationship becomes not one where the powerful male figure rescues the inert female from a debased life, but one of mutual empowerment.

Armand offers a second act testimonial to the possibilities of working together. He begins by noting his surprise, finding love not “agony ... sighs ... letters in mauve ink,” (124) all gestures romanticising aspects of traditional courtly love. Instead he has discovered that, together, he and Marguerite are “engines of possibility,” able to use their “vitality” and strength to overcome “dirt-eating corruption, anxiety, burning the vitals to win.” (125) The imagery of nineteenth century naturalism here is used to deny the stock idea that society limits and determines human possibility. Armand discovers that fulfilment rests in camaraderie, not in the constructed gap between women and men, as *Gems* returns to one of her themes: men and women may find harmonious and productive union only when they are able to overcome the constructs of gender and class. *Gems* offsets her central relationship with opposing forces that throw these constructs into relief.

Gems sets the Parisian milieu where Marguerite and Armand meet in diametrical opposition to Duval. In sharp contrast to her predecessors, Gems portrays the Parisian circle in a favourable light. There Marguerite and Armand have a taste of non-conformist freedom which prevents them from patent acceptance of traditional gender-role norms. Armand's father, in contrast, becomes the ultimate agent of conformity usurping the freedom which allowed Marguerite and Armand to think it possible to redefine romance between the sexes.

The life Marguerite and Armand live before their retreat to the country defies conventionality on several fronts. For example, an interlude during a party, early in the play (Act I, Scene 4) captures its general flavour. There is a game of hide and seek, a waltz punctuated by frequent partner swaps, and the passing of an opium pipe, all amidst an atmosphere of sleepy dreaminess. Carlson, referring to this interlude, finds that

...the sexual and relational freedom of such moments threatens to collapse into mere decadence, but more often there radiates an openness in which the stereotypes of male and female behaviour in Dumas fils are transcended.<sup>30</sup>

More than this, Gems creates a portrait of the entire 'demi-monde' contrasting with that offered by Dumas. It is a world where men buy access to women but the money becomes a passport to various kinds of female power and freedom. Marguerite's relationships in this world, far from superficial and fleeting, seem enduring and fulfilling. The play's early scenes carry over an element of Dumas's frivolous banter but also express the concern these people have for one another. Marguerite shows compassion



and offers support after Sophie's abortion and her interaction with Prudence, while not without friction, intimates mutual respect. Prudence admits to Marguerite:

PRUDENCE You're a beauty. Men desire you. You keep us all afloat ... servants, seamstresses, shoemakers ... My dear, don't throw it all away ... What are we all to do without you?  
*Camille*, II . 3 . (127)

Crucially, Marguerite continues to prize these relationships once she has left the city, as if Gems actively resists portraying her character as solely male-identified. Thus, in dialogue with Armand, Marguerite insists, "I need my friends." (111)

Marguerite's friends offer her an escape from the social artifice and the economic interdependence that pervades her working relationships with men ("masters"). Gems valorises female friendship, as she does in her other works, creating what Carlson calls the "female context." (112) Gems includes lesbianism in this. The easy rapport between Marguerite and Sophie (another prostitute) extends to a passionate kiss in Act II, Scene 3, and Marguerite dismisses Prudence's warning about sharing her bed with Sophie. Their interaction is an unordained, non-compulsory comfort in a highly circumscribed order. Armand, too, resists the order epitomised in his father by having an affair with another man, Bela.

Just as Gems transforms the picture of Marguerite and Armand's Paris life to stress its unconventional and polymorphous freedoms, her characterisation of Duval foregrounds his function as controlling patriarch. An early indication of Gems's revision of this figure is the distance she puts between Armand and his father. Their dialogue suggests that adversarial exchange has become routine; the son's remarks about his father's arrogance counter Duval's jibes about his son's depravity (Act II, Scene 2).

Duval is generally less congenial in Gems's rendition of the story. Where his counterparts in Dumas and Verdi speak in terms of lofty ideals, he offers a graceless bluntness. He cuts short Armand's attempt to explain his relationship as one of "friendship" and "respect", demanding, "Good God boy, what does it matter? One woman's slot or another?"(123). In place of Verdi's godly man obliged to uphold a just social order, Gems offers an example of the brutal chauvinism that sustains the oppression and objectification of women and the infantilisation of men. Gems's father-figure represents the codes and assumptions which force a wedge between men and women who might otherwise enjoy fulfilling partnerships. When Armand draws attention to the mutual concern he and Marguerite share, the Father derides this common ground, positing instead - through his ugly remark about the female "slot" as a generic receptacle for the male - the physical differences that distinguish men and women.

As in *Camille's* predecessors, Duval's entrance alters the course of the plot. He disrupts the lovers' harmony in an effort to restore social equilibrium. Gems, however, creates a pivotal and radically different meeting between Marguerite and Armand's father. Where other versions bring these two characters together as strangers, Gems devises a shared history for them. In her play, Duval turns out to be Monsieur le Marquis, the man who owned the estate on which she and her mother worked, who impregnated her and then threw her out of his home, and who slapped her face, leaving a scar with his ring, when they met by chance later in the street. This history between the characters makes for a more sinister patriarch and works to compound Gems's view of sexual oppression. Dumas's character accepted his son's involvement with the courtesan when it did not interfere with social boundaries; Gems reveals the Father as the very force that creates and sustains the system prostituting poor women. Her plot enacts her



thesis about wealth and power in the lives of such women: the play's patriarch dooms Marguerite to either a life of drudgery or one of prostitution, and social punishment is exposed as irrelevant to 'justice' - rather it is an expression of hypocrisy and legitimised violence. He rapes her and then leaves a lasting scar on her face as punishment. His morality demands that she be physically violated in public as well as in private.

With his arrival, the father reclaims not only his son but his power over Marguerite's destiny. This time she does not submit with a martyr's deference in a poetic exchange, but resists with dignified intelligence in a scene that erupts into violence. His wealth does not impress her: her understanding that it signifies social determinism, not achievement or skill, is clear when she argues that Armand "has as much right to the money as you have. You didn't earn it!" (132) She feels immutable at first, an individual who knows the world and has the resources not to be victimised simply because she is a woman. She would like to turn the tables on the father; to order him from her house as he ordered her from his, to revel in the knowledge he can no longer touch her; but she discovers that he still has the controlling edge.

The father's trump card is not Armand, but little Jean-Paul, his other son, carried by Marguerite. Jean-Paul lives with Yvette and believes Marguerite is his aunt. Though Marguerite feels it best to hide their true relationship from him, he means a great deal to her. In a passage characteristically Gems in its focus on motherhood, Marguerite tells Armand:

MARGUERITE You have no idea what a difference a child makes. Your life is quite changed. Forever. Of course, with a man, this can never happen. Not in the same way ... You're no longer alone. You're connected ... with someone who is and isn't you. Your own flesh. I love my brother of course ... but you grow up ... you go away, you're on your own. Until, if you're a woman, you have a child. Then you're never alone again. Whether you wish it or not. It's there. Part of you. Of your body. You have reason ... purpose...oh, no destiny too fine, for the child!

*Camille*, I. 6. (107)

Through Jean-Paul, Duval can still wield power over Marguerite. He gives her an ultimatum. If she leaves Armand, he will ensure that Jean-Paul is reared as a gentleman, given a fine education, financial security and social standing. If she refuses, he will use his influence to have Jean-Paul made a ward of the state by exposing her as an unfit mother. Though Marguerite resists feebly, saying, "Do you think I want him to be like you?" (135), she realises her defeat. Even Gems's Marguerite remains, despite her personal strength, independence and determination, subject to the social hierarchy controlled by men like Duval. Either way she loses her son; by leaving Armand, she at least ensures that Jean-Paul will have the material and necessary advantages which she never had.

This, the defeat of Marguerite via the fact she cannot erode the reality of motherhood from her life, is the play's true catastrophe - so much so that Gems originally wished to leave out her death, the most defining 'Camille' image of all.

The death scene does indeed tempt us into re-reading Marguerite as - ultimately, and inevitably - a victim. This re-affirms and strengthens the predominant myth of the penitent whore, and the loss of her son might actually be said to compound her victimisation in Gems's text. Even Carlson, generally quite favourable toward the play, is forced to conclude that "Gems's critique of the patriarchal 'Camille' is fragile." (112)



For Gems herself, Marguerite's death does deflate some of the play's power - and many critics believe it colludes too heavily with previous versions, in remaining decidedly romantic - yet it is a re-thinking of romance and victimisation. Through Marguerite and Armand, Gems collapses the idealised gulf between the sexes to offer an alternative to images of male domination and female subservience. She locates the forces which victimise Marguerite squarely in terms of economic exploitation, oppression and misogyny - detaching them from lofty assumptions about transcendental order (Verdi) and visions of women as either innately dangerous (Augier) or delicate (Dumas).

As in her earlier plays, Gems's reluctance to sentimentalise also leads to moral even-handedness. The harsh physicality of the play refuses Marguerite the romantic heroine's death. Instead her dreadful illness is graphically depicted in an incredibly powerful stage performance whereby she suffers a '*massive haemorrhage*' in her final moments. Gems again suggests a pattern of agency and victimisation which offers a complex understanding of social models and oppression. Gems stresses the hierarchy among prostitutes which mirrors larger social designs - Carlson reminds us that Marguerite has "earned the privilege of selling herself only to the wealthiest," (108) - and in the third scene, through images recalling both *Queen Christina* and *Piaf*, Gems portrays her protagonist as a victim-turned-victimiser, emulating the very systems that have oppressed her. Marguerite wrestles with her servant Janine. Modelling her treatment of Janine on the way she herself has been treated, she threatens to send her home to her "pig-faced mother," (88) to use her economic advantage to cast Janine back to the margins of society.



Later, Marguerite, “playing the lady” (88) as Prudence says, offers some remarks about the servile class from which she escaped and her new relation to it. She claims that she has never met a “laundress who wasn’t light fingered” (88) and seems unrattled by Prudence’s response that “you should know, dear.” She goes on to characterise them all as “the biggest scroungers in the village” and then to admit, with a grin, “I only took her to show off.” (88) Janine, however, gains the upper hand late in the play with her name changed to Olympe, she enjoys the attention of Armand, who seeks his revenge on Marguerite. Olympe,<sup>†</sup> the name of Augier’s female protagonist, is also utilised in the Dumas novel as a young courtesan Armand uses to make Marguerite jealous. By making Olympe begin as Marguerite’s servant, Gems foregrounds the class dimension of these relationships; and by making the relationship between Janine and Marguerite a violent and vengeful one, she begins to suggest how the limited opportunities for poor women pit them against one another.

### Conclusion

More than its predecessors, Gems’s *Camille* incorporates substantial historical information about Duplessis’s life in order to stress the complex relationship between class, violence and victimisation. In *Camille*, Gems orchestrates existing models and new perspectives; sentimental images juxtapose with violent struggle.

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<sup>†</sup> 'Olympia' (1863) (based on the character of Olympe) is also a famous nineteenth century painting by Édouard Manet which shocked the art establishment of Second Empire Paris. They were accustomed to viewing the female nude, but always in a setting that made it innocuous; it was a goddess, or a symbol, or an allegory - never in the brutally honest form of the naked prostitute which Manet painted and with which most males were secretly accustomed. With 'Olympia', Manet directly confronted the hypocrisy of his times, which refused to admit to the presence and fascination of the prostitute. The painting is housed at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. See Sister Wendy Beckett, *1000 Masterpieces* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1999), p. 289.



The paradox is typical. In *Queen Christina* and *Piaf*, Gems disowned the pretence to life-like accuracy claimed by other Queen Christina and Piaf 'biographers'. Yet, when Gems worked on the 'Camille' myth she re-asserted key social details carefully euphemised by her predecessors. *Camille* re-situates a legend in one woman's life: in the other plays, such as *Marlene* and *The Snow Palace* which form the final chapters of this thesis, Gems emphasises how one life (legendary or otherwise) can reveal larger patterns of experience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Endnotes

The text of *Camille* referred to in this chapter and hereafter appears in:  
*Three Plays: Piaf, Camille and Loving Women* (London: Penguin, 1985; repr. 1988), pp. 74-153.

1. Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', *University of Denver Quarterly*, 6 (1972), 38-80.
2. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic In Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', in *Toward an Anthology of Women*, ed. by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210 (p. 179).
3. Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1990), p. 80.
4. Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt* (London: Victor Gollancz Press, 1969), p. 101.
5. Dr. Véron, a newspaper publisher in Paris, spoke about Marie Duplessis with Albert Vandam, an Englishman who frequented social and literary circles in both Paris and London. The quotation appears in full in his contemporary memoirs:  
Albert Vandam, *An Englishman in Paris*, 2 vols (London: Chapman & Hall Press, 1892), I, 90-123.
6. The text of the novel, *La Dame aux Camélias* referred to in this chapter is:  
Alexandre Dumas (fils), *La Dame aux Camélias*, trans. by David Coward, intr. by Barbara Bray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).  
Hereafter, Alexandre Dumas (fils) will be cited simply as Dumas.
7. The text of the play, *La Dame aux Camélias* referred to in this chapter appears in:  
'*Camille*' and *Other Plays*, ed. by Stephen S. Stanton (New York: Hill & Wang Press, 1957; repr. 1992), pp. 105-64.
8. F. A. Taylor, *The Theatre of Alexander Dumas (fils)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1943), p. 8.
9. Barbara Bray, 'Introduction to *La Dame aux Camélias* (novel)', p. 5.
10. Alexandre Dumas (fils), *Théâtre Complet*, ed. by Fernande Bassan, 8 vols (Paris: Minard Press, 1898), I, 85.
11. Taylor, p. 6.
12. Taylor, p. 7.
13. Bray, p. 7.
14. Bray, p. 7.



15. Dumas, *La Dame aux Camélias* (novel), p. 38.
16. Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*, trans. by Norman Cameron (London: Soho Press, repr. 1986), p. 67.
17. The director Ron Daniels decided to cast Kathleen Turner in the part of Marguerite Gautier in Pam Gems's adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias* at the Long Wharf Theatre, New York when the play premiered in America in 1987. See Gabrielle H. Cody, 'The Return of a Sacred Monster: Pam Gems's *Camille*', *Theater*, 19 (1987), 78-80.
18. Roland Barthes, 'La Dame aux Camélias', in *Roland Barthes: Selected Writings*, intr. by Susan Sontag (London: Fontana Collins, 1982), pp. 89-92.
19. Dumas (novel), p. 103
20. The text of Emile Augier's *Le Mariage d'Olympe* referred to in this chapter appears in:  
'*Camille*' and *Other Plays*, ed. by Stephen S. Stanton, pp. 165-226, (see 7, above).
21. Giuseppe Verdi, *La Traviata*, trans. by T. T. Barker (Pennsylvania: Oliver Ditson, [n.d.]).
22. Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', p. 129.
23. Janelle Reinelt, 'The Politics of Form: Realism, Melodrama and Pam Gems's *Camille*', *Women in Performance*, 4 (1989), 96-103.
24. See Katherine Worth, 'Images of Women in Modern English Theater', in *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
25. Susan Carlson interviewed Pam Gems on 22nd April, 1986.  
See Robert Shannon Turley, 'Gender, Myth and History in Recent British Playwrights' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Florida State University, 1992), p. 114.
26. Keith Gordon, 'Review of *Camille*', *The Times*, 25 October 1984, p. 12.
27. Graham Hirschorn, 'Review of *Camille*', *Guardian*, 25 October 1984, p. 14.
28. Stephen S. Stanton, '*Camille*' and *Other Plays*, p. xxx.
29. Susan Carlson, 'Revisionary Endings: Pam Gems's *Aunt Mary* and *Camille*', in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Theatre*, ed. by Linda Hart (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1989), pp. 103-17.
30. Susan Carlson, 'Revisionary Endings', p. 110.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**PAM GEMS**

***MARLENE***

**DECONSTRUCTING DIETRICH: EXPOSING HOLLYWOOD  
MYTH IN *MARLENE***



## Introduction

I am the icon who does not fuck up.<sup>1</sup>

In an interview, Gems discusses her passion for her art which goes some way towards explaining why she chose Marlene Dietrich as a focus:

I have always been stage-struck and loved the theatre but I had to find a way of justifying something that I loved so much but which at the same time seemed to me to be frivolous. Dietrich was perfect. This icon was Aphrodite and Diana, Juno and Demeter in one.<sup>2†</sup>

Here, Gems brings together the idea of the female as both icon and legend and this provides the point of discussion on Dietrich which informs and directs this chapter on Gems's play, *Marlene*. First, it seems necessary to discuss the ideas of myth and iconography in terms of Dietrich's cinematic rise to stardom.

### Iconography: Myth-Making in the Cinema

... there arose, identifiable by standard appearance, behaviour and attributes, the well remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl (perhaps the most convincing modern equivalents of the medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues). ... The conduct of the characters was predetermined accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

Erwin Panofsky's detection of the primitive stereotyping that characterised the early cinema could prove useful for discerning the way myths of women have operated in the

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<sup>†</sup> In Greek myth, Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, was the goddess of love and beauty, while Demeter was the goddess of fertility and protector of women. In Roman myth, Juno, the queen of the Olympian gods, was noted for her stately bearing and regal beauty, while Diana, was the virginal goddess of the hunt and moon. *Concise Classical Reference Dictionary of Myth and Fable*, ed. by Alice Grandison and others (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1982). While I am not altogether convinced by the parallel Gems makes between Dietrich and Diana it is evident that Gems is clearly dazzled by Dietrich and the mythology surrounding her.



cinema. Panofsky locates the origins of iconography and myth making in the cinema in terms of practical necessity; he suggests that in the early cinema the audience had much difficulty deciphering what appeared on the screen. Fixed iconography, then, was introduced to aid understanding and provide the audience with basic facts with which to comprehend the narrative. Iconography, as a specific kind of sign or cluster of signs based on certain conventions within the Hollywood genres has been partly responsible for the stereotyping and myth-making of its male and female stars within the commercial cinema in general.

In general, the myths governing Dietrich as a cinematic signifier are no different from those governing other cultural products: they relate to a standard value system informing all cultural systems in a given society. Myth uses icons, but the icon is its weakest point. Furthermore, it is possible to use icons (that is conventional configurations) in the face of and against the mythology usually associated with them. For example, Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* analyses how a sign can be emptied of its original denotative meaning and a new connotative meaning superimposed upon it. What was a complete sign consisting of a signifier plus a signified becomes merely the signifier of a new signified, which subtly usurps the place of the original denotation. In this way, the new connotation is mistaken for the natural, obvious and evident denotation: this is what makes it the signifier of the ideology of the society in which it is used. This chapter attempts to go further in this mythical analysis using Dietrich as its case study. Not only is it of primary importance to demonstrate how the many signifiers collate in order to construct Dietrich as a mythical figure, but also it is my intention to focus on the consequent deconstruction of these signifiers by Gems in her play, *Marlene*, thus creating a new and de-mythologised set of signifiers.



Myth then, as a form of speech and discourse, represents the major means in which women have been used in the cinema: myth transmits and informs the ideology of sexism and renders it invisible - when it is made visible it evaporates - and therefore natural.<sup>†</sup> This process puts the question of the stereotyping of the female in a somewhat different light. For example, it could be argued that precisely because of the iconography of Hollywood, the system offers some resistance to the unconscious workings of myth. Thus, Richard Dyer notes in *Heavenly Bodies*, that unconscious workings of myth barely existed in Hollywood due to its strict control and precise organisation of its stars:

Hollywood controlled not only the stars and their films but their promotion, the pin-ups and glamour portraits, press releases and fan clubs. In turn, Hollywood's connections with other media industries meant that what got into the press, who got to interview a star, what clips were released to television was decided by Hollywood.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, as Dyer also admits, sexist ideology is no less present here, as it is in the nature of myth to drain the sign (the "image" of woman = the "function" of woman in the film narrative) of its meaning and superimpose another that thus appears natural. (17) This point assumes considerable importance in *Stars*, when Dyer examines Dietrich as a female star in 1930's Hollywood. He attempts to discuss her in terms of an "individual", but ultimately cannot separate her from the star-system and thus her individuality is replaced with the more familiar category of "star/director study"<sup>5</sup> - an extension of Von Sternberg. Similarly, in Rebecca Bell-Metereau's <sup>6</sup> attempt to free Dietrich from the restrictions of the Hollywood star-system, she rejects Dietrich's usual image of "director's

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<sup>†</sup> Roland Barthes insists that myth is a type of speech rather than an object: "...everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message." Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathan Cape Press, 1972), pp. 109-59 (p. 109). This offers an alternative view to the theory that woman as cinematic myth is defined as an object. See Maureen Turim, 'Gentleman Consume Blondes', *Wide Angle*, 1 (1979), 66-80 (p. 68).



muse" only to reassess her in terms of another label, "the motif of the cabaret tradition." (103)<sup>†</sup> Thus, as iconography offers in some ways a greater resistance to the realistic characterisations, the mythic qualities of certain stereotypes become far more easily detachable and can be used as a shorthand for referring to an ideological tradition in order to provide a critique of it. Indeed, Dyer himself, adopts this shorthand approach in his study of the star-system in *Stars*. He structures his argument in terms of a listing of stereotypes, categories and labels.

The conventional view about female stars working in Hollywood (Dietrich being one of many) is that they had little opportunity for real expression within the dominant sexist ideology; they were token women and little more. In 1974, Pam Cook and Claire Johnston wrote one of the first essays using Lacanian theory to prove this very point. In 'The Place of Woman in Cinema',<sup>7</sup> Cook and Johnston consider film as a coded and artificial construct and the task of feminist criticism is to decode it. They set out to prove that female stars and their on-screen characters are not the independent agents they seem to be, but rather serve as signifiers encoded by a patriarchal culture. They assert that:

In Hollywood, both on and off-screen, 'woman' is no more than an object of exchange between men ... the means by which men express their relationships with each other. Woman is thus the locus of a dilemma for the patriarchal human order and a locus of contradictions defined from male interaction. (109)

By reading Hollywood and its films as a text which contains the contradictory interplay of different codes, Cook and Johnston attempt to disengage the real woman from the

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<sup>†</sup> Further discussion of Bell-Metereau's text, *Hollywood Androgyny* in relation to Dietrich's cross-dressing and androgyny



screen-myth and thus bring about reverberations within the sexist ideology in which the film is made.

In rejecting a sociological analysis<sup>†</sup> of Dietrich in the cinema we reject any view in terms of realism, for this would involve an acceptance of the apparent natural denotation of the sign and would involve a denial of the reality of myth in operation. Within a sexist ideology and a male dominated cinema, Dietrich is presented as what she represents for man; Dietrich as Dietrich is totally absent in her films written and directed by Von Sternberg (male). Using Dietrich as a case-study, Laura Mulvey, in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', utilises Freudian theory to state that:

The fetishistic image portrayed relates only to male narcissism: Dietrich represents not herself but, by a process of reconstruction and displacement, the male phallus... It is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent.<sup>8</sup>

If we view the image of Dietrich as sign within the sexist ideology of Hollywood, we see that her portrayal is merely one item subject to the law of verisimilitude, a law that Von Sternberg reacted against. The law of verisimilitude<sup>††</sup> (what determines the impression of realism) in the cinema is precisely responsible for the repression of the image of Dietrich as woman and the celebration of her non-existence.

The point becomes clearer when we look at a typical Dietrich film précis - one that revolves entirely around Dietrich and the idea of the female star. The system in

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<sup>†</sup> By 'sociological analysis', I am referring to an approach which compares screen images of women with real women, past or present. This discussion takes the view that Hollywood film is a coded artificial construct which may be decoded by using feminist film criticism as a tool.

<sup>††</sup> The law of verisimilitude was a tenet laid down by US Congress in 1920 as part of its terms and conditions governing film studios in the USA which stated that "studios would take responsibility for their films maintaining the appearance or semblance of being true or real." See Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (London: BFI Press, 1973), p. 72.



operation delineates as follows: in order that the male protagonist remain within the centre of the universe in a text that focuses on the image of Dietrich, the auteur is forced to repress the idea of woman as a social sexual being (her Otherness) and to deny the opposition man/woman altogether. Dietrich as sign, then, becomes the pseudo-centre of the filmic discourse.

In this chapter, much of the research done on the star system concentrates on the star (Dietrich) as the focus for false and alienating dreams which is borne out so clearly in Gems's *Marlene*. This empirical approach is essentially concerned with the construction and effects of the star system, ultimately proving that the fetishisation of the star does indicate the collective fantasy of phallogentrism, serving only to reinforce the myth.

### **Hollywood: Creating Scopophilic Myth**

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema that fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. This chapter also seeks to use Dietrich to discuss the interweaving of erotic pleasure in her films, its meaning and in particular the central place of the image of Dietrich. The assertion Gems casts on this in *Marlene* is that orchestrating and overanalysing fame, or beauty, breeds within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

According to Laura Mulvey, the myth of Dietrich offers a number of possible pleasures for the audience which can be used as a useful framework for evaluating Dietrich as a star. The first is Freud's notion of scopophilia: the circumstances in which



looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Originally, in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality that exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. He associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Later, in *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, Freud developed a second theory by suggesting that scopophilia, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, translating this theory into film terms, Mulvey states that:

...the former implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with the recognition of his like.<sup>9</sup>

For Mulvey, visual pleasure (scopophilia) as constructed in the cinema is male pleasure. In line with patriarchal culture, pleasure in looking is split between active/male and passive/female: woman as image and man as the bearer of the look, both on screen and in the audience. Nowhere is this theory better illustrated than with Dietrich and her director, Josef Von Sternberg, a man who uses scopophilia almost as the content or subject matter of his films and uses it to a fetishistic extreme. Furthermore, it is Von Sternberg who creates the signifiers and in turn creates Dietrich as myth.

## Von Sternberg: Creator of the Signifier/Signified

It is the nature of a woman to be passive, receptive, dependent on male aggression, and capable of enduring pain... she is not normally outraged by being manipulated; on the contrary, she usually enjoys it. I have plenty of evidence to assume that no woman, as opposed to the male, has ever failed to enjoy this possibly mortifying experience of being reorganised in the course of incarnating my version of her.<sup>10†</sup>

This quotation, taken from his memoirs *Fun In a Chinese Laundry*, bears arrogant testimony to the self importance of its author; the psychological mentor and svengali who imposed **his** vision of Marlene Dietrich on the screen and the world. Sam Jaffe confirms Von Sternberg's function in Dietrich's life:

He was her representative, her agent, her chaperone. In all my days at Paramount, I never saw a man who took a piece of clay and so ruthlessly shaped it to his will as Von Sternberg did with Dietrich. He gave direction to her career as well as definition to her image: no other director on the lot did that ... you could not think of Dietrich without Von Sternberg ... he definitely had something this woman needed.<sup>11</sup>

Von Sternberg's first glimpse of Dietrich in 1929, as she gave a characteristic glare of cold disdain sealed his fascination. In fact, her gaze made such an impression on him that he was to produce it in film after film, in different lights and shadows, against different backgrounds as if it possessed the miraculous power of epiphany. He was to be accused years later of simply using Dietrich as the principal sexual prop in his inventory of erotic effects. However, writing in his autobiography some thirty five years later, he makes a point of distancing himself from her mythical creation:

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† The biographical material concerning Von Sternberg, unless stated otherwise, is taken from his autobiography, *Fun In a Chinese Laundry*. Similarly, biographical material on Dietrich is taken from Charles Higham's 1977 biography, *Marlene*. See endnotes for full references.



I gave her nothing that she did not already have ... What I did was to dramatise her attributes and make them visible for all to see; though, as there were perhaps too many, I concealed some.<sup>12</sup>

Although some may have considered he was obsessed with Dietrich, the likelihood is that in such an egotistical man as Von Sternberg, the beloved's image was only a reflecting mirror for his own narcissistic vision. In the films they made together in Hollywood, Von Sternberg nearly always included a character who bore so close a resemblance to himself that he might have been taken for a double of the director. He thus gained an erotic satisfaction by proxy without having to suffer the artistic pains of the actor.

In Marlene Dietrich he found his most celebrated muse to reflect his private desires. Speaking to *Film Weekly* in March 1932, Dietrich confesses in accordance with Von Sternberg's criteria:

... without Von Sternberg I should be absolutely nothing. ... he is the one and only man who is capable of bringing out my true self.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, 'found' is not the right word, 'shaped' is better. As John Baxter, one of his critics, once wrote: Von Sternberg's talent was to "select from the work of others the elements he wanted to use."<sup>14</sup> Among these elements were, first, Dietrich's own nature; second, films which she had already made which reflected aspects of it; and third, Von Sternberg's own specifications for his 'visionary woman' which in his imagination he had formulated, using images created by his predecessors in erotic perversity - Baudelaire, Beardsley, Goya, Huysmans and Felicien Rops. Indeed, his first literary description of Dietrich seems to confirm what was already in his mind's eye:

Here was not only a model who had been designed by Rops, but Toulouse-Lautrec would have turned a couple of handsprings had he laid eyes on her. Her appearance was ideal: what she did with it was something else again. That would be my concern.<sup>15</sup>

At this point there seems no doubt that his “concern” with Dietrich was to create in the flesh the image of perfection he fantasised in his mind. However, Dietrich as ‘woman’ was not sufficient to satisfy his legendary agenda. What follows is an analysis which charts the painstaking construction of Dietrich as cinematic myth - an accumulation of star-signifiers piled en masse which prepare us for Gems’s ironic deconstruction in *Marlene*. The first manipulative tool in transforming the woman into myth is Von Sternberg’s utilisation of the camera - the recreation of the scopophilic male.

### **Constructing the Image**

#### **(i.) The Camera: Recreating the Scopophilic Male**

It is well known that Von Sternberg once said he would welcome his films being projected upside down so that story and character involvement would not interfere with the spectator’s undiluted appreciation of the screen image. This statement is revealing but ingenuous. Ingenuous, in that his films do demand that the figure of the woman should be the identifiable, definitive icon. But, revealing, in that it emphasises the fact that for him the pictorial space enclosed by the frame is paramount rather than narrative or identification processes. Sternberg opts to produce the ultimate fetish, taking it to the point where the powerful look of the male protagonist (characteristic of traditional narrative) is broken in favour of the image in direct erotic rapport with the spectator. The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt (woman), but a perfect product (myth), whose body, stylised and



fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look.

As has already been mentioned, Von Sternberg dedicated the film to the face. He insisted upon positioning the camera as close as possible to the skin's surface in an effort to contain and objectify it. As scenes progressed, he would veer closer and closer to the face, so much so that Dietrich almost disappears. Her outline grows indistinct, receding into soft focus and her place is taken by the surface or texture of the image, the screen. A remoteness is thus created: a disconcerting distance between Dietrich and spectator that no focus-puller could measure, since it only exists in the spectator's erotic imagination. This in itself can be perceived as a deconstructive act on the part of the director for Dietrich has been reduced to the substrate of representation; revealed as no longer simply the privileged object of the gaze, but the support of the cinematic image. Furthermore, Von Sternberg would further sectionalise Dietrich with his camera, letting a part of her imply the whole of her. For example, in *Shanghai Express*, instead of showing Dietrich (Shanghai Lily) at prayer, he photographs only her hands. To portray her grief, he photographs only her tears, while a close-up on her lips denotes her fancy.

I would argue that the marking of the image in this way, the positioning of the woman as screen - all of this merely heightens the eroticism, makes her more desirable, stimulating the scopophilic desire of the film-maker. Indeed, its resulting envy became an integral part of Von Sternberg's camera work, especially in his filming of Dietrich's leading men - all of whom he despised. They were a breed he always detested because they were often so tall and handsome, only serving to emphasise his smaller stature and less aesthetic features. Therefore, as well as Von Sternberg opting for leading men with a semblance to himself, Dietrich was always posed above the male protagonists in order



for them to be forced to look up at her - the camera realising the physicality of Dietrich being placed on a pedestal, reflecting the director's desire to sustain her as myth. In return, Dietrich enables Von Sternberg to impose himself on the male actors and at the same time assuage the jealousy arising from what he sensed were his own romantic deficiencies.

The image of Dietrich indicates that even when the woman is no longer visible, she is the support of its seduction of the spectator, its provocation. And I think one could ask similar kinds of questions about the desire of Von Sternberg who appeals to the woman as a form of theoretical proof - the desire to reveal her status as support, substrate of truth/untruth or representation, and simultaneously to maintain her 'operation,' because she can indeed be so representative of many things even if she does not understand them herself. The question is why the woman (i.e. Dietrich) must always carry the burden of the troping/demonstration, why she must be the one to figure the myth and why she is the support of these topological systems.

As soon as the dichotomy between the visible as guarantee and the visible as inherently destabilised, between truth and myth, is mapped onto sexual difference, the woman is idealised, whether as undecidability or jouissance. The necessary incompleteness or failure of the attempt to leave behind the terms of such a problematic is revealed in the symptomatic role of the woman, who takes up the slack and becomes the object of a desire which reflects the lack that haunts myth.

What I am attempting to suggest here is how we might begin to understand the philosophical and psychoanalytical envy of the woman through examination of a desire which always seems more visible in the cinema, especially through the camera of an



overweening director. The focus on the camera as male scopophilic gaze leads feminist theory to imagine what Dietrich's returning gesture might have been, having been previously denied her own autonomy. In *Marlene*, Gems colludes with feminist theory by releasing Dietrich from the constraints of the camera (male scopophilic gaze) and its associated myth-making.

## **(ii.) Lighting**

The characteristic 'Dietrich face' of youth had been latent in the camerawork of some of her better photographed films. A thoroughgoing cosmetic remodelling of it came with her Hollywood contract and crucial amendments were made with the materials to hand in order to satisfy Von Sternberg's criteria. Chief of these was lighting, an element that is to prove so important to the mature Dietrich in Pam Gems's play. Frequently, Von Sternberg lit her from above, emphasising her brow and diminishing the size of her nose by this so-called 'grace-angle.' This brought out the definition of Dietrich's cheekbones and created the fascinating dissonance between her heavy eyelids and the artificial eyebrows, shaved and pencilled in, to the shape of the familiar flyaway antennae above them. The whites of her eyes were always spotlighted in order for everything in the frame other than Dietrich (i.e. usually her male leads) to melt into the shadows.

As she moved around the set, Von Sternberg devised a particular lighting technique in order to maintain the 'grace angle.' He created a travelling spotlight which moved with Dietrich's face at exactly forty five degrees from above the line of her hair, augmented by special lights positioned either side of the spotlight. This lighting



arrangement went unchanged and Dietrich still insisted on its exact implementation as part of her cabaret repertoire.<sup>†</sup>

In close-ups, Von Sternberg positioned three tiny spotlights, to meet just above her browline; with the help of a silver streak drawn in wax crayon down the bridge of her nose, these reduced its width. The rhinoplasty operation was not particularly sophisticated or reliable enough in the twenties and thirties to warrant use by Von Sternberg. He could not take any risks with his muse and therefore hours were invested in lighting techniques in order to re-sculpt Dietrich's face. Her nose was a particularly problematic feature to enhance due to its predominantly Germanic appearance. According to Charles Higham, Von Sternberg, cruelly referred to it as resembling a 'ski-slope' and in turn, Dietrich became neurotic about its size.<sup>††</sup> Lighting was Von Sternberg's cosmetic surgery and he used it to perfected detail in order to sculpt his star according to optimum facial proportions.

However, Lee Garmes, lighting photographer for Dietrich's film *Morocco*, later laid claim to the fact that it was he who was responsible for creating the classic Dietrich image, and not Von Sternberg. In his book, *Behind the Light*,<sup>†</sup> he says, he, at first, followed the director's instruction to light her from one side only: but then the daily 'rushes' showed him that what this was producing was a second Garbo. Whereupon, without telling Von Sternberg, Garmes reverted to the 'north' lighting he himself preferred. The simple truth is that each man's vision probably modified the other's.

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<sup>†</sup> See Peter Cunard and Robin Courage, 'The night we had to turn Dietrich into an iron lady', *Mail on Sunday*, 16 May 1999, p. 15. This article discusses the lighting techniques used on stage to achieve Dietrich's look.

<sup>††</sup> See Charles Higham, *Marlene: The Life of Marlene Dietrich* (London: Granada Press, 1977), p. 82.

<sup>†</sup> Lee Garmes was a lighting director and photographer who worked for a variety of Hollywood studios (1922-1960). He arranged press photography and the lighting directions for many famous stars including Dietrich. His book reveals the tricks and techniques used in capturing some of the famous images associated with certain stars. See Lee Garmes, *Behind the Light* (New York: Madison Grove Press, 1962), p. 88.



Moreover, it is interesting to note each man's enthusiasm for staking their claim on Dietrich's creation through this particular medium.

### **(iii.) Speech and Song**

However, lighting was only part of Von Sternberg's presentation of Dietrich. He 'edited' her whole personality, starting with the way she spoke. Although she had a basic knowledge of English, Dietrich, at this early stage of her career, did not yet know it confidently enough to handle long sentences, even an unusual word threw her. This is one reason for Von Sternberg's notching up such an abnormal number of takes in filming the scenes (sometimes over three hundred attempts). Another reason being Dietrich's obvious speech impediment - she could not pronounce the letter 'r'. This particular defect is seized upon by Gems in *Marlene* and is used for comic effect in order to further undermine her legendary image. As Von Sternberg demanded Dietrich's intonation to fit with her mythical persona he employed the services of an elocutionist, Elsie Grace, in order to eradicate not only her impediments and errors but also her own voice.<sup>†</sup>

The result of his efforts to perfect ended in compromise as Dietrich could not quite rid herself of her strong German accent, nor indeed the speech impediment. Although softened, the accent had to be kept and in spite of her bizarre pronunciation and verbal idiosyncrasies it fortunately colluded with Von Sternberg's ideal of the exotic woman.

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<sup>†</sup> A section on Elsie Grace's work in Hollywood as an elocutionist to a number of celebrities, provides a revealing insight into the influence of the film studios and the construction of a star through the voice. See Stanley Solomon, *The Film Idea* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 113-15 (p. 115).

He stylised her speech by demanding an unnaturally deep, slow and breathy delivery which eventually became another Dietrich trademark.<sup>†</sup> However, her voice was muffled and dubbed over in crucial places so as to disguise the problematic speech defect. For these reasons, singing also proved difficult. In terms of natural talent, Dietrich did not possess a good singing voice and had to take further lessons in order to improve it. Again, in spite of valiant efforts, she could not perfect the classical tone and pitch required by Von Sternberg, so his only option was to stylise within her voice capabilities.

She became forced into the mould of ‘diseuse’ or ‘*sprechtsinger*’ - speaking her way through songs with her new, stylised voice. With a range of barely more than an octave, spoken in mezzo-baritone and with no recognition of key, this style of *sprechtstimme* gave an impression to her songs which dramatically coloured the meaning of the words. Dietrich avoided the long-held note and would often embellish or improvise lyrics in order to detract from her speech impediment and problematic singing voice. Later, she was to say that she picked her repertoire for the words rather than the melodies. This, of course, caused some confusion among the press and critics who were not ready for her unorthodox style. Indeed, Dick Williams, writing for the *New York Mirror* in 1953 stated that Dietrich “... has no great voice ... but she has an adroit beguiling style.”<sup>16</sup> This judgement scarcely conceals a certain perplexity typical of other reviews. Yet, Dietrich’s style, however clumsy, was fortunately superseded by her mythical persona. Her faithful audience overlooked her faults and her style in which the story carried the song, the way she carried the whole show, by aural implication of the

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<sup>†</sup> See Higham, *Marlene*, pp. 78-81 (p. 78). This section provides a detailed account of Dietrich's voice development as influenced by Von Sternberg and provided the factual information for this subchapter. See Bibliography and Endnotes for full reference.



words' emotional resonances was hailed as a marvellously effective and winning way of bringing a legend to the people.

Such a complex repertoire ran to her precise specification - one false gesture on the part of the conductor, or one bad note played by the orchestra meant she risked having her flaws exposed to the public. Her sheer dread of being 'given away' by others, poignantly portrayed by Gems in *Marlene*, meant that her musical arrangements, as with the rest of her itinerary, remained precise, orchestrated and unchanged for all her working years.

#### **(iv.) Physical**

Von Sternberg also forged ahead with Dietrich's physical transformation, without even consulting his protégée. This was not that unusual as Dietrich never even saw a script during her film career. She was simply told by her 'Professor Higgins' that he would instruct her on what to say from day to day. The schedule for her physical metamorphosis followed a similar pattern.

Von Sternberg had Dietrich's hair dyed platinum blonde, and it was curled, acquired and coiffed to such a degree that all reality was lost. Filming scenes where the wind was blowing, or she made any movement, it had to remain perfectly smooth without any hair out of place. David Selznick, the rival film producer, commented in dismay at its unnatural appearance.

That hair gets too much attention. Every hair is so well placed it could be nothing but a wig and the insistence that it is sprinkled with real gold dust baffles me even further!<sup>17</sup>

Apparently, Von Sternberg considered that strategic applications of gold dust on the hair and face would compliment his lighting techniques and further enhance Dietrich's projected image.

Dietrich's infamous high cheekbones were hollowed by heavy rouge and weight-loss. It is also rumoured that the extraction of her back teeth also aided the creation of this particular trademark. The legs were slimmed by intense diet and exercise regimes as Von Sternberg ordered her to lose thirty pounds in weight. Everything was designed to bring her figure into line with his fantasy and everything had to be perfect. This also included being given the studio's cosmetic liposuction treatment that made her too chunky Berlin flesh literally melt.

Her eyebrows were shaved away to be repainted higher on her forehead in the shape of the familiar antennae. Her already pale face was rendered even paler with thick panstick and powder. Glycerine was placed in and around her eyes in order to create the glassy freshness and sparkling effect from the camera lens, while the inner eye-lid lines were painted white so as to make them seem bigger.

Massage slimmed her buttocks and thighs to even svelter proportions, her ankles being sometimes bandaged so as to disperse the slightest tendency to fat at this crucial juncture. Indeed, it was said that her fondness for wearing trousers owed something to the need to conceal the surgical bindings. Bandages were also used to shape other parts of her body. As Von Sternberg denied Dietrich the use of underwear for the reason that it marred her screen image, so the bandages were also used to slim her waist and to keep her breasts held high on set. Eventually the bandages were replaced with a bespoke,



form-fitting, flesh-coloured undergarment made of latex rubber created to mould her figure according to perfection. As Dietrich got older, so the garment covered more of her body. In her mature years, she wore a foundation garment which disguised her wrinkled neck and covered both arms as well as contouring her form into its previously youthful shape. Its exact design was always kept a secret between herself and Milo Anderson, one of her many costume designers, as she did not want to expose any signs of ageing. Hence, the illusion was wonderfully sustained whatever underpinnings might have been revealed to her dresser. As a consequence, one sharp-eyed newsman noted that Dietrich never sat down during her cabaret acts. This was a hazard of wearing such bindings, but it was also alleged that she was conscious of the inches that age had gathered around even the best-exercised midriff. This example, again, serves to remind us that Dietrich considered herself always 'on parade' - consumed by her public image and legendary status. These bindings are a crucial signifier for Gems, who uses them to great effect in order to promote an alternative significance at the conclusion of *Marlene*. For the playwright, the bandages are reassessed to symbolise the unforgiving exposures of old age.

As the lead in *Blonde Venus*, Dietrich had little in common with the classical Greek ideal of womanhood, but for the film's release in Germany the poster artist was ordered to reshape Dietrich's already slender hips and thighs in order to heighten her resemblance to the Venus de Milo.

Her image of perfection on-screen also became imperative for Dietrich off-screen. So much so that even her own daughter Maria became both enamoured and confused about her mother's complex identity:

... even when she was not working she would still be dressed in jewels and furs... I just wanted her to stand there, shimmering and perfumed only for me .... I would cry myself to sleep in the dark... I never felt good enough for her. She was so beautiful that it always gave me a feeling of ugliness and unworthiness.<sup>18</sup>

With such obsession devoted to her physical appearance it was only a matter of time before Dietrich became neurotic about the maintenance of this highly stylised image. One of Marlene's co-stars, Melvyn Douglas, recalls an event which is prophetic to the content of *Gems's Marlene*:

Maybe she felt herself slipping back all the time. ... She was just too meticulous about her hair, make-up, lighting, jewellery and costumes, so much so that as we were going through our rehearsal it became obvious that she wasn't even looking at me... she was sort of glancing out of the corner of her eye. Suddenly I looked around the set and then noticed all these strategically placed mirrors .. she was continually checking herself from every angle instead of acting. It was quite disconcerting. It was like a *menage à trois*.<sup>19</sup>

Even though it seemed as if Dietrich was not able to cope so easily with so many dramatic changes taking place, there were still more alterations to be made before Von Sternberg had completed his star. He decided to change her name. Dietrich's real name, Maria Magdalene was considered too long and had too many religious overtones for it to be considered suitable for her screen image. By merging the two to form 'Marlene,' Von Sternberg had discovered an alluring and exotic name befitting his fantasy, even though he had erased her identity in one foul swoop.



## (v.) Costume

What emerges from research into the legendary wardrobe is that Von Sternberg clothed Dietrich in metaphysical/symbolic material according to his fantasy which predetermined his criteria - but this never involved his muse dressing like a man.

The infamous masculine attire which stamped Dietrich onto the filmgoers' imaginations (notably in the form of top hat and tails) was never Von Sternberg's desire for his creation. It was merely a protesting stance against Hollywood's Production Code (and the sharper draconian measures outlined by the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency) which sought to censor salacious material from Hollywood productions in the 1930's. Thus, Von Sternberg was forced into more hypocritical subtleties of titillation and so Dietrich's masculine attire was eroticised and coupled with a more daring choice of song title, e.g. 'What Am I Bid For My Apples?', not to mention her stylised bisexuality. Her much talked about sexual orientation was another tool in Von Sternberg's offensive against the censors - Dietrich could simply turn it on and off at his bidding.

In *Hollywood Androgyny*, Rebecca Bell-Metereau offers an interesting insight into Dietrich's cross-dressing in the context of her films. Firstly, she notes that Sternberg's masculinisation of the female is often accompanied by the feminisation of the male, with the role exchanges reinforced by visual cues. For Bell-Metereau, Von Sternberg's intention was always sexual. Thus, it is more than coincidental ("a loaded gesture" (104)) that in *Shanghai Express* (1932), Dietrich puts on Clive Brooks' hat while encircling him with her feather boa. Again, in *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), Dietrich, dressed in her Hussar's uniform, proves herself more than a man than Peter



(Sam Jaffe) who has the long, loose hair and flowing robes.<sup>†</sup> Alternatively, we can also view Dietrich's androgynous appeal and use of cross-dressing as an example of gender performativity as highlighted by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Dietrich's use of sexual stylisation in her costume and her oscillation between butch/femme identities, parodies the notion of an original or primary gender identity. Butler asserts that in imitating gender, cross-dressing implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency. In her discussion of drag acts she provides a theory which lends itself well to Dietrich's double role as a performer (in terms of actress) and a performer (in terms of gender). Butler indicates:

... the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (137)

This argument provides a useful framework in which to analyse Dietrich and offers a more interrogative challenge to the gender issues surrounding androgyny compared with the theories of Bell-Metereau. Yet, taking issue with Bell-Metereau, Alexander Walker in *Sex in the Movies* makes a more pertinent point that Dietrich's personal background and film persona owe a great deal to the masculine military tradition.<sup>††</sup> Instead of viewing the male dress as military rather than sexual, I would argue that there is something sexual in the military motif, particularly in the German context. The gender-related elements of submission and aggression complement the strict military tradition. It

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<sup>†</sup> Bell-Metereau makes further connections between the masculinised Dietrich and the feminised male interchange which she believes stemmed from the German cabaret tradition. See Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 103-10.

<sup>††</sup> Walker argues that: "the male dress Dietrich often puts on in her films is not necessarily sexual in its undertones: generally it has a military association, too." See Alexander Walker, *Sex in the Movies* (London: Michael Joseph, 1966), p. 94.



is interesting to note that Dietrich's identity as a foreigner, and a German no less, undermined her appeal for popular audiences during the war. As film censorship took over and the United States witnessed the events that led to the Second World War, the masculinised, foreign female image was diminished and replaced by less threatening models of femininity.<sup>†</sup>

However, I would argue that Von Sternberg's preference for Dietrich was glamour and allure. He loved to wrap her head in veils and sumptuous fabrics like a fetishised Madonna, screening the wolfish cavities out of her cheeks, adding innocence and an air of mystery to her mythical screen image. He employed the famous couturier Jean Louis to create her bespoke furs and gowns. Even as far back as the 1930's, it was not unusual for Von Sternberg to pay in excess of ten thousand pounds for one of Dietrich's dresses. All her clothing was studded with real jewels as well as being specially tailored 'breakaway' garments, cut with an invisible slit so that she could practically walk in and out of them between costume changes on set, satisfying Von Sternberg's rigorous time keeping. Yet, in spite of Louis's efforts, Dietrich always found one item annoyingly recalcitrant. Ironically, she told a news reporter in Las Vegas that:

The socks are still a problem. He [Louis] has not found any way to put them on differently. I still have to bend over and put them on myself.<sup>20</sup>

Louis, a well-established designer before his association with Dietrich, often had to endure weeks of having his creations ripped apart and re-sewn until both Von Sternberg and Dietrich were satisfied. He recounts the tense moments of her dress fittings:

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<sup>†</sup> If Dietrich was too foreign to remain a popular favourite throughout her career, Bell-Metereau suggests that it was Katharine Hepburn who took her place in Hollywood because of her "American womanhood admired by an American audience." (p. 115)



Marlene is intelligent, ruthless and quite extraordinary over clothes. She never says 'Good morning'. She stands in the fitting room, hour after hour ... without a smile, pinching a tenth of an inch of material here or there to show how it puckers. As the hours go by she pinches a bit lower down the dress. I have known her to have a garment fitted six times because of a seam in the **lining** of which she didn't quite like the angle.<sup>21</sup>

This petty attention to detail is used to great effect by Gems in *Marlene*, but is used to promote the idea of the has-been star becoming awkward and bombastic with age.

However, perhaps the most famous item in Dietrich's wardrobe, given little significance by Gems, is her cigarette and Von Sternberg deemed her naked without it. A cloud of cigarette smoke curling out of an elegant cigarette holder, wreathing around her face like the physical manifestation of smouldering reminiscence was often far more of an erotic and mythical signifier than the priceless clothes she wore on her back.

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From Hollywood onwards, everything, to the last detail, in a Dietrich-Von Sternberg film - lenses, lighting, costume, cosmetics and props etc. was accounted for, and furthermore, created its own psychological comment on their director-actress relationship. No secret ever came so well wrapped up as Marlene Dietrich, and Von Sternberg ensured he stayed its keeper. Indeed, it was only Von Sternberg who fused himself emotionally and spiritually with what he saw. As he once told Peter Bogdanovich during an interview, "*I am Miss Dietrich, Miss Dietrich is me.*"<sup>22</sup> Dietrich confirmed this when Bogdanovich asked her if the remark upset her. In spite of denying suggestions of an off-screen romance, she vehemently replied, "No, because it was true."<sup>23</sup> Von Sternberg forced a denial of Dietrich's eroticism to stretch into the realms of reality, in



spite of his erotic creation of her and subsequent uncensored obsession with it. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that Von Sternberg was only obsessed with Dietrich's mythical image, for the simple reason that **he** created it - the by-product of the scopophilic ego. He is not interested in Dietrich as 'real woman' - and thus sought to censor her links with reality.

This idea of a censorship of realism within the female myth is illustrated by a comment made by André Malraux, who once compared Dietrich to "a myth like Phryne,"<sup>24</sup> rather than to any other actress. One can see what he meant, but the comparison, ironically enough, happens to be singularly inapposite. Phryne was the notorious Athenian courtesan of the fourth century BC., who tried to discompose the judges in the act of sentencing her by stripping off her clothes. This was hardly Von Sternberg's ideal for Dietrich. Had Von Sternberg been defending Phryne, he would never have let her appear in court other than fully clad from the neck down, and maybe he would have added a half-veil or, quite possibly, put her in breeches. The important point here being that at least Phryne, (even confined to the restraints of myth) was, at least, granted some erotic autonomy. Von Sternberg, however, served notice that, where Dietrich's eroticism was concerned, her director was the great coverer-up. Thus, what Von Sternberg sought to censor, so *Gems*, in contrast, seeks to reveal and deconstruct.

### **Background to *Marlene*: Dietrich the Septuagenarian**

It is significant that *Gems* chooses to set *Marlene* in the 1970's as this decade corresponds with the aftermath of Von Sternberg's death in 1969. As a consequence, the loss of her 'creator,' meant Dietrich, ironically enough, was seen less frequently in public. Gone were her halcyon days on the 'silver screen' - younger, more beautiful stars



had taken her place and now, well into her seventies, Dietrich offered little other than minor television appearances on chat shows. At this stage her time was mostly taken up with concert tours and cabaret shows.

Whatever the venue, it was so vital for her to play upon an audience that the **quality** of the audience was important to her, and anything that intervened between her and the audience was anathema. Hence, it was common for her to orchestrate her audience as part of her repertoire. She would use plants and stooges to throw flowers, encourage standing ovations and call out her name. If a chorus line supported her act, it was said that the dancing girls were ordered to kick only so high. Thus, Dietrich, to the marvel of many, would then be seen kicking higher than the dance troupe. The illusion was what mattered, and she had known no other way, thanks to Von Sternberg's teachings. However, Gems, who portrays Dietrich's performance orchestrations with great detail and humour, does so with the objective of exposing the reality behind the myth.

Dietrich's need to prime and orchestrate her performances to such minute detail is largely the reason why she held off from appearing on television - she could not orchestrate television. One particular television venture courted disaster as Dietrich's cantankerousness and imperious demands initiated a major law suit which brought her close to bankruptcy.† Quickly, she became labelled as an embittered relic of a by-gone industry and as a result was courted less and less by the media. However, in spite of her age, it proved impossible for Dietrich to retire due to her financial position. She had earned millions during her lifetime but had spent almost everything, most of it being

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† According to Higham, Dietrich lodged an official complaint regarding the organisation of her own TV special in 1973. She accused the producer, Alexander Cohen, of managing the show "incompetently, inartistically, in unjustified haste, and without making adequate financial provision." Unfortunately, for Dietrich, Cohen was awarded a "suitable sum in damages."  
(294)



squandered on unnecessary luxuries and an insistence on maintaining her vast retinue of chefs, designers, maids and advisers. In her twilight years she was forced to rent out her properties and borrow large sums of money from friends in order to meet her debts and bills.

With age also came its fair share of ill-health which did nothing to alleviate her financial problems. In the seventies Dietrich suffered from repeated falls and mishaps for no other reason than that she was too old to continue her exhaustive concert tours. With concerts the only entertainment medium left for her to dominate, it was unfortunate that her accidents were always in full view of her audience. For example, she broke her arm during a performance on Broadway, only to break her ankle a few weeks later.

Whilst on-stage in her 1961 show at the Queen's Theatre, London, she tripped over backwards, (the audience cried out in horror) and lay unable to move until the concierge helped her to her feet. Worse, while singing in Washington DC, she literally tumbled off the stage itself into the orchestra pit, badly gashing her leg. She lay there, her dress covered in blood, ordering the conductor to "clear the theatre,"<sup>25</sup> before anybody could see her. A parallel incident is recounted by Gems in *Marlene*. Afterwards, Dietrich needed numerous skin grafts, her vanity proving unable to bear the scars of her falls. Due to her age, the grafts did not heal quickly and she was forced to rely on a wheelchair until extensive surgery could take place.

In Sydney, in 1975 worse was to come when Dietrich collapsed on stage. After a shocked silence, the audience began a 'cruel round of sarcastic applause,'<sup>26</sup> while Dietrich was carted away in an ambulance. Next day it was announced that doctors diagnosed a broken femur in her left leg, whereupon the offending limb was swathed in

plaster from the waist down. It had been obvious from press reports of unsteadiness on her feet during performances that the right leg, broken some eighteen months before, and the steel pin in her right hip were troubling her. Where American cabaret artists once flatteringly imitated her, they now cruelly caricatured her and the song that was her 'signature.' 'Falling In Love Again', became, on the satirist's lips, 'Falling Off Stage Again.' In spite of the damage to her body, not to mention to her dignity, Dietrich was unperturbed, travelling to performances world-wide 'hoisted onto the aircraft by forklift.'<sup>27</sup>

Later, it came to light that Dietrich was also suffering from poor circulation and hardening of the arteries. Her falls were due, not only to this, but to the tight, fine rubbery sheath (as described earlier) which she permanently wore in order to improve her figure and give her a look of firmness.

As well as encountering the problems associated with physical ageing, Dietrich was also plagued by mental deficiency. She had problems remembering her repertoire or memorising new routines and was forced to resort to cue cards, but often she could not read them due to her failing eyesight. Again, vanity prevented her from wearing spectacles. Dietrich was also treated by psychologists and therapists for chronic insomnia, as well as for her neurotic obsession for cleaning. Her playful self-taunts at being a 'hausfrau' developed into a full-blown obsession for cleanliness in her mature years. John Marven, a hardened fan of Dietrich's recalls an extraordinary scene:



One time, another fan and I went over to Marlene's apartment on Park Avenue ... I noticed a woman frantically scrubbing the front entrance. I didn't think anything of it. She had a bandanna round her head. No make-up, an ordinary loose blouse. A bucket beside her, full of grey slops and a large brush in her hand. She was scrubbing away with furious energy. We did a double take. My God! It was Dietrich. ... We mentioned to a woman next door what we had seen and she said, "Oh, that's nothing. She's **always** scrubbing!"<sup>28</sup>

Gems uses this neurosis to great effect in *Marlene*, as a way of imposing a realistic framework onto the Dietrich legend.

Isolation haunted Dietrich through the 1980's where she lived as a recluse in a small apartment until her death in May 1992.

There is no doubt that the 1970's and thereafter, were painful years for Dietrich and this provides the focus for Gems's play. Dietrich's last years have not been lived so much as lived out, and this seemed to provide sufficient material enough for Gems to make a contrast with her mythical screen presence a few decades earlier.

### **Gems and Dietrich: *The Blue Angel* (1991)**

Gems's first attempt at analysing Dietrich came in 1991 in her direct adaptation of one of the star's most remembered films, *The Blue Angel*. Ironically, it recounts the story of a man, Professor Emmanuel Rath, enslaved and ultimately destroyed by his obsession for a young show girl, Lola-Lola, who eventually sacrifices his career in order to marry her and become a stooge in the cabaret. Years later, the combination of Lola taking a new lover and his appearance on stage in the town where he once taught drives Rath insane, and he dies in his old school room with his arms wrapped around the desk



that was once a symbol of his standing. This situation is in direct opposition to the real Von Sternberg-Dietrich relationship which categorically rejected male humiliation by the female. In response to Heinrich Mann's novel, and Von Sternberg's film which sought to position Rath as the victim, Gems decided to use her version of the play to readdress the gender bias. Her objectives for *The Blue Angel* can be gleaned from her perception of the narrative she inherits:

[Rath's] marriage to Lola-Lola looks less like the surrender to a fatal passion than a grab at the chance of a lifelong meal ticket. How anybody has ever been able to see this as the tragedy of an upright citizen of Toytown ruined by the baleful influences of the floozy is quite beyond me. Lola is an attractive but unimaginative cabaret singer who marries a boring old fart in a fit of weakness, lives to regret it but is too soft-hearted to actually throw him out until his sulks, tantrums and idleness become intolerable.<sup>29</sup>

While there is by now an impressive tradition in Gems's criticism of reading 'against the grain', her remarks anticipate a production which is much more than a simple counter-reading of *The Blue Angel*. However, her efforts at revisioning the narrative became lost in the process of 'telling the tale' and the result proved sometimes disappointing to both critics and audiences alike. The production opened on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1991 to mark the unveiling of the RSC's newly refurbished Other Place Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and ran until 28<sup>th</sup> April 1992.<sup>†</sup> Coupled with a production of

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<sup>†</sup> The re-opening of the Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon heralded a new and significant phase for the RSC. The new building boasted more space with the "latest developments in lighting and technology", while still hoping to retain its most important feature of intimacy with the audience. It provided a dramatic change from "the old tin hut of yesteryear." However, the RSC still had a £3 million deficit at this time. For the 1991-92 season, Adrian Noble had been lucky enough to secure an Arts Council enhancement grant, which, even then, would only give the RSC enough funds to break even. In the meantime, plans were afoot to raise money through private investment in order to re-address the deficit. *The Blue Angel* opened at the half-way point of Noble's first Stratford season as Director of the RSC. Thus Gems's play became a crucial production to reflect on Noble's suitability for the post. Quotations and information taken from: John Peter, 'A Noble Stratford', *Sunday Times*, 30 August 1991, p. 40.



*Measure For Measure*, *The Blue Angel* became part of the RSC's annual regional tour until the following year, when it transferred to London's Globe Theatre on 20th May 1992. The very fact that the production was granted a transfer to London's West End was significant for Gems. It meant that her writing was moving out of the smaller enclaves of provincial theatres and onto the more widely recognised stages of mainstream theatre. In effect, the process heralded a positive dynamic for feminist theatre - coming out of the margins to make an impact in national and international spheres.<sup>†</sup> Thus Gems, was attempting to break out of the margins, just like many of her female protagonists.

*The Blue Angel* under the direction of Trevor Nunn (who presided over the opening of the original Other Place Theatre) and featuring Kelly Hunter as Lola-Lola met a selection of mixed reviews. Several critics found the script somewhat uneven and tended to agree that Gems's work was at its strongest late in the play.<sup>††</sup> Considerable attention went to the nature of Gems's adaptation.<sup>‡</sup> Comparisons to Dietrich's 1930 film typically suggested that Gems's bleaker and more haunting version had more similarity to the Mann novel than was intended. For example, Michael Coveney writing for the *Observer* claimed that in contrast to the film, Gems and Nunn revealed a much harsher

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<sup>†</sup> Gems's main concern in having her plays transferred to national and international stages focused on the "precarious balancing act between achieving the prestige of commercial success and compromising my writing for the sake of mainstream audiences. I don't like adapting my work just to suit the management's coffers." Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 4 February 2000.

<sup>††</sup> "This adaptation fails to engage either our attention or emotion as a play until far too late." Rod Dungate, *'The Blue Angel: Review'*, *Tribune*, 13 September 1991, p. 17.

"What is particularly absorbing is the last act... a strong, suggestive closing to an uneven play." Jane Edwardes, *'The Blue Angel: Review'*, *Time Out*, 4 September 1991, p. 24.

<sup>‡</sup> "Gems has based this musical play on a 1905 Heinrich Mann novel. Although she has updated the action to Hamburg in the late 1920's and incorporated Friedrich Hollander's songs from Sternberg's legendary 1930 movie, the result is much more savage than the film. Once or twice the adaptation lapses into corny crudity." Michael Billington, *'The Blue Angel: Review'*, *Guardian*, 3 September 1991, p. 22. "The problem lies in the adaptation, which is neither lucid enough in and of itself, nor sufficiently metaphorical to satisfy on either count... The material is reduced to an anodyne, anachronistic account in which Nunn and Gems confound not only themselves but the audience as well." Michael Quinn, *'The Blue Angel: Review'*, *What's On*, 4 September 1991, p. 15.



story and extended the expressionist references right back to Frank Wedekind.<sup>30</sup> Coveney was not alone in his reference to the expressionism of the production. Maria Bjornson's sets were largely considered the foundation for such a style. Benedict Nightingale in his review for *The Times* described a set where:

... the floor is paved with cobblestones along which tram tracks run to a palatial arch and a zigzag staircase: here a giant mirror, there an askew street lamp, above them a tiny sloping bedroom.<sup>31</sup>

It is worth noting here that the same set was to be used in a subsequent production of RSC's *Measure For Measure*. Such a set composed of geometric slants and angles would again be repeated by Gems in her 1998 production of *The Snow Palace*, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Among the positive reactions to Trevor Nunn's direction was Andrew St. George's remark that:

Nunn's direction is impeccable; the ensemble scenes seethe with energy and the tense schoolroom is controlled to suit [Philip] Madoc's stern, forbidding style. Nunn has never shied away from doing the obvious and making it work.<sup>32</sup>

However, while Kelly Hunter impressed some of her critics<sup>†</sup>, others were less enthusiastic. Charles Spencer, writing for the *Daily Telegraph* noted the absence of Dietrich:

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<sup>†</sup> " Ms. Hunter sings with bewitching courage and is the quintessential fallen idol who symbolises the loss of innocence. This is a brave, unsentimental performance that never grovels for sympathy." Maureen Paton, 'The Blue Angel: Review', *Daily Express*, 21 May 1992, p. 26. "The coltish Ms. Hunter is startling and superb. With considerable talent she effectively removes all sentimentality from her performance without ever alienating our interest in her predatory existence." Graham Hirschorn, 'The Blue Angel: Review', *Sunday Express*, 24 May 1992, p. 15.



... sexual charisma is a highly personal and unanalysable quality, but for me, Miss Hunter just misses it.<sup>33</sup>

When the play transferred to the West End, a familiar theme ran through a number of its reviews.<sup>†</sup> Kate Kellaway and Andrew St. George both noted that a studio production did not necessarily transfer as a good West End production.<sup>††</sup> Kellaway wrote that the transfer:

... was a lesson in the subjectivity of theatre-going: what was magical in Norwich seemed frumpy in the West End. It's hard to be sure that the actors were stale. There are two other possible culprits: the Globe theatre, robbing the play of its immediacy. And me, not enjoying it so much second time around.<sup>34</sup>

St. George, noted that the play had "coarsened and dwindled in the transfer from Stratford",<sup>35</sup> and offered an equally interesting explanation for this:

While The Other Place studio felt like the eponymous nightclub, with the audience on three sides of the stage, the large stage at the Globe dissipates the intimate intensity which made the studio version work. Overall, a fine studio production now risks becoming main-house kitsch. (19)

Overall, the critical reaction to the West End transfer was negative. Perhaps this is because critics were expecting to see a typical West End musical of the time.<sup>‡</sup> Gems's absolute refusal to compromise her work for the sake of the financiers who governed

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<sup>†</sup> Critics seemed drawn to the fact that the West End transfer of *The Blue Angel* coincided with the actual death of Marlene Dietrich. "It is publicity made in heaven. The divine Marlene Dietrich has departed to that great film set in the sky just as the drama that immortalised her arrives in the West End." Maureen Paton, 'The Blue Angel: Review', *Daily Express*, 21 May 1992, p. 26. "As Marlene Dietrich sped to her final rest in a 1950's Cadillac last week, the RSC fine-tuned its stage version of the film that made her famous." Andrew St. George, 'The Blue Angel: Review', *Financial Times*, 23 May 1992, p. 19.

<sup>††</sup> Ian Shuttleworth offers his opinion on the transfer: "Easy as it is to ascribe shortcomings to the venue itself, transferring from Stratford's Other Place into the 900-seater proscenium-arch Globe Theatre inevitably robs the production of almost all its intimacy." Ian Shuttleworth, 'The Blue Angel: Review', *City Limits*, 28 May 1992, p. 8.

<sup>‡</sup> "The West End is awash with 'feel-good' shows - *Cats*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Starlight Express*... it takes a bit of nerve to present a 'feel bloody awful' show like this. It is a real relief to encounter a musical with a brain as well as a heart." Charles Spencer, 'The Blue Angel: Review', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 May 1992, p. 23.



mainstream theatre, ensured that she would never produce anything which may be classed as 'typical'. Thus, she was almost bound to disappoint. However, Sheridan Morley offered one notable exception to the negativity. Writing for the *Herald Tribune* he proclaimed that:

*The Blue Angel* is not only the best musical in town; in Pam Gems's script and Maria Bjornson's settings, it is also a brilliant summary of all the themes of *Threepenny Opera* and *Cabaret* and a reminder of the (principally) Friedrich Hollander songs to which Dietrich was to return at the end of the career they started.<sup>36</sup>

### **Gems and Dietrich: Constructing *Marlene***

Morley's phrase 'the end of the career' provides the framework for Gems's next venture on Dietrich. Unperturbed by the reviews, Gems set to work on an alternative analysis of one of her favourite film stars. This time, Gems decided to focus on Dietrich as the chanteuse of the 1970's, nearing the end of her career, touring the European concert halls. By 1996, Gems had completed her play - *Marlene*, which first opened at the Oldham Coliseum Theatre, Lancashire on 9 September 1996 and ran until 26 October of that year. This trial run proved to be successful enough to warrant the production's transferral to London's West End. On 3 April 1997, *Marlene* made its London debut at the Lyric Theatre and the production, directed by Sean Mathias, enjoyed a long and successful run until 13 September 1997. Since then, the Berlin Renaissance Theatre Company have been touring Germany with a new production of *Marlene*, (28 June 1998 - 27 February 2000). (See Appendix for full details)

In order to improve on her last attempt, Gems enlisted a legendary actress to play the part of the legendary Dietrich. She chose Sian Phillips, who was impeccably



groomed for the star role. Phillips's agent had been begging her to play Dietrich for years. Reviewers raved about her dazzling performance, especially (where it mattered most) in the songs. Phillips accurately captured the look and sound of the elderly Dietrich. The acting and singing went beyond impersonation and came over as a positively spooky act of ghostly possession. Indeed, when the audience cheered at the end, it was not at all clear who they were congratulating - Phillips for being Phillips (a legendary actress in her own right), Phillips, for an inspirational piece of mimicry, or the ghost and talent of Dietrich herself. It became impossible to distinguish one from another. Indeed, it was for this reason that Robert Butler found the London premiere a "theatrical blur."<sup>37</sup> He explains:

The first night crowd had been applauding Sian Phillips, or Marlene Dietrich, or rather this strange hyphenate, this Sian-Marlene person... who was meant to be lapping up the applause? Who exactly is the star - Dietrich or Phillips? Sian was putting on quite a performance as Marlene, but then Marlene was putting on quite a performance herself. (32)

The performance was one thing, however, the play as a whole, to quote John Gross in his review for the *Daily Telegraph* was "not very much."<sup>38†</sup> Spencer maintained that:

Although *Marlene* is atmospherically staged by Mathias, there is too much missing from the dramatic sections in the show ... his backstage scenes are rather dark and cluttered.<sup>39</sup>

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† Gems's writing of the play was particularly criticised:

"Gems writes a lazy homage to stardom. The script is a random, roaming monologue in which the playwright merely recycles old myths." Nick Curtis, 'Marlene: Review', *Evening Standard*, 9 April 1997, p. 19.

"I left the theatre with grave doubts about the show. The main problem is Gems's script. At her best, Gems can be an astute and penetrating writer. But too often she comes across as plain lazy." Charles Spencer, 'Marlene: Review', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 1996, p. 21.

The word 'cluttered' was also used in respect of Gems's writing. Gross asserts that Gems's script "can be clumsy as well as skimpy,"<sup>40</sup> while Spencer thought it "decidedly dodgy."<sup>41</sup>

In general, critics were disappointed with the lack of information supplied about Dietrich's life story. Benedict Nightingale made a particularly valid point concerning this issue:

What do we learn of Dietrich from the breezily meandering mix of chat and reminiscence that ensues? Nothing about her Prussian background and upbringing. Nothing about her Svengali or Frankenstein, the director Von Sternberg. Nothing about her men except she had a lot of them. Indeed, I was beginning to think that everything I most wanted to know about Dietrich was being neglected.<sup>42</sup>

It was noticeable that for once, Gems had rejected her traditional biographical approach and opted for a specific 'slice of time' in a localised setting, in this case, the Café de Paris. This provided a critical point for Charles Spencer who, writing for the *Daily Telegraph* (with the added benefit of having reviewed *The Blue Angel* some six years before), commented:

We learn virtually nothing about Dietrich's family background, of her feelings for her husband and daughter, or of her previous film career ... we are not told nearly enough. As a result, *Marlene* does not reach the same standard as *Piaf*.<sup>43</sup>

Whether or not Spencer made a fair assessment of *Marlene*, it is certainly true that Piaf, the French chanteuse emerges from her dramatic fray more interestingly and more impressively than her German counterpart. Gems's Piaf is the embattled survivor, warring with her own self-destructive instincts. Gems's Dietrich is the glamorous



septuagenarian who cannot resist the adoration of an audience. For all Phillips's excellence, the emotional stakes are not nearly as high.

Generically, the play veers towards being a musical,<sup>†</sup> as the action is punctuated with ironically titled songs from the Dietrich repertoire. Furthermore, the dialogue is confined to only three characters, including Dietrich; Mutti, an elderly dresser, so-called because of her mute status and Vivian Hoffman, a young female playwright clad in a man's suit who may be a former lover. Gross comments that these latter characters merely "drift around the set"<sup>44</sup> and although he concedes that both parts were 'nicely played' (by Lou Gish and Billy Mathias respectively), he remarked that Gems had unfortunately provided "nowhere for them to go." (12)<sup>††</sup>

Although some of their criticism may be justified, what most critics failed to understand was Gems's reasoning behind her play. For Gems, *Marlene* was never meant to be a biographical tribute to a bygone legend - as tends to be the theatrical tradition. On the contrary, Gems used her play as a vehicle for exposing and re-evaluating the myth(s) creating the Hollywood star. *Marlene* takes issue with the star system as defined and discussed earlier, rendering her construction by Von Sternberg even more conspicuous by its total absence in the play. Where Von Sternberg constructed and created a legend founded on bogus signifiers, so Gems reciprocates by exposing and deconstructing the myth in order to restore Dietrich's identity as ordinary 'woman.'

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<sup>†</sup> The play takes the form of a one-woman show, and in this respect, its structure bears close resemblance to that of *Piaf*.

<sup>††</sup> "Gems's supporting characters function as little more than cyphers. This is a one-woman show and Sian Phillips's powerhouse performance is what matters." Paul Burston, 'Marlene: Review' *Time Out*, 16 April 1997, p. 14. "Marlene is best seen as a one-person show with three actresses." David Nathan, 'Marlene: Review', *Jewish Chronicle*, 11 April 1997, p. 35.

Therefore, although *Marlene* may not be Gems's most challenging production, it provides a crucial discussion point for this thesis.

### *Marlene (1997): More than Biography*

As has already been outlined, Act One opens in the Café de Paris, sometime in the 1970's. Dietrich, nearing the end of her career (only a few years away from becoming the lonely recluse of the last twenty years of her life), is preparing to give one of her solo concerts. The audience is first greeted with backstage chaos and the stage management desperately attempting to organise Dietrich's orchestrated welcome. Her demands - flowers, music and crowds, arranged for her dramatic entrance - expose the artifice behind her popularity. Gems is clearly pointing out that **her** Dietrich is now a 'has-been' star, frantically clinging onto the star-signifiers that came so spontaneously in previous years. After the initial backstage agitation, Dietrich makes her imperious entrance through the theatre stalls to dominate the centre stage like a despot for the duration of the play. She is terse and irritable, clicking her fingers and bawling a stream of orders, with her speech impediment used for comical effect. Here, Gems is quick to confront Dietrich's mythical on-screen presence. Her first bone of contention is the lighting - a factor made so crucial in her legendary construction by Von Sternberg. She gazes at the lighting rig with some trepidation, obviously aware of its power to make or break her image. With hesitation she nervously addresses it:

MARLENE Well ... here I am. Yah - it's me. And don't think I'm afraid of you!

*Marlene*, I . (2).



This serves as a poignant comment highlighting the perils of being an ageing star, desperate to regain youth. This notion of age is further emphasised as Gems unveils another character weakness that seeks to strip Dietrich of her mythical status:

MARLENE Now a small whisky to face the hideous filth and sepulchre backstage.

*Marlene*, I. (2).

Throughout the play, Dietrich is rarely seen without a glass of strong liquor. In every sense of the word, Gems makes alcohol her 'prop,' a new signifier to counteract the old ones.

Vivian Hoffman's arrival signifies yet another aspect of Dietrich's former life. Gems has created this masculinised figure of the young female playwright, clad in male attire, to sustain the inference of Dietrich's alleged bisexuality. In *Marlene*, Hoffman acts as Dietrich's companion (sometimes she seems almost a reflection of the younger Dietrich, especially reminiscent of her appearance in *Two Bow Ties*) wearing a top hat and a tuxedo. Both characters kiss and embrace in the name of showbiz flattery, yet the exact nature of their relationship is left shrouded in mystery.<sup>†</sup> While Vivian organises Dietrich's schedule, the ageing star is frequently left to reminisce, her companion acting as the soundboard for her memories.

In the reminiscences Dietrich name-drops constantly, the list of fervent admirers, lovers and famous friends litters the dialogue to the point of absurdity (but, fortunately, some hilarity). Here, Gems neatly debunks the glamorous jet-set in Dietrich's speeches:

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<sup>†</sup> The audience is consistently given the impression that we will learn more about Dietrich's sexuality, however, the plot oscillates from women being in harmony (Vivian and Marlene) to women being in disharmony (Marlene and Mutti) and Gems does not make Dietrich's lesbianism definitive. However, when she sings 'You Do Something to Me' specifically to Vivian, Gems suggests that Marlene's female relationships are more fulfilling than any other kind.



MARLENE ... Both the Onassis sisters out of town, the Dutch Princess pregnant ... oh, a message from Picasso ... no! ... Ahh ... from President Pompidou. The dear man has a shy pancreas ... and send some fraises du bois to Princess Grace, they've had a crop failure.

*Marlene, I . (6)*

Yet equally, her memories (still so consumed with age) also recall emotive and tragic circumstances. All Vivian has to do is pick up an old first aid box:

VIVIAN This looks battleworn.

MARLENE That's because it's been around. Like me.

VIVIAN A box with a past!

MARLENE You could say so (*They laugh ... She looks at the box, a moment of reverie*) I'll never forget.

VIVIAN (*Eager for reminiscence from Marlene*) Yes?

MARLENE Italy ... 1944. Making love in the back of a two ton truck with a young GI† ... Why not? Most of that unit was wiped out ...

*Marlene, I . (7).*

The image of the young and sexually active Dietrich is sharply contrasted with Vivian's next question: "How are the legs?" (7) In typical Dietrich style, she retorts, "Legendary." (7) Yet, her blasé answer is a direct reference to those many falls and broken bones she sustained in her seventies, as well as her attempts to disguise the mishaps from others. Gems never misses an opportunity to reassess the star in accordance with reality, while Dietrich dramatically refuses to accept its agenda. This defiance is painfully illustrated in her snide carping at Mutti, who accidentally forgets to wrap the flowers she has ordered as if they came from different admirers. Marlene panics when it seems that the outward appearances of popularity may be failing her.

MARLENE ... Now I must rearrange! They are for the usherettes to present at the end of the show ... (*shouts at Mutti*) ... the whole thing you give away - she wants to shame me - show me up ... You are fired - she is fired.

*Marlene, I . (8)*

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† The clichéd lines in the play, of which this is merely one of many, act as Gems's ironic safety device against the dramatic problem of making recollected narration work in the theatre. She accepts the limits of the genre she is using (the musical) by parodying its style. Not only does this free her from criticism but it also injects some humour into the production.



Mutti leaves the stage silently - a mystery character to whom Gems gives no introduction. We are told only that she was a prisoner of war held in Dachau. This may be a passing reference to Dietrich's sister, Elisabeth, whom Dietrich saved from Belsen during the Second World War. Mutti's muteness is perhaps symbolic of Dietrich's German identity, silenced out of guilt for her country's war crimes which angered and embarrassed her. This particular aspect of her problematic identity is discussed at greater length at the play's conclusion, with Gems providing some of her most powerful and effective dialogue. Indeed, Gems portrays Dietrich's identity as a constant source of confusion, permanently at odds with the outside world. As she catches sight of herself in the mirror, the star is no longer glamorous and certainly in conflict with her supposed mythical status. So she berates her reflection:

MARLENE Yah ... Gott in himmel. This glass is so old! *(She pulls a face at herself in the glass)*  
We deal with you later ... these old movie stars, it's like a drug to them ... they need the  
applause ... like hell! I need the money ... and the applause.†

*Marlene, I . (9)*

In this dialogue Gems, as well as revealing the harsh gap between myth and reality, also refers to the biographical fact that Dietrich, as already discussed, had very little money.

It is interesting to note that Gems **does** use subtle biographical references in *Marlene*, but uses only those that seek to deconstruct her mythical identity. A further example of this is illustrated in perhaps the most striking scene in Act One, which deals with Dietrich's neurotic obsession for cleanliness. Like a woman possessed, she screams for a bucket of water to be brought on stage and demands a pair of rubber gloves. Vivian watches aghast as Dietrich vigorously scrubs the stage floor, with the excessive gesture of using an expensive fur coat to kneel on (without thinking twice). This powerful

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† This quotation is particularly pertinent to Gems's fascination for realism as well as the iconic.



tableau of the icon as competent housewife is sharply juxtaposed with her descriptions of glamorous bygone days. In a series of clichés, she reminisces to Vivian:

MARLENE Hollywood ... nineteen thirty. City of dreams for the whole world. ...so beautiful ... to look out at the Pacific, always shining, orange groves right down to the sea - Oh and the air! Ultimate accolade. To be summoned to Hollywood. How to travel! Fine staterooms, orchestras, champagne, wonderful food ... superb service, and every passenger on board talented, beautiful ... everyone exciting.  
*Marlene, I. (10)*

Then, Gems punctures the idyllic dream as Dietrich refers to her life now as being that of a “long distance lorry driver” on a “mindless, endless, toxic voyage in space.” (10) Besides the humour, Gems maintains the poignancy. However, most humour is confined to Dietrich’s discussions of her female lovers, past and present. One of which involves a comic debasement of a rival female star - Greta Garbo.

MARLENE I remember one day on deck this American woman ... she was lovely. A bit like Greta Garbo only ... good looking. Grrreta Garrbo. Always on the screen like she’s suffering some female problems down below. How can you be so blue all the time? Well, yoghurt and mung beans, what do you expect?  
*Marlene, I. (11)*

Dietrich’s mocking vilification of Garbo provides a hard-boiled parody of her own allure - both stars shown to be similarly manufactured by the star system, yet both superseded by the younger and temporarily more beautiful (but still similarly manufactured).

After more unnatural demands for “disinfectant and air freshener” (12) to satisfy her cleaning compulsion, Dietrich begins the mammoth task of performing her own ablutions, but not before she has sung the ironically titled, ‘Illusions.’ The songs which she performs in her dressing room reflect the internal Marlene. They are part of her memory and are not intended as her performance repertoire which is only revealed at the end of the play.



According to legend, Dietrich's voice was one of the great instruments for controlling audience reactions, the deep tones adding an erotic dimension to her visual mystery. Yet *Gems* maximises and mocks its masculine associations as she revises them into the voice of the unerotic dictator. Although *Gems* still allows the haunting melody and lyrics to convey the strength of Dietrich's personality, the romantic and sexual allusions, an intrinsic part of her mythical voice, are forgotten. All songs within the Dietrich repertoire are sung accordingly, and serve as part of the dramatic device to demythicise the figure of Dietrich.

After a few lines she has a mental block, another of the tell-tale signs of her age betraying her former glory. Dietrich's reaction is blind panic as she frantically rummages in a huge medicine chest for a handful of tablets. Again, *Gems* reveals the tragic scene in perfect antithesis to her 'glory days.' As she reaches for another 'stiff whisky' to swallow down the medication, Dietrich delivers the pivotal soliloquy at the heart of *Marlene*, which fuses *Gems*'s objectives for the play.

MARLENE I am the icon who does not fuck up.

You are Marlene ... Marlene.

Pay the dues, sweetheart...

*(But she crosses urgently to the drinks table, pours herself a stiff whisky, drinks it fast, taking deep breaths.)*

... I can't do it. Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. No, no ... oh no, no, no, no please ...

*(She falls to her knees ...)* Watch the door ... Don't let them see me like this.

*Marlene, I. (14)*

Scared lest the public see her 'un-public' persona, Dietrich's identity crisis (her irresolvable conflict between private and public, myth and reality) serves only to associate herself with yet another problematic identity - the tragic female. *Gems* lets Dietrich continue in order to further endorse the point:

MARLENE ... Glamour? It's in your heads, sweethearts, not ours. We are making it for you! Don't believe this wonderful smile in the photograph ... We must be put up high to knock down. ... You haven't seen her without wig and make-up - not so glamorous then, believe me. Listen, half the time the heroine is Camille, and she doesn't finish so good.

*Marlene, I. (16)*



This intertextual reference to a previous Gems production cannot be ignored. Gems deliberately chooses to parallel Dietrich with Camille - both figures standing as tragic victims of myth and the parallel is made even more emphatic as Dietrich immediately resumes her song, 'Illusions.' Afterwards, ironically enough, Act One concludes with Dietrich losing her footing on stage, her legs collapsing underneath her. Again, her physical pain is superseded by the painful realisation that her public persona is still "giving her away." Lying in a crumpled heap, she reluctantly, cries for help:

MARLENE Oh ... my leg ... (*she tries to rise*) Oh God, I can't get up (*she gasps in pain, calls out*)  
... verdammt leg ... help me up, for God's sakes, before they see me ...!

*Marlene, I . (25)*

Dietrich literally stumbles her way into Act Two. As bombastic and cantankerous as ever, she continues her tireless orders, organising and orchestrating crowds, flowers, lighting and chauffeurs in precise detail. Gems is at pains to devote a vast amount of dialogue to these orchestrations in order to highlight the falsity behind mythical star signifiers. As a consequence, the audience laughs as Dietrich feigns surprise at the orchestrations played out in front of her. Again Gems reminds us that Dietrich's act was, in part, a comic turn, a harsh parody of her legendary status. Yet, coupled with the humour is the sadness imbued in the reality. Gems continually juxtaposes the two notions in order to enforce their contrasts. For example, Dietrich, reminiscing on her star signifiers is quickly brought back down to self-realisation.

MARLENE ... created for a purpose ... oh, so lovely ... glamorous ... the wonderful cheekbones, the fabulous dress, the white fur, the blonde, blonde hair ... Anyway ... when the camera doesn't love you anymore, how do you make the rest of your life? What to do? ... When you are fifteen ... seventeen ... even nineteen ... you are an empress. You reign! The world picks up the tab ... But when you are not eighteen and you want to stay in that world ... what then?

*Marlene, II . (32-33)*



There is no solution to her identity crisis. Purposely, Gems does not offer one, hence, Vivian merely '*shrugs, not knowing the required answer*' (35). After a pause, pregnant with meaning, it is significant that Dietrich places her woes at the feet of a male - Von Sternberg.

MARLENE I never had a talent... Why did ...why ... why ... why am I a movie star? ... Because Jo Sternberg ... wanted to get into my drawers. *Marlene, II . (35)*

Although a crude explanation, it satisfies Gems's dramatic criteria. Namely, in the creation of the female legend, the star signifiers are borne out of the male desire to satisfy his own sexual agenda. Youth, the most crucial signifier associated with the female myth, when lost (naturally, or otherwise) automatically deconstructs the mythical status. At this point, the female is no longer a sexual commodity, explaining why Dietrich is no longer a "movie star" or "empress" and has been stripped of her former dignity. Unpalatable to an audience, Gems chooses to depict Dietrich as 'woman' rather than legend, in an effort to re-educate us on the fragile foundations separating ordinary 'woman' and extraordinary 'myth.'

Gems's dramatic criteria is further illustrated in Dietrich's own interpretation of the male scopophilic gaze, symbolised by the camera:

MARLENE The love affair with the camera. If you are loved by the camera, you are a star ... If the camera is for you ... if you are loved by the camera - that's it ... the camera told us everything ... Last of all, the greatest betrayal. "She is younger than you. She is more beautiful. She is bigger at the box office!" *Marlene, II . (38)*

Dietrich, obviously feeling the strain, not only of her age, but also her competitors, reveals another of Gems's intertextual references - Piaf. In an interview with a news reporter, Dietrich confesses:

MARLENE Yes, I knew Piaf. We were very close ...

(Pause) In the end I abandoned her.

(She shrugs) She was impossible. On the stage though, incomparable. There she is the Empress and I am the slave with the jar on the head. Marlene, II . (38)

The metaphors are significant. Dietrich, previously associated the metaphor of 'Empress' with her own former life, a figure of youth with the world at her feet. However, now she confesses her demotion as an inferior to Piaf. Again, Gems uses the intertextual reference in order to simultaneously parallel and yet contrast her legendary female protagonists.

Although Piaf and Dietrich were legendary singers in their own right and although Gems depicts both lives in tragic terms, Dietrich paints a very different picture. Gems's deconstruction of Dietrich's glamorous trappings is more thorough than in the core of any of her other mythical protagonists. The painstaking analysis is maintained to the play's conclusion as we see Dietrich preparing for her final curtain call. Gems cannot resist taking issue with Dietrich's constant erosion of dignity. For example, as Marlene waits in the wings, tormented by a panic attack, she slumps '*disconsolate*' in a corner, hitching up her trademark Jean Louis gown to reveal crudely bandaged legs. The legs that she had previously referred to as 'legendary' are now physically exposed as being anything but legendary, and furthermore, are only just hidden from public view. Dietrich again ponders over her identity, but this time her thoughts are tainted with an element of realism, previously denied:

MARLENE ... What am I trying to prove? ... I am an old woman. Why don't I seek the truth of that

... be in the centre of who I am, where I am, what I am?

And what are you, Maria - Magdalene - Marlene?

Who are you? Who? Marlene, II . (41)

With an exhausted groan and a pained expression, her problematic personal identity is juxtaposed with her equally problematic sense of national identity.



MARLENE ... I am an American citizen.  
With my German accent.  
You are German, Marie - Magdalene - Marlene.  
Your home is Germany.  
I am in exile.  
Expatriate. An exiled person.  
In time.  
In space.  
I am in severe exile.

*Marlene, II . (42)*

The poignant dialogue seeking impossible answers gives way to the onset of her finale. After telling Mutti that she “may be able to fool them all just one more time,” her private angst is superseded by the audience’s demands. To make the divide between private and public persona even more emphatic, the effect is crystallised in Dietrich’s entrance on stage - orchestrated to promote her as icon. Gems’s concluding stage directions confirm the apotheosis of star signifiers:

*(She glides on in her tight, shimmering dress, trailing a swansdown coat. She traverses the stage twice ... and approaches the microphone. Applause, MARLENE stands, an icon, head bowed, absorbing the applause without acknowledgement. She lifts her head at last ... She receives flowers from the usherettes ... more flowers ... more flowers ... and leaves the stage)*

*Marlene, II . (47)*

Intertextuality brings *Marlene* to its conclusion as it draws together a selection of Gems’s heroines. Gems’s Marlene pays tribute to Von Sternberg’s Lola-Lola in her rendition of the trademark song of *The Blue Angel*, ‘Falling In Love Again.’ It is also ironic that her repertoire should include ‘La Vie en Rose’, a song traditionally associated with Piaf, while the masses of flowers (white camellias) thrown at Marlene’s feet make a pertinent reference to Marguerite Gautier.

## **Conclusion**

Stardom is achieved when a personality has been sufficiently rotated in a diverse number of roles to the point where one particular facet evokes an overwhelming public

curiosity and enjoyment of its repeated standardised display.<sup>†</sup> Dietrich's fateful association with Von Sternberg ensured that what he saw in her - and only that - would be what other people saw too. Whereas, *Gems* opts for the audience to see everything, exposing the reality behind the myth.

The films that Von Sternberg and Dietrich made together were the ones that have lastingly defined her public image. Dietrich was an imposed star; moreover, she was imposed by the male as spectator. She was not tried out in a variety of roles to see which ones the public preferred. The erotic image manufactured out of her obedience to another's fantasy was sufficiently strong to register the minute she faced the international public. Undoubtedly, the spell wore off; but, by then, the myth was potent enough to sustain her independent career; and when she finally took sole control over it by using the world as her concert platform, *Gems* uses it to expose her demise and mythical deconstruction.

From the very first day of her international fame, Dietrich was a manufactured article, in spite of the components being totally unique. The way they were assembled has proved fascinating and the durability has remained equally impressive. However, Dietrich was always forced to depend totally upon the presentation of herself as 'legend' from the outset. Indeed, she became, in that much debased phrase, a **living** legend who had to look, move, talk, act and sing in a manner appropriate to her created mythical nature. Most stars do not have to handle their legend, since it usually accretes around

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<sup>†</sup> This definition of stardom is asserted by Charles Affron in his work *Star Acting* which is devoted to an analysis of stardom in relation to the careers of some of Dietrich's contemporaries Lillian Gish, Greta Garbo and Bette Davis. See Charles Affron, *Star Acting: Gish, Garbo, Davis* (New York: E. P. Dutton Press, 1977), p. 149. This definition contrasts strongly with the more basic one referred to in the English dictionary, "**stardom** - the fame and prestige of being a celebrity." See *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, ed. by Della Thompson and others, 9<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). p. 1359.



their memory and not their presence. Ironically though, Dietrich in Von Sternberg's hand was, if legendary, also limited. Undoubtedly, without him, she would never have acquired her fame or mythical status.

What maintained Dietrich's legend so long was her innate discipline. However, although Gems portrays this in *Marlene*, her main objective is to expose moments of surrender to the glamour that Dietrich formerly projected; instances where the simple woman is forced to peep out and stand against the legend. After all, old age, as Gems points out, cannot do anything but enforce such an exposure, even in that particular industry.

The mythical Dietrich never asked for sympathy, never wanted to be liked, never wished for love - she would never have condescended to such a banal need. After all, part of her mythical status depended upon mysterious allure as much as youth. Yet, Gems's Dietrich is an emotionally unstable, insecure, ageing female star who craves attention from everyone and anyone and longs for a sense of identity. Gems's logic in exposing Dietrich's mysteriousness as myth can again be explained with reference to male scopophilic desire. As men are responsible for setting up such a scopophilic ideal, women - whose age-old task it has been to preen for and please them - have also set premiums on similar characteristics. And for what? Why enigmatic allure? Why the perfume of mystery? All at the expense of voluntary exile in intellectual affairs of the mind. Gems posits Dietrich's legendary status, her posture of mystery (one of the few tactical defences left for women), as yet another self-defeating cycle, for Dietrich could not possibly be what legend had built her up to be. After all, a legendary woman by definition must possess that certain mystique which normal women lack and once devoid

of trappings Dietrich, as Gems clearly demonstrates in *Marlene*, was just a normal woman.

Thus, *Marlene* plays out the self-defeating cycles, her continually failed quests for regaining youth, beauty, power and of course, her myth. Dietrich ends the play, and indeed her life, enslaved by forces beyond her control and alienated by the system which created her. A consumable and consumed myth.

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After having been let down by publishers on several occasions, Dietrich repeatedly embarked on an autobiography in order to generate some income. In 1976, Dietrich stayed in Paris during a severe winter, determinedly working on a new book. It was painful, she wrote to a friend, to have to go back over the past. Dietrich was alone much of the time. Bank officers and neighbours who came to the door barely recognised her. Her friends (those who were still alive) found her difficult to reach; when they did succeed they suspected her of resisting an intrusion into her private life by announcing (as if she were the maid, or other aide, who had answered the telephone) that “Miss Dietrich has had to go to Switzerland,”<sup>45</sup> or wherever. Old loyalties were severely strained by this idiosyncratic behaviour. This image of an isolated Dietrich strongly correlates to Gems’s next choice of female protagonist, Stanisława Prsybrysewska - a life of loneliness most graphically depicted in her play *The Snow Palace* (1997).



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Endnotes

At the time of research Pam Gems's *Marlene* was an unpublished play manuscript. References made to the play are taken from a xeroxed copy of the manuscript courtesy of Gems's agent: Sebastian Born, The Agency, 24 Pottery Lane, London, W11 4LZ (0171) 727 1346.

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**CHAPTER SIX**

**PAM GEMS**

***THE SNOW PALACE***

**WRITING 'HERSTORY': BIOGRAPHY AND THE CREATIVE  
PROCESS UNLEASHED IN *THE SNOW PALACE***



## Introduction

In this final chapter, I have chosen to discuss Pam Gems's most recent play, *The Snow Palace*,<sup>1</sup> which was performed at Warwick Arts Centre on 8th March 1998. The play was a three month touring production performed by the Sphinx Theatre Group and was preceded by an informative discussion given by the director, Janet Suzman. Her ideas and experience as both director and famous actress have provided the inspiration for the theme of this particular chapter - the problematic nature of the female creative process.

Gems has made a speciality of writing about women who must struggle to fulfil themselves in a male world. Yet, never before has she written a play which not only includes this struggle, but also encapsulates and dramatises the arduous process involved in the very act of writing a play, as it is being written on stage. The very title of the play is indicative of this process. The 'snow palace,' symbolises not only the physical environment which dominates and controls Przybyszewska's creative process, but also it represents the emotional heritage, frozen within each writer, which the author brings to the text from the moment of picking up the pen. Furthermore, the 'snow palace,' is an effective metaphor which reflects a disjointed and hostile creative process. It brings to mind writer's block, those big empty spaces longing for inspiration, the erratic scriblings, the endless reams of snow white paper, but most of all, the isolation in creativity of the woman writing alone, in the margins. All of this is certainly evident in the creative process documented by Gems and Przybyszewska.

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† Janet Suzman is known to audiences for her many stage, film and television appearances. As a director, her South African version of *The Cherry Orchard* earned her the 1997 Theatrical Managers Association (TMA) Best Director Award. Most recently, she directed the critically acclaimed production, *The Good Woman of Sharkville* (Hackney Empire and national tour). In 1998, *The Snow Palace* was nominated for the TMA award for Best Touring Production.

In her discussion of *The Snow Palace*, Suzman considered it Gems's most "achieved" play and that her writing "improves with age." Furthermore, Suzman deems her a "remarkable playwright and an even more remarkable female," whose creativity, like Przybyszewska's is often "explosive."<sup>2</sup> Przybyszewska's creative process is brought to the audience through the realisation of the vibrant characters involved in her literary project on the French Revolution - Danton and Robespierre. The delight in her eyes, as she sees her characters fulfil her literary criteria at her bidding, mirrors Gems's zeal for the excitement and accomplishment of being a successful playwright. The two writers stand separated by huge chasms in time, culture, language, class and nationality, yet, in spite of these great differences, both women are united by the two important factors which direct this chapter - their gender and their creative process.

### **Biography of the Biographer**

Stanislawa Przybyszewska was born in Cracow on 1st October 1901, the illegitimate daughter of Stanislaw Przybyszewski, the then celebrated modernist author, and Aniela Pajak, an impressionist painter.

Przybyszewski, ('Stach' to his companions, as the difficulty of pronouncing his name was the butt of jokes even in his own country) certainly was a colourful character. Friend and associate of August Strindberg and Edvard Munch, he was also a committed Satanist, drunkard, liar and seducer of women. Indeed, his affair with Pajak proved merely a convenient interlude between more compelling entanglements and Stanislawa was simply the sixth and last of his "dear little bugs"<sup>3</sup> who somehow had to be looked after.



As Gems chillingly reveals in *The Snow Palace*, Przybyszewski treated his children the way he did his women, as objects of curiosity and experimentation, as reflections of self and love of self. He showed them some affection, but tried to have little to do with providing for them as possible. In fact, Stanisława was reared entirely by her mother in Lwow and for the first five years of her life saw her father briefly on only two occasions. Yet, according to Jadwiga Kosicka and Daniel Gerould,<sup>†</sup> none of the other Przybyszewski children was as similar to her father temperamentally, or followed his creative path as closely as Stanisława, who, like him was artistically gifted and even more intellectually precocious. Again, like her father, she began writing from an early age in both Polish and German and, naturally for a young child, she placed her absent father on a pedestal. Looming in the distance with his halo of fame, Przybyszewski provided an exemplary role model to give her life meaning, in spite of his poor treatment of both mother and daughter.

In 1907, artistic commitments and the promise of exhibitions forced Pajak and Stanisława to live in Paris. Mother and daughter regularly frequented the Musée Carnavalet which devoted itself to the French Revolution. This offered Stanisława her first glimpse of Danton and Robespierre - the two heroic figures who would become her obsession in later life; the latter serving as her model of greatness. In a letter to Antoni Slonimski, in 1927, Przybyszewska recalls her first impressions of the man who so fascinated her:

Geniuses are very rare flowers indeed - so rare that in the multitude of talents that the French Revolution had at its disposal, only the wonderful Robespierre stood out - with his versatility, inner harmony and equilibrium that are the marks of a true genius.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Their work, *A Life of Solitude* is the only biographical study of Stanisława Przybyszewska written in English. It also includes her selected letters. Biographical information on Przybyszewska used in this chapter is taken from Kosicka and Gerould, unless stated otherwise.



Her “idyllic”<sup>†</sup> childhood in Paris ended abruptly when Pajak died of pneumonia in 1912 and the eleven year old Stanislawka found herself totally alone, deprived of the one person who had truly loved her. From this point onwards, Przybyszewska embarked on an uprooted life of multiple displacements. Firstly, she travelled to Zurich to live with friends of Pajak, and then with her maternal aunt, Helena Barlinska, in Austria.

By her early teens, Przybyszewska had a particular cast of mind and a set of traits that enable us to recognise the adult playwright. Her malady was perfection and she showed no sympathy for flaws or shortcomings. Gems is convinced that this particular trait was an intrinsic part of her national identity and partly explains the reason for her untimely death:

She wanted to be the complete artist...But, of course, it killed her... It is this notion of being everything and giving everything to the utmost for your work, even your life... it is all so Polish.<sup>5</sup>

Gems’s words crystallise a dangerous and destructive element to Przybyszewska’s creative process and this certainly informs and directs Gems’s depiction of her character in *The Snow Palace*. The assertion is also borne out in Kosicka and Gerould’s biography. Often dissatisfied with her literary accomplishments, she would immediately destroy the poetry, essays and stories which she had spent hours compiling alone in her room, only to punish herself further in spite of their improved revisions. Withdrawn and given to sudden rages, the sensitive adolescent felt lonely and unwanted, unable to understand why her glamorous father had not come back for her since the death of her mother.<sup>††</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Kosicka and Gerould consider Przybyszewska’s time spent in Paris to have been an “idyllic epoch” in her childhood.

<sup>††</sup> According to Kosicka and Gerould, Przybyszewska was aware that her father came to Vienna in 1915 for lectures and a banquet in his honour. He made no effort to contact his daughter, although at that point she was living not far outside the city.



As World War One engulfed Europe, the Barlinski family returned to Cracow, taking with them their young niece. Stanislawka enrolled at the Teachers' Institute. An outstanding student, she passed her examinations and was granted a teaching placement in a convent school. In the darkest period of her life, when death was already present within her, Przybyszewska would remember her life among the nuns as one of the few moments of supreme tranquillity and joy. †

The most important event, both intellectually and emotionally, for Przybyszewska during this period was her reunion with her father, whom she idolised as a genius and all of whose works she had read and admired. For Przybyszewska, the meeting was crucial; only after it did her determination to adopt writing as a career start to take shape. Choosing to forgive Przybyszewski's unforgivable negligence towards both herself and her mother, Przybyszewska developed a renewed infatuation for this man who had suddenly reappeared in her life. In a letter to her father's friend, Lucjan Paczoski, Przybyszewska recounts the meaning of this reunion:

I finally stopped being so completely isolated and lonely. One other human being in the world lived and thought the same way I did. This unique other being could become everything for me - my closest companion, confessor, guide. I loved him madly, totally, with an adolescent passion. I didn't think about anyone but him. I had no other desire ... but to put myself in his hands. I achieved my goal... I found my father.<sup>6</sup>

Following her father's advice, Przybyszewska moved to Poznan in June 1920, where she mixed with the avant garde artists associated with her father's expressionist journal, *The Source*. It was here that she developed a long lasting fascination for films, renewed her interest in French translations and met her future husband Jan Panienski, a science student and writer for *The Source*.



Father and daughter sustained their relationship via a series of secret letters and clandestine meetings. One such meeting in a Gdansk hotel one summer had tragic resonances that neither party could deny nor escape. Whether one or both of this pair succumbed to the incestuous longings that enveloped them has never been entirely proven. In *The Snow Palace*, Gems decides to interpret this biographical incident as a particularly violent rape scene which concludes with Przybyszewski attempting to strangle his daughter, although there is no biographical evidence to prove that this actually happened.<sup>†</sup> However, what does remain certain is that following this tryst a dreadful domestic crisis resulted. Przybyszewski felt obliged to assure his wife:

The child has died for me forever. I no longer have a daughter.<sup>7</sup>

It was also at this time that Przybyszewski introduced Stanislaw to morphine, which he presented as a harmless and beneficial stimulant to improve mental capacity and enhance creativity. The truth was that while trying to control his alcoholism, the writer had become addicted to morphine and eventually would have to undergo anti-drug treatment. This proved to be the most fatal heritage bequeathed by Przybyszewski to his daughter: morphine became a habit that she could not control, alienating and isolating her from outside realities and finally destroying her.<sup>††</sup> However, Gems remains philosophical about Przybyszewska's dependence on the drug; she finds a method in her

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<sup>†</sup> Kosicka and Gerould assert that the exact nature of the incident cannot be truly ascertained as portions of Przybyszewska's letters concerning the event have been withheld and she also destroyed much of the detailed correspondence. (p. 28)

<sup>††</sup> In a letter to her Aunt Helena in 1931, Przybyszewska admitted to taking a half gram of morphine every day for seven years and experiencing little effect in spite of alleging that "half a gram a day is equal to five lethal doses." (Kosicka and Gerould, p. 209)



madness which is inextricably linked to her creative process, and of course, her national identity.

For her to be the complete artist she had to be alienated ... it was a kind of mad Puritanism and of course it was horrible, so she started to take morphine. She found it released her mind, it relaxed her, she could produce more imaginative and inspired work and she could rise above her discomforts. But of course, it killed her. Such a Polish way ... giving the maximum ... everything for your art. But what else was there for her, if not her work?<sup>8</sup>

In Poznan, Przybyszewska at the age of twenty, showed tendencies toward depression and a desire to withdraw from the world. In a quest for greater privacy, she moved from apartment to apartment to avoid the intrusion of prying eyes.<sup>†</sup> The traumatic experience with her father weakened her ability to withstand the pressures of everyday life and she suffered a nervous breakdown before her twenty first birthday. Her illness meant that she had to forego her teaching career and further university studies. Proud and unwilling to tolerate failure, Przybyszewska decided to leave Poznan and the past behind her. Already nurturing those concerns that would dominate her future: the fate of the exceptional individual and the nature of the creative process (the essence of *The Snow Palace*) and emerging from within her own being was the choice that she would make for absolute autonomy of the mind, free of emotion and all traces of personal life that could hamper its development. She had embarked on a path that would lead her to oppose the chaos of her father's life (which threatened to engulf her) by her own self-discipline. She was willing to devote the utmost for the sake of her own creativity.

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<sup>†</sup> In this instance, Przybyszewska resembles the elderly Dietrich of the last chapter. They stand as two significant women in history, separated by a multitude of differences and yet, brought together by Gems to exhibit similar behaviour.



By 1922, Przybyszewska had moved to Warsaw where she stayed with her Aunt Barlinska and earned her living working in a communist bookstore, only to find herself briefly imprisoned as a result. As a consequence of this incarceration, Przybyszewska grew obsessed with the victims of unjust imprisonment and judicial oppression. Her thoughts re-focused on Robespierre and she began to write avidly on the subject of his political interrogation. The French Revolution had made him a victim of political injustice, just as Przybyszewska saw herself as a victim of paternal and creative injustice.

In June 1923, although she did not believe in the legal bonds of marriage, Przybyszewska married Panienski and moved with him to Gdansk where her husband had procured a lectureship at the Polish Gymnasium. She considered a husband as a perfect solution to her problems, claiming that it was “proof of her boundless practicality,” and the “most pragmatic step.”<sup>9†</sup> This ‘practical’ marriage suited the lives of the two literary artists and they spent the following years sharing intellectual passions and mutually enhancing their creativity. Again, Przybyszewska remained dedicated to the French Revolution, particularly after reading *Danton’s Death*, Georg Buchner’s only famous work on the subject. Przybyszewska was critical of Buchner’s portrayals of Danton and Robespierre and she immediately set herself to intensive research on these characters who had fascinated her from childhood, finding in the past a sense of order and purpose that the present could never supply.

### **1925: Thermidor and Tragedy**

In 1925, Przybyszewska wrote her first drama (in German) on the subject of the French Revolution. Named after the eleventh month of the French revolutionary

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† Przybyszewska’s letter to her aunt detailing her marriage tells only of a “simple but by no means intense friendship” with Panienski, expressed, “solely by the desire to have a good talk from time to time and in no way occupies a place in the narrow circle of things which constitute the psychic life.” (Kosicka and Gerould, p. 78) It seems she married for every reason except love.



calendar, *Thermidor* (mostly a philosophical and political diatribe), presents the final days of the Committee of Public Safety and the fall of Robespierre. She presents a bleak picture of Paris in 1794, 'cowering and greyish from fear and exhaustion,'<sup>10</sup> where a tired and disillusioned Robespierre, a prophet of doom predicting the end of European culture, foresees the inevitable defeat of the revolutionary ideal of freedom at the hands of growing military might, foreign conquest, obligatory happiness for all and the power of money. The play stands as a remarkable achievement for a twenty four year old author, demonstrating an impressive comprehension of a wealth of historical material. Her incisive analysis of the issues and ideas, her ability to articulate powerful dramatic characters and situations is impressive, although the very fact of portraying the stasis and stagnation of the French Revolution did not prove conducive to inspire dynamic and diverse theatre. Przybyszewska, ultimately unhappy with her attempt, chose to revise the play, but part way through, her creative ambitions were halted due to the sudden death of her husband in November 1925. The cause of death was given as cardiac arrest due to a morphine overdose. It is interesting to note that Gems denies Panienski any kind of reference in *The Snow Palace*, in spite of the importance he assumes in Przybyszewska's biography. Indeed, his absence from the play is a point of concern for critics, a matter which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### **The Creative Process: 'A Life of Solitude'<sup>†</sup>**

Przybyszewska spent the remaining ten years of her life in seclusion and misery, locked away from the world in an unheated school hut in the grounds of the Polish Gymnasium in Gdansk. Her life was devoted to her literary work, her creative process,

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<sup>†</sup> The part of this subtitle marked with inverted commas corresponds with the title of Kosicka and Gerould's biography on Przybyszewska. I considered it served as a suitable heading for this particular sub-section.



which was aided yet enslaved by her morphine addiction and this provides the starting point for Gems's play. For the first two years following Panienski's death, his money bequeathed Przybyszewska maintained some financial stability: however this legacy was soon spent, not least because larger sums were required for increasing doses of morphine.

The pattern of Przybyszewska's daily existence, so dramatically captured by Gems, was rigorous but dreary: most hours were spent engaged in erratic bouts of writing, visiting her doctor for her morphine prescription and occasionally venturing to the grocery store for essential foodstuffs and tobacco. Gradually, she avoided going out altogether and depended on others to bring her provisions. In fact during these ten years Przybyszewska ventured out of Gdansk only three times, once to attend her father's funeral.<sup>†</sup> Indeed, at no time does Gems let the audience see Przybyszewska venturing outside the hut. All the action is confined to the internal, whether physically, - the four walls of the hut - or psychologically, the thought processes which are realised for the audience. Gems takes dramatic licence, but she does so in order to posit the isolation of the creative artist as the focal point for the play.

Przybyszewska's life was one of poverty, illness and pain (she suffered from rheumatism, asthma, amnesia, palpitations and a score of other ailments resulting from her morphine addiction), but her solitude was so intense and disciplined that she transformed suffering and loneliness into a creative force. By constant studying, thinking, writing and re-writing, Przybyszewska attempted to defy the misery that

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<sup>†</sup> Throughout, her only companion, according to Kosicka and Gerould, was a stray cat whose cries were the only indication to alert Przybyszewska's death to her neighbours. Indeed, they also allege that the cat was one of the few attendants to follow her funeral procession (p. 35). Gems does not make any reference to the feline in *The Snow Palace*, partly out of her need to emphasise the solitary nature of Przybyszewska's existence. The presence of her much beloved pet would have portrayed her life as being bearable and almost cosy, and Gems's intention was to promote her suffering.



engulfed her, but inevitably it overcame her. Accordingly, her biography must now give way to a chronology of her thought and creativity, a heritage which eventually brings us to *Gems* and *The Snow Palace*.

### *The Danton Case (1929)*

In March 1928, (after eleven dissatisfied readings of Georg Buchner's, *Danton's Death*), Przybyszewska began writing her retort entitled, *The Danton Case*, a task for which she had been preparing for many years and this provides the target for her obsession in *The Snow Palace*. After constant revisions and four different versions, Przybyszewska proudly declared in her journal:

9th March 1929 is a historic day in my life: I have finished *The Danton Case*. Completely...I am scared... this was the point around which all the activities in my life revolved... it was my whole existence. I'm still more deeply in love with Robespierre than I was five years ago. So it's frightfully sad to part with him...<sup>11</sup>

The following day she sent the play to the theatre impresario, Leon Schiller, who reviewed the play favourably and granted it performance at the National Theatre in Lodz. For a few months Przybyszewska received the critical acclaim that she felt was due, but her celebrity status proved to be only temporary.

*The Danton Case* reflects the depth of Przybyszewska's obsession with the French Revolution, consisting of five acts, twenty scenes and over six hundred pages of dialogue. She modestly referred to it as an 'historical chronicle.'<sup>12</sup> It represents the pinnacle of her writing career, yet she was never satisfied with it. Originally, the title of the first draft was *The Fallen Idol or Germinal*, but this was eventually changed to *The*

*Danton Case*, to indicate the impact of Danton's downfall on Robespierre, which proved crucial to the outcome of the French Revolution.

Set in April of Year II of the Republic, 1794, the action is limited to the last eight days of Danton's life - his arrest, trial for corruption, condemnation and execution - but within these highly theatrical confines, focusing on intense confrontations in the tribunal, courtroom and prison, she presents a broad and dynamic canvas of the French Revolution at the most critical moment in its history. Przybyszewska creates an enormous cast including the crowds demanding food, mobs storming the Tribunal, and hordes of spectators to witness the drama of the guillotine. Every detail was included and maximised 'to the utmost' (to use Gems's phrase) as it was Przybyszewska's goal to depict on stage the definitive epic of the French Revolution:

I've plunged into the epic mode... (I stick so closely to history that I'm not free to change anything in the ordering of the events of the day...it must be the revolution on a universal plane.<sup>13</sup>

However, the heart of the drama focuses on the battle for power between Przybyszewska's Danton, a corrupt sentimentalist and the incorruptible and highly principled Robespierre, genius of the Revolution, who knows that by institutionalising 'the Terror' in order for the government to survive, he is forcing his own downfall and sowing the seeds of dictatorship (to be reaped by Bonaparte).† Providing an anatomy of the workings of political power and the mechanics of revolution, *The Danton Case*,

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† The second scene of *The Danton Case* features Robespierre's crucial speech regarding the fate of Danton. In a letter to her half-sister, Iwi Bennett, Przybyszewska recounts its dramatic content: "He exercises a personal power which works on the masses - hypnotically. In any case I have him climb the tribunal, greeted with "A bas les dictateurs! A bas le tyran! A la guillotine!" wait, speak and after half an hour shake the building with ecstatic applause when he comes down. (Kosicka and Gerould, p. 111)



contrasts the private and yet very public lives of the two heroes of the French Revolution.

After a brief period of elation when two theatres accepted *The Danton Case*, Przybyszewska struggled with many problems in its staging. The theatre in Lodz quickly abandoned the whole project on the grounds of its sheer length, meanwhile, the National Theatre in Warsaw asked for restructuring and further editing and, much to the author's disgust, not even these amendments prevented the actors from walking out of rehearsals, just short of the opening night.

The premiere of *The Danton Case* finally took place at the Teatr Wielki in Lwow on 30th March 1933, under the direction of Edmund Wiercinski. At five hours, the drama proved too lengthy a production to be deemed successful and it was cancelled after only five performances. A dramatically shortened version of *The Danton Case* was eventually accepted by the Teatr Polski in Warsaw, opening on 30th September 1933. This production ran for a more encouraging total of twenty four performances, but by this time Przybyszewska had lost all interest in ever writing for the theatre again, preferring to concentrate her erratic literary efforts on letter writing and fiction.†

In spite of her adoration of Robespierre, Przybyszewska refused to take sides for or against her characters, even feeling a strong sympathy for the vain and unscrupulous Danton who betrayed the Revolution. Yet it is partly because of her impartiality that *The*

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† Przybyszewska conceived and outlined twenty three novels, only two of which she was able to complete. Most of these works were devoted to the French Revolution and date from the period of her plays on the same subject. Her biographical account of Robespierre, entitled *The Last Nights of Ventose* was eventually published in 1958. She even tried rewriting her father's unsuccessful novels, only to be equally unsuccessful in securing their publication.



*Danton Case* aroused such public controversy.<sup>†</sup> However, Przybyszewska refused to compromise her beliefs and would not pander to the wishes of the general public. Przybyszewska, and indeed, Gems, were both convinced that history is decisively shaped by exceptional individuals of mythical dimensions capable of sacrificing their personal lives for the sake of a higher cause. This is precisely why Przybyszewska was fascinated by the likes of Robespierre and Danton, and why, indeed, Gems became fascinated by Przybyszewska. Creative processes are mutually interdependent.

### **Robespierre and Letters: The Creative Process Unchecked to Death**

Given her reality of isolation and feelings of depression, helplessness and doom, it is little wonder that Robespierre satisfied Przybyszewska's urgent need to have faith in an exceptional individual who could act as her saviour and usurp the desecrated memory of her father. She adopted the revolutionary calendar devised by Fabre D'Eglantine, began dating all correspondence and work accordingly, and began conversing out loud with Danton and Robespierre as though they were her contemporaries. Her obsession with Robespierre was inseparable from her obsession with the creative process: Robespierre was a hard-working man of intellect and self discipline, and her perfectionism demanded she emulate him. Her words proved more prophetic than she could have imagined:

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<sup>†</sup> The play's 1933 production was given with support of the Polish government and in the context of growing right-wing nationalist control of Polish theatres. The text was repeatedly cut in large part due to the supposed topical allusions to actual political figures and contemporary historical events. Przybyszewska was furious that comparisons were made between Robespierre and Hitler. Although she insisted on her distance from any political party, her comments would cause controversy: "I am not a Marxist and have never been one...but I have great, very great respect for the Bolsheviks." (Kosicka and Gerould, p. 48)



No-one has ever had such a decisive influence on me as that man, thanks to whom I discovered morality, the highest spiritual morality....Two points hampered him terribly: the first was his isolation... the second was the lack of resources... For a mind of that scope to be able to express fully, and to carry out in action, its vast potential - he would have had to have knowledge for the absorption of which he simply could not have found time in his short life.<sup>14</sup>

Przybyszewska opted for relentless, systematic work directed by force of will as the sole principle of creativity. However, her passion for perfection caused her to make numerous, painstaking revisions in the fine-honing of his character. Her savage self-criticism meant that her writing could not satisfy her creative criteria and do literary justice to her complex hero. The less she was sustained by deep imaginative impulses, the more she depended on morphine to bridge her creative lacuna and even more rigorously applied the creative method of relentless, systematic work by sheer force of will. Her method harboured a recipe for disaster; she was caught in a vicious cycle of creativity, ultimately geared towards her own self-destruction.

Przybyszewska's Robespierre appears as her alter ego and double, a vision of her own existence transposed to another time and different circumstances. His limitations were hers, his greatness compatible with her achievements. Again, no wonder Przybyszewska could claim to understand the 'incorruptible'<sup>15</sup> better than Buchner or anyone else ever had; she was, in fact, speaking of what she knew best, herself. Thus, Przybyszewska explained Robespierre's final defeat as the result of physical exhaustion and tragic doubt regarding his own vocation. Her identification with Robespierre was matched by a violent self-infatuation:

I love in the woman myself, my own ego raised to its greatest intensity...no-one else thinks as I do, feels as I do.<sup>16</sup>



For the lonely writer, it proved comforting to find a worthy recipient of words she had formally used about her father. It gave her a misplaced confidence, a new identity. After her *annus mirabilis* of 1928, she began to use the pseudonym Brout to sign the countless drawings and paintings with which she tried to capture the quintessential Robespierre on paper. As usual, these attempts were never to her liking. Brout was the name of Robespierre's dog.

Przybyszewska, in analysing Danton's fate gave a sketch of her own unhappy end. She, unconsciously or otherwise, characterised him as an unfulfilled genius who misused his talent, sacrificing his personal life in the process and towards the end of her life, Przybyszewska would recognise that she too would be tragically unfulfilled. Her father's failure as a role model and Robespierre's perfect example were decisive in directing her to a life of solitude and alienation where her own artistic but rigorous, creative programme eventually defeated her.

The final strand of Przybyszewska's biography is told through her intensive letter writing. They stand as her autobiography, her thoughts captured on paper in the act of being thought; moment by moment, day by day. For her, this obsessive correspondence was less a confessional act of catharsis than a dramatisation of the workings of her disturbed mind: "I have to write in order to think."<sup>17</sup> Sensing the dangers of solitude, Przybyszewska tried to lessen her isolation and master her diminishing existence by communicating with the outside world by correspondence. This art, a cultivation and scrutiny of the self, often took the form of interminable and sometimes unfinished letters addressed to friends, peers and role models. The letters themselves were frequently not mailed, since the process of writing became the goal itself. Of course, again, this is



indicative of the creative process in malfunction and yet, collectively, they form a remarkable work of art. Gems certainly admires them:

From the few I've seen, I'm not sure her letters aren't her true oeuvre. They are astounding, full of passion, reflection and philosophical speculations of every kind.<sup>18</sup>

By this time, the external world scarcely existed for Przybyszewska. By March 1930 she had stopped reading the newspapers and no longer knew or cared what was happening around her in Gdansk. Instead, she chose to focus on her typewriter and the misery of surviving the freezing cold winds and frosts of a Polish winter. Her journal confirms her willingness to lose everything except her creative instinct:

During the last three or four nights when my nervous state reached its peak ... I almost lost my senses because I could not get rid of the thought of the possibility of losing my creative powers - I cried during even the shortest breaks in my work.<sup>19</sup>

During the last eight months of Przybyszewska's life, nothing was heard from her; all letters, sent and unsent, stopped. She had grown so weak from malnutrition and morphine addiction that emaciation prevented her from holding a pen or typing. On 14th August 1935, after the morphine and what little money that sustained her for so long ran out, Przybyszewska died alone in her hut, frozen to death. The official cause of death was tuberculosis. She was only thirty four years of age.

### **Heritage**

Although the graveyard in Gdansk where she was buried was totally destroyed in the Second World War, Przybyszewska left a more powerful epitaph. Since her death,

Przybyszewska's work has been far more frequently staged and discussed than her father's. Przybyszewski is merely remembered as an eccentric curio from her past.

In the late 1960's, Jerzy Krasowski began the process of rediscovering Przybyszewska and her literature. As a consequence, *The Danton Case* was revived and successfully staged (some thirty years after its last performance) at the Teatr Polski in Wroclaw in 1967. The revival proved so popular, that by 1975 it had led to the publication of all her plays and Przybyszewska is now firmly established in the Polish repertory.

In the wake of its rediscovery, the famous theatre/film director, Andrzej Wajda became fascinated by *The Danton Case* and after staging it successfully in 1980, he decided to direct a film version. *Danton*, a joint French-Polish production was eventually released in 1983: starring Gerard Depardieu (still relatively unknown outside France) as Danton, and Wojciech Pszoniak as Robespierre. The film received critical acclaim both because of its artistic merits and its allusions to Solidarity, Martial Law, Lech Walesa and General Jaruzelski. Przybyszewska would have been gratified to see her work transferred to the medium of film, about which she was so enthusiastic, and pleased that it had finally reached such a vast international audience. Yet, equally, she would have been angered by the change of title and emphasis, irritated by the interpretations that compared her heroes to contemporary figures, and ultimately dissatisfied with anybody who dared to usurp her creativity. However, the film led directly to Gems's involvement with Przybyszewska's career and legacy.



## Gems's Creative Process: *The Danton Affair* (1986)

In 1984, Adrian Noble decided to stage an RSC season at the Barbican Theatre of European plays which had inspired internationally successful films. He chose *Danton* and *Mephisto* (Szabo's film based on an epic drama by Arian Mnouchkine). It was Gems who was commissioned by the RSC to adapt *The Danton Case*, under the direction of Ron Daniels.

Gems spent eighteen months on the researching, writing and revision of the play but the project was not without its problems. First of all, Gems was asked to write her own play based on the French Revolution, but she categorically refused out of loyalty to her predecessor's efforts, though her decision caused tension between Daniels and herself:

Me? ... writing a play on the French Revolution?... I just could not do it, not after reading hers [Przybyszewska's]. It was sort of unfair somehow, but mostly I was just so fascinated by her that I eventually decided to compromise and agree to a revision of *The Danton Case*.<sup>20</sup>

Gems was so intrigued by the character of Przybyszewska, that she felt the need to chronicle the trials of her own creative process by recording her months of research and writing in a journal.

Ironically enough, Danton was also a figure of fascination for Pam Gems (another reason which influenced her decision to agree to the project) as she confessed in sections of the journal which she later published:

I'd had a weakness for Danton for years, ... a picture of his ugly mug hangs halfway up my stairs ... he has a deadly capacity for intrigue.<sup>21</sup>



Out of admiration for Przybyszewska and Danton, Gems embarked on a trip to Poland, “where Solidarity was alive and vibrant,”<sup>22</sup> (even though it had been suppressed for over five years) in order to engage first-hand with Przybyszewska’s background and heritage. Gems had had problems in absorbing Przybyszewska’s six hundred pages of *The Danton Case*, but she found that her research in Warsaw added neither to her understanding nor her literary inspiration. Despondent, she wrote:

The shops were empty of food and consumer goods, people queued in the street for a few withered oranges. I came back quickly and just cut the play from six hundred to one hundred pages ... like a robot.<sup>23</sup>

During the massive task of revising the play, Gems’s initial perception of Przybyszewska changed, perhaps reflecting a frustration with her own creative process. In the difficult, early stages, fascination quickly turned to critical resentment:

I’m beginning to know her. She’s reticent and horribly arrogant, which usually means wounded. No stagecraft whatsoever. And I hate her...<sup>24</sup>

The first draft of what she called *The Danton Affair* proved as problematic as Przybyszewska’s. At first, Gems could only reduce the drama to two hundred and twenty four pages and, moreover, she was deeply dissatisfied by the lack of strong female roles.<sup>†</sup> Gems almost decided to give up on the project for this very reason.

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<sup>†</sup> Przybyszewska allotted *The Danton Case* an enormous cast consisting of predominantly male characters. She denied partners for both Danton and Robespierre, considering Eleonore Duplay to be merely “Robespierre’s friend, and not his lover” as he preferred to “confine himself to prostitutes.” (Kosicka and Gerould, p. 143) Interestingly enough, neither lovers nor even prostitutes were included in her large cast in spite of her wish to create a play in accordance with historical fact. Gems readdressed this balance in *The Danton Affair* by concentrating on a minimum of major characters, half of which were female and given active roles. Eleonore was restored as Robespierre’s lover and Danton is given a wife, Louise, a character who will gain greater significance in *The Snow Palace*. Gems still retained some of the crowd scenes, but she was careful to keep the male and female numbers equal.



However, in spite of likening the task ahead to “climbing a cliff face,”<sup>25</sup> she adhered to the project but took dramatic licence by adding female parts where she saw fit.

Troubled further by disagreements with Ron Daniels regarding the material which should be cut, Gems was also struggling to finalise her production of *Camille* which was due to transfer from Stratford-upon Avon to London's Comedy Theatre in October 1985. Again her diary conveyed her disillusionment:

He [Ron] ... doesn't know where or if the play will go on, which is unnerving. Why am I doing this? Because I am curious about her, because she's Polish, because I can read about the Revolution? God knows!... don't feel like going on.<sup>26</sup>

By July 1985, the stress of writing the play had begun to take its toll. Gems became ill after writing the fourth draft of *The Danton Affair* and the journal entries at this time often closely parallel Przybyszewska's letters:

Finished fourth draft and feel very ill ... my legs are made of glass, can't even walk the dog ... Wish I could think of a title ... I don't want to stay in or go out. Can't speak, but don't want to be left alone. Price of working too hard.<sup>27</sup>

Further disaster struck as Gems, relaxing in Southern Spain, was seriously injured by two stone pillars falling on her leg. The wound proved serious enough to warrant skin grafts and so yet another complete reworking of the play was written in a hospital bed, with its author in agony. By November 1985, her frustration was still evident:

At the hospital wrote out thirty titles. No good ... Keep improving scenes which means that previous good scenes are now mediocre, ... the whole jigsaw shakes out of focus, characters lose definition.<sup>28</sup>



Finding and securing actors for the roles proved equally problematic, especially as it was critical for the two main parts, Danton and Robespierre, to be supremely well acted. Even here Gems felt herself struggling with the inheritance of the original text since Przybyszewska had built up only four major roles but demanded an extensive number of minor characters. For Gems, casting good actors to do cameo appearances was “like using steam engines to squash ants.”<sup>29</sup> Consequently, several leading actors withdrew at the last moment and the two lead roles were finally confirmed less than a month before *The Danton Affair* was due to open: Brian Cox† as Danton and Ian McDiarmid as Robespierre. In spite of her considerable relief, Gems still had reservations about the production which plagued her until its opening night:

Should I therefore stop working on the text? ... oh no, don't do that. So I work ... then thought how wonderful it would be if the play were to be cancelled. ...if only one could tell when a script is ready.<sup>30</sup>

*The Danton Affair* finally opened at the Barbican Theatre, London on 15th July 1986 (see Appendix) to anticlimactic reviews. Most critics were unimpressed by the play itself but praised the performances of Cox and McDiarmid, who confirmed their status as the “two best actors in the country.”<sup>31</sup> This was to prove a key moment in both their careers. Michael Coveney, writing for the *Financial Times*, considered the production “neither informative... nor urgent in its application.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Mary Harron said Gems had only succeeded in “muddying the waters of thought in her disregard for history,”<sup>33</sup> and though Irving Wardle thought the play had great potential he was disappointed by the “rough and ready crowd scenes” and “undercharacterised supporting

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† Brian Cox was previously cast as Danton in the 1982 staging of Buchner's *Danton's Death*, staged at the National Theatre. At the time of his casting for *The Danton Affair*, he was still appearing in Ron Hutchinson's critically acclaimed, *Rat in the Skull*, at the Royal Court Theatre. The latter was so successful that there was prolonged uncertainty as to whether Cox could commit to Gems's production.



performances,”<sup>34</sup> which detracted from the overall effect. All critics† were taken with the lighting and the set - the dilapidated golden ballroom of the Tuileries Palace, encrusted with dried blood which maintained a “melancholy mood to perfectly encapsulate a blighted epic.”<sup>35</sup> - but despite all Gems’s work, the play’s sheer length (nearly four hours) was severely criticised.

### *The Snow Palace (1998)*

Out of the cutting, carving and shaping of Przybyszewska’s *The Danton Case*, what became “intriguing and dramatically beguiling”<sup>36</sup> for Gems was the shadowy figure of Przybyszewska herself, writing of her isolation and most importantly, the ecstasy of creativity. For Gems, the creative life of the playwright superseded the French Revolution. Therefore, after *The Danton Affair*, Gems set to work on a theatre-piece which would turn the spotlight onto Przybyszewska, and onto the female creative process. Due to ill health and the pressures of other work, it was not until the end of 1997 that Gems finished the project, to be entitled *The Snow Palace*.<sup>††</sup>

*The Snow Palace*, presented by the Sphinx Theatre Group, and directed by Janet Suzman, opened on 22nd January 1998 at the Wilde Theatre in Bracknell to a meagre audience, but favourable reviews. Barely twenty people arrived for the premiere, yet *The*

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† It is interesting to note that all of the critics mentioned here confessed in their articles to never having read *The Danton Case*, nor had they ever heard of Przybyszewska!

†† Gems’s failing health also meant that she struggled to attend rehearsals for *The Snow Palace*. Indeed, Suzman confirmed that Gems only participated in two of the many rehearsals for the play and on each occasion she was “wonderfully helpful, but quite difficult.”<sup>37</sup> Mainly this was due to the fact that Gems, like Przybyszewska, had her own definitive ideas about how her play should be acted and presented to the audience. Protective of her own creative process, Gems often intervened in rehearsals to take issue with the actors and the director. Suzman, as both director and actress, could empathise with both parties, considering that playwright intervention is an occupational hazard of the dramatist. This dynamic, interesting in itself, stands as a living testament to the conflict which arises out of a plethora of creative processes existing simultaneously and often in competition.

*Times* deemed the production as one of the most striking of Gems's plays. Benedict Nightingale wrote:

She [Gems] has written neater, more accessible plays ... but none that allows her to range with such imaginative breadth on matters political and psychological.<sup>38</sup>

Michael Billington, writing for *The Guardian*, considered the play "beautifully atmospheric,"<sup>39</sup> chiefly in its casting of Kathryn Pogson, who provided a "startling performance,"<sup>40</sup> as Przybyszewska, shivering to death and haunted by the ghosts of her past. Nightingale was also struck by Pogson's "riveting mix of bony intensity and wraith like abstraction,"<sup>41</sup> in her role of the hermit dramatist. However, Kate Bassett, in her review for the *Daily Telegraph*, considered the supporting cast were most notable for their "committed energy."<sup>42</sup> Ian Shuttleworth deemed it an "immensely admirable, well written, well directed and well performed story," although he felt it "failed to make that leap to being of general application."<sup>43</sup>

Although the play was generally well received, Gems was criticised for "several scenes" which appeared "roughly truncated"<sup>44</sup> in performance. According to Bassett, most obvious of these was the rape scene where Przybyszewska is brutally attacked by her father. Furthermore, the familiar criticism concerning Gems's 'bio-dramas'<sup>†</sup> surfaced again in *The Snow Palace*. Bassett wrote

... the bio-drama is decidedly selective, missing out key elements of Stanislaw's life ... all proving too schematic to fire you up.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> The phrase 'bio-drama' was chosen by Bassett in her article to make sense of the pattern of Gems's work. The phrase, used widely by her critics, is disliked by Gems, who is annoyed by the fact that people feel the need to label her work in an attempt to justify her existence as a playwright. Questioned on this matter, Gems states, "I dislike the term 'bio-drama', very journalese and ultimately reductive... it means nothing to me. I am a female playwright, pure and simple, writing beyond categories."

Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, unpublished manuscript, 4 February 2000.



But, *The Snow Palace* is not intended as a chronological performance of Przybyszewska's biography. It is structured as a specific 'slice of time,' (like *Marlene*) in a localised setting, (the school hut) with a view to exposing the isolation of the female artist in conflict with/consumed by the creative process. Gems was also criticised for her use of cliché in *The Snow Palace*, but again this can be an occupational hazard for a playwright who has chosen to include biographical references in a drama not fully committed to biographical content. Critics and reviewers seem too eager to categorise Gems as a 'bio-dramatist' in order to clarify her work and in so doing, achieve only a marginal understanding of her as a playwright.

Using a familiar Gems set of dark, harsh, geometric lines and frosty, angled windows (akin to the set design of *Marlene* and *Piaf*), Bruce Macadie evoked the ice-cold atmosphere of the frozen school hut in Gdansk. This set remained unchanged for the duration of the play in order to let the theme of coldness dominate and direct the action. Act One of *The Snow Palace* opens to the frozen gloom of an impoverished school hut where the light from outside is obscured by thickly frosted windows. Przybyszewska, pale, thin and obviously near the end of her life, shuffles across the floorboards in fur boots and threadbare clothes, frantically scribbling a letter to her aunt, painfully distracted by the cold. Her creative process, punctuated by shivers, cramps and hunger, is interrupted by the poignant act of melting snow with a candle to create drinking water. Gems creates a scene of extreme poverty to emphasise the hardships of a female artist who sacrifices everything in order to work alone. This powerful opening stands in stark contrast to *Marlene*: where Dietrich depended on the identity of a glamorous icon, Przybyszewska yearns for anonymity, for non-identity. She writes to her aunt Helena:

STANISLAWA ...My room here... superb, everything I could desire ... anonymous, neutral, for a writer the perfect hermitage. *The Snow Palace*, I. (13)

Physically trapped in the hut - both snowed in and mentally ensnared by the demands of her creativity - it is clear from the outset that Przybyszewska is ill. Her blind stubbornness forces her to shrug off her relatives' concern for her welfare: she scrawls 'I - am - well' (14) across the envelope, yet her contrary nature decrees she must also crave for the attention lost in childhood. Appealing to her aunt's sympathy, she writes:

STANISLAWA ...on second thoughts, continue to be concerned for your highly intelligent, deeply talented and wholly adoring niece ... Stanislawka. *The Snow Palace*, I. (13)

The severe cold forces her to engage in the comfort of escapism and so she imagines the voice of Robespierre and begins the first of many confabulations with her hero. He becomes her confidant and mentor during the long and lonely hours while she confesses to the misery of her existence - caused by the creative process which causes her to write him: "I'm becoming nothing but a huge, inflamed Brain and - ach!" (15) Her addiction, her compulsion to give literary life to Robespierre, is at the expense of losing her own existence. The repeated theme of 'nothing' becomes Przybyszewska's motif.

Ignoring the knock of her neighbour Anna, Przybyszewska, angry at the disturbance from the outside world, resumes her imagined conversations. She shuns outside contact, indeed seems frightened of it, because she has devoted herself to the internal, rather than the external. Bending herself double, she shrinks into a foetal position in order to avoid other people's eyes, and resume her concentration, and then fuelled by morphine, Przybyszewska lies back while St. Just and Robespierre take centre stage and transport the action to the French Revolution. An intense literary process is



realised during these moments as we travel through the jumbled thoughts of Przybyszewska's introspection. Erratic dialogue mirrors her stream of consciousness, for Gems was keen to use this technique as a central dynamic in the play:

The characters are realised on stage for the benefit of the audience, but really, it's all happening in her [Przybyszewska's] head. If you are a writer, it all happens in your head. If you are a dramatic writer you actually say it out loud, you certainly say it dramatically in your head.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, Przybyszewska tries to control her mind as she dictates her script and vice versa. The following quotation is a particularly good example of Gems's use of stream of consciousness to realise the complexity of creative thought and show how the act of writing is inseparable from the act of thinking:

STANISLAWA (*Through her teeth.*) Not... important. (*Released, her mind drifts back to her work.*)  
Not important. (*A sudden decision.*) Get her off. (*She picks up her pencil, bends over the page, mutters to herself.*) Farewell, Eléonore... And enter ... the Angel of Death ... the baleful ... St. Just! *The Snow Palace, I. (p. 16)*

Though Gems was writing for a feminist company (The Sphinx Theatre Group was formerly the Women's Theatre Group), here, Przybyszewska undermines the literary female subject, Eléonore (Robespierre's wife and it seems, Przybyszewska's romantic rival) in order to devote attention to St. Just, her eventual saviour. It is as if she must control her script with such authority in effort to keep fastidious control of her life. These literary moments are her only source of happiness but ultimately they do not last long enough to blot out reality. The cold continually brings her back to her miserable existence and the pencil falls from her frozen hand to signal one (of many) literary hiatuses.

Pathos is a constant presence in *The Snow Palace* as the audience witnesses Przybyszewska quite literally freezing to death. In Act One the cold stiffens Przybyszewska's legs, forcing her to squat on the floor and go into a regressive stupor: like a child she cries for her mother, "Mamushu! ...Mamoo!" (19) to comfort her and defy the cold. At this point Gems, taking dramatic licence, has a dying Pajak enter to reveal the identity of Przybyszewska's father. In fact Przybyszewska, from her birth, always knew Przybyszewski was her father. Yet Gems chooses to heighten the tragic element by creating a scornful, venomous and drunken mother† who exposes Przybyszewski's nature in no uncertain terms, castigating this "madman," "bastard" and "ugly lecher," (21) until suddenly his grisly form appears on stage, fondling Pajak's breasts. He then proceeds to strangle her to justify her harshness. This demonstration of her father's sexual violence characterises his split personality and is prophetic of Przybyszewska's rape at the end of Act One.

Gems sets the sad truth of her parentage in sharp contrast to her dreams - as a girl Przybyszewska was convinced she was descended from royalty. Interestingly, here Gems makes a characteristic intertextual reference to another of her plays, *Queen Christina*:

STANISLAWA I've been reading Swedish history! ... I thought I might be descended from Queen  
Christina of Sweden ... royal! *The Snow Palace*, I. (20)

But as the memories of her mother's death become too painful, Przybyszewska immerses herself in the French Revolution with renewed enthusiasm - more glorious than her present reality yet more savage and complex than her dream of being Christina's heir.

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† Gems casts Pajak as an alcoholic for the tragic purposes of the play. Again, this is an example of Gems taking dramatic licence as, according to biographical material Przybyszewska's mother was not an alcoholic even though Przybyszewski was certainly treated for alcoholism. Kosicka and Gerould certainly do not mention this in their biography.



As she begins zealously to chronicle events, ironically she begins her work with the word “cold.” (23) Agitated, she paces the floor and scribbles notes while St. Just and Robespierre discuss the nature of Danton. She is momentarily jarred by St. Just’s description of him as “that lecher,” (27) and frowns, uncomfortable with the parallel forged between Danton and her father; but her subconscious repeats the word “Terror,” (25) as she writes, indicative of the private terror she must confront herself - reality - as she transcribes the terror in history.

The embodiment of moral principle, Robespierre stood for all that Przybyszewski lacked and it would not have escaped the notice of Przybyszewska that it was the flamboyant, charismatic, licentious Danton, with his alcohol, women and dishonesty who resembled her father and shared his antagonism to the austere Robespierre.† Ironically, it did not escape the notice of Gems who purposely cast the same actor, Robert Willox, to play both Danton and Przybyszewski in *The Snow Palace*, in order to heighten the parallel.†† Throughout the play Gems continues to allude to these two characters as mutually identifiable. For example, Gems has St. Just define their similarities:

ST. JUST ... He’s growing like a fungus! ...sucks every tit his fat hands can squeeze ...  
*The Snow Palace*, I. (25-6)

Danton’s delayed arrival only serves to confirm the parallel. He is a belching, crude, and blustery drunk, staggering on stage with his mouth full of food. Danton, with his “big ugly mug,” (28) stands in sharp contrast to the handsome and virtuous Robespierre, and his language only emphasises his (and Przybyszewski’s) bestiality.

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† Much to his daughter’s disgust, Przybyszewski detested Robespierre and his principles. He once referred to him as a “mere stupid, petty lawyer.” (Kosicka and Gerould, p.46)

†† However, it is interesting to note that Gems does not posit Robespierre in the role of Przybyszewska’s saviour. This role is reserved for Robespierre’s trusty advisor, St. Just, who (as his name suggests) is the physical manifestation of justice in the play.

DANTON The soul of man? Testicles! ... (*Laughs*) The only virtue I know is what I put into my wife's little hole three times a night... What's love got to do with it?

*The Snow Palace*, I. (33-4)

Przybyszewska is a mind blazing while the body dies: dialectically, Gems also plays out the conflict between mind (Robespierre) and body (Danton). Robespierre argues his high devotion to justice and morality through intellectual reasoning, while Danton tries to seduce Robespierre to his viewpoint by appealing to his appetite. He produces soup, fine wine and a little obsequious flattery in order to feign friendship, but Robespierre is not fooled. Their long exchange - taken from the most celebrated scene in *The Danton Case* - is geared towards debunking the heroic Danton of the history books and stands as a direct reworking of a similar sequence in Buchner's *Danton's Death*. The latter portrays Danton as the serious and committed hero, but Gems uses touches of black comedy to reduce him to a fat and arrogant blockhead who tries but dismally fails to assert his boosted masculinity through vulgarity and alcohol. The writing here is energetic and vibrant, but again, the cold interrupts Przybyszewska's literary flow.

The need to stoke a pitiful fire leaves her vulnerable to the gaze of the outside world. In this case, she is disturbed by her aunt Helena (played by the same actress - Kristin Milward in the first production - as her mother) who enters, armed with a basket of groceries for her niece and an invitation and an invitation to a dinner party. The scene replays the idea of food - life - as seduction. In this instance, its quality and aroma represents the allure of the outside world, just as Helena's warmth, fine clothes and perfume leave her niece '*slightly mesmerised.*' (35) Angry at being disturbed and desiring neither provisions nor family concern, Przybyszewska swiftly ushers Helena out



of the hut. Agoraphobia overcomes sensibility and Przybyszewska, finally alone, pours scorn on bourgeois ladies of leisure, the antithesis of her existence, the target of her hate:

STANISLAWA "Poor thing! ... and here am I, a warm, cosy bunny with my man and my little bunnies and my things to define me, all my muffs and ruffles and aren't I the bee's knees, who can take his eyes off me I'm the crystallised violet of Gdansk, perhaps I'll even let him in tonight, ooh he's given me a rash, would you like to see my portrait?" ... God murder every coquette in this world, every bourgeois female renegade to decency.

*The Snow Palace, I. (37)*

In a symbolic gesture, she throws the basket of food out of the door as Helena's car (one of Gems's most powerful symbols of the modern world) drives away from the hut. Again, in the process of rejecting the external for the internal, her savage diatribe sparks a memory of that fateful rendezvous with her father in a Warsaw hotel, where she entertained him with her own bourgeois aspirations, so reviled now. Her gregarious nature and materialism echo the aping of her aunt; thus, Gems sets Przybyszewska's younger self in sharp contrast to her impoverished ambitions in the present. Desperate to seek her father's approval, she appeals to his humour:

STANISLAWA What I'd really like is a new hat. Red - offensive! ... I'd like a choker of rubies, no, fire opals, foiled with silver to make them glow. (*Getting drunk.*) I want to look Mexican, sensational!...Oh!! (*She jumps up.*) I'm going to dance ... then I'll hop ...and buy my own clothes and sail to Madagascar!

*The Snow Palace, I. (38-9)*

Ironically, the theme of food is used again with reference to seduction, but this time, tragically, it is the seduction of the daughter by the father. Przybyszewska remembers exactly what she ate that evening, probably because she is always so hungry now: "pheasant ...smoked herring in a sour sauce ... lamb ... spring cabbage," (37) "carp" and "wild boar." (40) Przybyszewski's response is one of cold and painful ignorance, caring little for his daughter's conversation. Dazed with drink, he is described in the stage notes as '*a looming, ominous figure,*' (41) in trousers, "green with piddle stains," watching his daughter, '*like a predator.*' (42) As her father collapses in a drunken

stupor in the middle of the restaurant, a helpful waiter carries him out and warns Przybyszewska to be wary of such a man. Whilst she is shocked by his impudence, the waiter removes his uniform and reveals himself as St. Just. Out of loyalty to Przybyszewska, he kicks her father whilst muttering “Kill Danton - kill Danton,” (39) asserting himself as the voice of justice and Przybyszewska’s saving grace. In this almost surreal sequence of events Gems is employing literary techniques to realise Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of dream concentration, where memories are distorted in the process of their concentration in the mind. The technique is used to capture on paper the disjointed thoughts of the female artist in isolation, consumed by the creative process.

Desperate for her father’s attention, Przybyszewska tries to deny her mother in order to get closer to him. Finally, after much hesitation, she asks the crucial question, only to receive an even more painful reply:

STANISLAWA (*At last.*) Do you ... mm ... (*He swivels round at her, his gaze cold.*) ... do you love me?

FATHER (*His face frightening*) What?

STANISLAWA No, why should you, there’s no reason why you should, we’re strangers.

*The Snow Palace, I. (41)*

In fact, the only emotional exchange between father and daughter is when Przybyszewska sits on her father’s lap in order to squeeze unsightly blackheads out of his pockmarked face. Disturbingly, in an effort to make sense of his problematic identity, she calls him “my ugly angel,” (44) and he reciprocates with the equally disturbing gesture of licking her hands like an animal. She is forced to flatter his intelligence, but he can only reply with gestures pertaining to the physical. Disgusted by her talk of the French Revolution and especially by her deviation to Robespierre as its hero, Przybyszewski tries to rape his daughter in order to redeem her - to define her according



to himself. Asserting his masculinity - even more savagely than Danton - the drunken Przybyszewski reappears groping a prostitute as a way of taking vengeance on his daughter: he '*cracks*' the whore across the face and proceeds to assault her in front of Przybyszewska. The audience views the action through Przybyszewska's eyes as she bears witness to the dreadful scene, a bloody fight over money. When the dutiful daughter refuses to withdraw and bathes her father's wounds, he redirects his lust and brutality at her. The stage directions are particular and precise. Unequivocally, Gems defines exactly how the scene is to be played, even though there is no biographical evidence to suggest that the events actually occurred as written.

*He begins to stalk her.*

*There is a prolonged, silent tussle. Then he traps her. And throws her down, lifting her clothes and forcing her legs open. She makes a last despairing effort to escape. He puts a hand on her neck, half-throttling her. And then reaches out, taking up an empty wine bottle.*

*She shrieks, one awful howling shriek.*

*The Snow Palace, I. (49)*

In production, this scene provides the chilling centrepiece to *The Snow Palace*, purposely posited half-way and providing the dramatic conclusion of Act One. Przybyszewska's rape is the equivalent of Dietrich's equally dramatic collapse at the end of Act One of *Marlene*, indeed, both incidents serve as good examples of one of the advantages of Gems's creative process, whereby dramatic licence permits the playwright to highlight her own agenda. Yet Gems knew she was taking a risk with the inclusion of the rape scene. Of course it stands open to criticism, and several critics did consider it unpalatable if not far from the truth. Gems's intention with the rape scene was to ask her audience just how far should women, in particular, tolerate attractive ogres (like Danton) and creative monsters (like Przybyszewski)? To the brink of violence and beyond, in spite of the familial bond? In *The Snow Palace*, Gems constantly places Danton on a

par with Przybyszewski, both representing a beguiling sensuality and insecurity because of their fame and notoriety.

According to Michael Billington, Gems's assumption that Przybyszewska's increasing hostility to Danton was coloured by her rejection of her natural father proved "questionable,"<sup>47</sup> and that the suggestion that Przybyszewska, in dramatising the death of Danton, was symbolically disposing of her own demonic father was both to "diminish the heroine" and provide "too pat a Freudian motive."<sup>48</sup> Yet Gems actually uses Danton and Przybyszewski to emphasise the fine line that divides a gregarious zest for life from the most disgusting self indulgence. Gems's characterisation of Przybyszewski is particularly interesting, although chilling. He stands as the most savage reduction of masculinity in contemporary British theatre, so reduced in fact, that his is the language of bestial gestures rather than significant dialogue. The violent rape of his daughter is so brutal, it warrants too much to redeem his character; so Gems does not even begin to attempt his redemption. Przybyszewski is raw man, stripped of every trace of Robespierre's intelligence, morality and virtue and thus, he stands as the shameful, apocalyptic symbol of the failure of the French Revolution and its legacy. Przybyszewska's attempt to live in a world of revolutionary ideals is rendered tragically impossible by the very existence of such a man.

Where Act One concentrated on the key biographical events of Przybyszewska's life, Act Two is devoted to their process and effect within her mind, the mind of the female artist, as she waits for death. Act Two opens with Helena visiting her niece with yet more provisions. In the aftermath of the rape, it is ironic that they discuss the notion of justice and that Przybyszewska, a staunch advocate of justice which is so crucial to her literary motivation and creative process, feels that such an ideal is barely applicable



to herself: “hardly a luxury available to a bastard.” (50) She smashes a plate to prove that her life has been irreversibly shattered by her father’s actions. She utters the word “finished,” (50) which is prophetic of the last word she utters before her death at the end of Act Two. Yet Helena represents a different kind of femininity, a voice of survival and solidarity. She has hope for her future and symbolically proceeds to ‘*pick up the pieces*’ of the broken crockery. She responds with feminist enlightenment, articulating Gems’s agenda - and perhaps sounding slightly out of character - to assert the idea of a male conspiracy, whereby the patriarchy reserves justice solely for itself.

HELENA Oh my dear... Don’t you know? I thought you knew... **All women feel that. In the centre of things, but exiled ... He’s flawed! A monster! He thinks there’s no God, that he’s on his own, that he can do as he likes and survive... You found him. Now let go... Survive. For me.**  
*The Snow Palace, II. (51, 54)*

Tragically, Helena’s pearls of wisdom are outweighed by the seductive strength of the morphine her niece drinks with growing vigour - an anaesthetic to blot out her painful and cold reality. She becomes increasingly dependent on the drug in Act Two to aid her creative process: she tells Helena, “It releases the mind wonderfully.” (54) But Helena has hope and Przybyszewska does not, even with the aid of morphine. In fact her first discovery of Robespierre, was the expression of her faith, as a young woman, in the future, but now she is convinced that life’s reality destroys aspirations and poses a question to the audience: “How can you enjoy yourself?” (53)

At that moment, St. Just and Robespierre enter as if to answer her question. Robespierre sits at a desk piled with papers concerned with the arrest and trial of Danton - caught in his own creative process, the stress and exhaustion involved in preparing the official documentation is bringing him to the point of collapse. He mutters, “How can I stop when so much is unbearable?” (53) and so Gems deftly builds up the parallel with

Przybyszewska, who is similarly physically and emotionally drained by the creative process that compels her to write him. Both figures exemplify Gems's dedication to 'giving everything to the utmost,' - two principled people writing history even though it kills them. Yet it is crucial that *The Snow Palace* includes three key figures from Przybyszewska's chronicle of the French Revolution, not only two: where Robespierre falters, St. Just provides the motivation for both writers to carry on. Wanting justice for both Robespierre and Przybyszewska, he offers the following:

ST JUST Please - you must rest... At least you'll be safe now... Danton will be where he belongs,  
where all animals belong - in a cage. *The Snow Palace*, II. (53)

Stanislawa begins to laugh: she suddenly realises the parallels in her writing - Danton and her father, St. Just and her sense of justice, Robespierre and herself - and her realisation has only been made possible through engaging in the creative process. For the first time, even though she is reluctant to admit these feelings to Helena, she sees her father for what he is - a liar, a monster, and a dreadful writer. Only through writing can she exorcise the myths that have conditioned her, and achieve self-realisation.

As she sits in her self-induced haze, her internalised experience of the rape becomes an externalised piece of literature: her thoughts wander to Danton, forcing himself upon his pregnant, teenage wife, Louise.<sup>†</sup> Coincidentally, the role of Louise, played by Jemma Shaw, is also cast to play Aunt Helena. The dialogue between husband and wife closely reworks the nightmarish tryst between father and daughter in the last act. Yet, Przybyszewska grants Louise more strength and determination than she

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<sup>†</sup> The role of Louise, played by Jemma Shaw, is also cast to play Aunt Helena. Again, Gems is using the multiple role technique in order to make pertinent various dynamic parallels and contrasts between characters.



possessed herself in Act One. She spits in Danton's face and '*looks at him with loathing,*' berating his conduct with feminist conviction:

LOUISE How can I carry a child? I'm not ready yet! ... You really think a woman goes with an old man for pleasure!?... You bought me! Like a dog on a string! When was I asked? Who consulted me? ... Every time you slander Robespierre, and sneer, and ridicule him. - I know he's won! - taken one more day away from you. And I thank God for it!

*The Snow Palace*, II. (56)

Stanislawa does not make her wait long for justice. She stands against the window '*like a statue*' with her '*candelabrum held high,*' (57) strangely prefiguring the Statue of Liberty, and Przybyszewska quickly follows the scene of Louise's anger by writing Danton's arrest.

In the trial that follows, her need to write her justice leaves Przybyszewska a marginal figure, her desk positioned at the side while St. Just and Robespierre take centre stage. Yet she has the advantage of being the clear-eyed observer, in spite of being on the margins. Here Gems is making a pointed gesture towards a history of female creativity that has had no other option but to have been written from the margins. With every stroke of her pen, her literary attempts to right the wrongs of history (personal and political) increase her confidence, so much so that at last she feels strong enough to cast herself in the key role of Legendre, the character who controls Danton's trial proceedings. Now she takes centre stage in the search for objective truth and allows Danton the opportunity to speak. It is almost as if she is conducting the trial of her father, commanding justice to be the victor by letting Danton admit his crime and in so doing, seeing her father confess. Liberated by literature to become an intrinsic part of the action, she paves the way for Robespierre's swansong, his rousing speech, which is great only in that it depends on Przybyszewska's creative process to write it. The content articulates her own agenda and that of Gems:

ROBESPIERRE ...We are here to create a new society. A society based on the notion of democracy. On the notion of personal freedom... No man is born a slave! Another man makes him so... We mean to build a state without hierarchy, where notions of comfort, dignity and personal happiness are not confined to the few at the expense of the many. You think that impossible? With so much energy locked in want and despair? Wasted in human beings deprived of the means of survival, let alone education, civilisation! I tell you, we have the means to unlock that energy. Here, for the first time in the history of the world, we have a chance to save the world, for the world ... ALL people... everywhere! Must that great work be put at risk? For personal greed? For criminality? I, Maximilien Robespierre - Citizen - say NO!!! (*Cheers.*)  
*The Snow Palace, II. (61)*

Yet a life lived only through literature is surely tragic. Przybyszewska's frantic writing leaves her physically and mentally defeated. She '*collapses on her seat, frozen and exhausted,*' (62) too weak even to warm herself by the fading fire. She recalls letters received from her aunt, one begging her to attend a sanatorium and fight the morphine addiction, another, informing her the educational authorities have terminated her grant. Outside the room, writing undermines her and Gems uses Przybyszewska to convey the frenzied solitude of the creative process, to voice the cry of baffled literary artists everywhere. She writes to her aunt, as if to convince herself:

STANISLAWA No, I am not depressed! Nor am I lonely. I am alone in order to work and I cope with loneliness by working. If you inhabited the world that I inhabit, a world of the most potent, the most thrilling thought, then you would not be in the least concerned for my welfare. I am in a fever, yes. But of excitement.  
*The Snow Palace, II. (63)*

As her frantic scribbles are played out for the audience, Stanislaw's thought processes become more muddled and the character of Danton is again confused with that of her father. For example, whilst delivering his speech, Danton suddenly '*turns with a jerk*' (63) to smile at Przybyszewska with her father's leering grin. Her ability to write is disrupted by the shock of his glare and she draws back, whispering with ashamed realisation: "My God... No... You had our trust. We adored you." (64) The sad realisation is all too close for comfort and Przybyszewska must detach herself from the



pain of the moment by writing another of her many letters to Helena, begging to be left alone. The theme of coldness and the motif of ‘nothing’ are reiterated in her correspondence, heightening the sense of isolation and emptiness. In desperation she writes:

STANISLAWA Were you aware that one can survive indefinitely on snow? If you could see the frosting on the windows! I’m surrounded by jewels! My breath on the air keeps me company, the icicles on the window are my guardians. This is all there is. This and Work.  
*The Snow Palace, II. (66)*

With ‘nothing’ as her company, she becomes Robespierre’s adviser, almost usurping St. Just’s role. Both sit in parallel at their own desks, ensnared by their own creative process, writing their respective fate. Przybyszewska makes the carefree comment, “We could be dead tomorrow” (67), not realising it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy for herself as well as her long-dead hero.

As Danton’s trial continues, Gems again places this theme of emptiness at the forefront of the scene:

STANISLAWA Nothing.  
Nothing.  
Nothing.  
Nothing  
... I must keep the margins straight... Am I dissolving?... If no one sees me, do I exist?  
*The Snow Palace, II. (68)*

Slowly, as Przybyszewska freezes to death, her creative focus on completing her literary project is superseded by a focus on herself. Graphically, she describes the cold as it ravages her body. Her journal now becomes devoted to her suffering as she loses control. Her body dictates her mind:

STANISLAWA Odd reactions of the body to cold ... all the tissues contract. Everything goes stiff, like hardening wax. You can’t eat - breaks the teeth. Your tongue, your throat, your palate... You can’t swallow... your stomach won’t have it. You can’t think.  
*The Snow Palace, II. (69)*

As Przybyszewska dies, so Danton is led away to his untimely death, and Robespierre completes his official paperwork. Przybyszewska sits by his side offering comfort and understanding, appreciative of his literary efforts. He writes his last words, mutters "Finished," (71) and breathes a huge sigh of relief, while Przybyszewska breathes her last breath. She is sitting rigid in her chair, still gripping her pen. The door of the school hut swings open to let the snow engulf the room. As the white flakes accumulate to cover even the window panes, Stanisława is left petrified in the act of writing, having paid the ultimate price for giving everything, 'to the utmost,' in the name of the female creative process. A 'whiteout' (as opposed to the usual blackout) on stage signals the end of the play and Przybyszewska is left a prisoner and victim of the 'snow palace,' Gems's chilling metaphor for the mental and physical existence which had to claim Stanisława's life.

### **Conclusion**

The parallel between Przybyszewska's life - lived, as a literary artist, giving everything 'to the utmost' - and the lives of the revolutionaries, prepared to commit everything, each with a fervent political agenda, seemed so cogent to Gems. The parallel continues with Gems herself - a female playwright, feeling isolated from other literary contemporaries, struggling to rear four children (one being disabled), alienated, writing from the margins in a hostile city (London), with few close friends and yet, still determined to give everything to her art:

I give everything to my work. It's either work or life if you are an artist. You have to make up your mind.<sup>49</sup>



It is little wonder that Gems became fascinated by Przybyszewska and indeed, Przybyszewska's fascination. 'To the utmost,' killed her, as it did Danton and Robespierre. Nonetheless, despite controversy, they gave the world an incomparable push forward from "medievalism and the despotic to the rule of law and the rights of man."<sup>50</sup> Not an undeserving subject for such fascination. When I asked Gems for her personal thoughts on Przybyszewska - passionately misguided? Foolishly destructive? - she wrote:

Stanislawa was a brave, lonely woman. A pathfinder. Pathfinders get picked off. They command our respect.<sup>51</sup>

In accordance with her own viewpoint on Przybyszewska, Gems must also be classed as a pathfinder. Her creativity, offering such original material commands an equal respect and yet, also like Przybyszewska, her fascinating work remains so rarely researched.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Endnotes

1. The full reference for the main text used in this chapter and referred to hereafter is: Pam Gems, *The Snow Palace* (London: Oberon, 1998).
2. Janet Suzman, speaking of Gems in the post-play discussion at Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry on 8th March 1998.
3. Przybyszewski referring to his children in Jadwiga Kosicka and Daniel Gerould, *A Life of Solitude* (London: Quartet, 1986), p. 9.
4. Stanisława Przybyszewska, Letter to Anton Slonimski, 10 September 1927, repr. in Kosicka and Gerould, pp. 90-94 (p. 93).
5. Pam Gems speaking in an interview with Emma Freud for the television programme 'Theatreland', produced by Carlton Television Company and shown in December 1998.
6. Stanisława Przybyszewska, Letter to Lucian Paczoski, 8 December 1927, repr. in Kosicka and Gerould, pp. 98-101 (p. 99).
7. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 28.
8. Gems's interview with Emma Freud (see 4. for full reference).
9. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 31-32.
10. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 33.
11. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 39.
12. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 40.
13. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 40.
14. Stanisława Przybyszewska, Letter to Helena Barlinska, 5 April 1929, repr. in Kosicka and Gerould, pp. 142-144 (p. 143).
15. Jean-Paul Marat referred to Robespierre as the "only honest and incorruptible man of the French Revolution," in his political tract entitled *L'Ami du Peuple*, in Louis Gottschalk, *Jean-Paul Marat: A Study in Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 115.
16. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 45.
17. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 105.



18. Pam Gems, 'The Danton Affair', *Drama*, 161 (1986), 5-8 (p. 7).  
This article, written in a diary format by Gems, chronicles the trials of her creative process in the writing of her play *The Danton Affair*. Hereafter, this article will be referred to as '*Drama*' in order to avoid confusion with Gems's play, *The Danton Affair*.
19. Kosicka and Gerould, p. 217.
20. Gems's interview with Emma Freud
21. *Drama*, p. 6.
22. Pam Gems, Introduction to *The Snow Palace*, p. 8.
23. *Drama*, p. 6.
24. *Drama*, p. 6.
25. *Drama*, p. 6.
26. *Drama*, p. 7.
27. *Drama*, p. 7.
28. *Drama*, p. 7.
29. *Drama*, p. 8.
30. *Drama*, p. 8.
31. Michael Billington, 'Bruisers of the Revolution', *Guardian*, 17 July 1986, p. 12.
32. Michael Coveney, 'Review: *The Danton Affair*', *Financial Times*, 16 July 1986, p.19.
33. Mary Harron, 'Petty Revolution', *Observer*, 20 July 1986, p. 19.
34. Irving Wardle, 'Revolt of the Human Will', *The Times*, 17 July 1986, p. 19.
35. Billington, 'Bruisers of the Revolution', p.12.
36. Pam Gems, Introduction to *The Snow Palace*, p. 8.
37. Janet Suzman, (see 2. for full reference).
38. Benedict Nightingale, 'Freezing to Death in a Man's World', *The Times*, 30 January 1998, p. 32.
39. Michael Billington 'The Revolution: Crazy Name: Crazy Show', *Guardian*, 31

38. Benedict Nightingale, 'Freezing to Death in a Man's World', *The Times*, 30 January 1998, p. 32.
39. Michael Billington 'The Revolution: Crazy Name: Crazy Show', *Guardian*, 31 January 1998, p. 7.
40. Billington, 'The Revolution', p. 7.
41. Nightingale, p. 32.
42. Kate Bassett, 'Revolution Sparked in the Ice', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 February 1998, p. 16.
43. Ian Shuttleworth, critic for the *Financial Times*, offering his personal opinion of *The Snow Palace*, on 'Theatreland' (see 4. for full reference).
44. Bassett, p. 16.
45. Bassett, p. 16.
46. Gems's interview with Emma Freud, (see 4. for full reference).
47. Billington, 'The Revolution', p. 7.
48. Billington, 'The Revolution', p. 7.
49. Gems's interview with Emma Freud, (see 4. for full reference).
50. Pam Gems, Introduction to *The Snow Palace*, p. 9.
51. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, 18 January 1999.



## CONCLUSION

My work with Gems's biographical drama accounts not only for the many mediums and forms used in the writing of biography, but for its many functions. As a form of history, biography offers a glimpse back upon the details of a culture's inheritance. Biography also offers basis for myths and legends where particularised details diminish in importance, eclipsed by generalised truisms about human life.

Gems inherited five markedly different traditions in working with Queen Christina, Piaf, 'Camille', Dietrich and Przybyszewska. The line between myth and biographical fact is always difficult to discern, but becomes increasingly so in the journey from Christina to Przybyszewska. The biographical heritage Gems confronts with Christina is ridden with glaring gender biases, but does offer a fairly consistent identification of the main events in a chronology of her life. From the moment of Piaf's birth however, the line between truth and myth-making become more entangled - making even select details of her life elusive. Another shift occurs in the movement from Edith Piaf to Marguerite Gautier. Reality gives way to myth as the biographical basis of the 'Camille' narrative becomes sublimated to generalised maxims about gender. Analysing the female role takes precedence over biography as Gems moves from Marguerite to Marlene; the focus on the romantic, mythical heroine in French literature shifts to a study of myth and iconography within Hollywood cinema. In so doing, Gems redresses and revises the stereotype of the 'penitent whore' and the '*femme fatale*' respectively. While Marlene was the equally glamorous and gregarious artist of the celebrity world, Przybyszewska stands in contrast as the unknown female artist devoted to an insular and abject existence in the margins. As Gems makes the transition from *Marlene*, to *The*

*Snow Palace*, myth, female role and even - to some extent - biography, carry less importance for Gems when compared with the reality of the female artist in the very act of writing - alone. In this respect, Gems finds affinity with Przybyszewska more so than with any of her other female protagonists, because she reflects her vocational *raison d'être* - to translate historical lives. Gems explains:

Translation is a specific job ... to make a version which is truthful to the original and does not bore the tits off people is difficult.<sup>1</sup>

As a woman translator in a predominantly male tradition, Gems believes that her work is far from over as "there is an awful lot of redefining and reclaiming still to do,"<sup>2</sup> but she is alert to the dangers of misemphasis:

You can't extrapolate what isn't there, but in great plays there are always things that haven't been seen before; what you **can** do is redress the balance.<sup>3</sup>

Gems's urge to redress is clearly evident in this thesis, but the matter of whether her revision constitutes a specifically feminist interpretation is far from resolved. Gems attempts to define her standpoint:

Being labelled 'feminist' creates disadvantages for the artist ... but what is the alternative when you seek a just society? I do not question the relevance of the word 'feminist' to my work. The feminist outlook was my springboard.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of self-qualification, Gems (consciously or otherwise), has instigated a redefinition of her theatre in closer association to feminism than was originally conceded.



Thus what originally started out as a denunciation of the impact of feminism on her work has eventually led to a much more complex even 'committed' stance. This oscillation toward and away from feminist thinking by Gems should not be observed negatively. Indeed, I feel that Gems is fully aware of this movement and positively transforms it into a dynamic with which to shape her female protagonists. A dynamic which encourages reader/audience/critic to view her work - and indeed the female role(s) - as moving fluidly between ideological perspectives, positing feminism merely as a continuum of positionalities that can be simultaneously occupied.

Thus, for Gems, the female role rejects prescriptiveness and embraces the notion of plural, multi-faceted identity(ies). This idea is echoed by certain feminists<sup>†</sup> who, like Teresa de Lauretis, consider that woman is "multiple, shifting and often self-contradictory."<sup>5</sup> This idea of female plurality complements Gems's theatrical and 'feminist' viewpoint and consequently, has influenced her use of the female role.

However, in spite of such contrasts in Gems's choice of females, certain observations shed light on the connection between **all** her female protagonists. Perhaps, even more crucial is the way that each female, in spite of their enormous differences and marked contrasts, do however resemble each other. They are interdependent, pushing forward with the same objectives. To a certain extent, all Gems's females are constructs; their images have been appropriated, moulded and refined over time to embody various ideas about gender and biography - this in itself dictating the direction of their mythical status. Accepting the challenges embedded in each of the traditions she inherits, Gems

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<sup>†</sup> Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler and Annette Kolodny are other examples of feminist literary theorists who consider the female in terms of plurality.

redresses historical lives through a plural feminist revisioning in order to reveal, and ultimately deconstruct their mythical constraints.



# CONCLUSION

## Endnotes

1. Gems in conversation with Claire Armitsead.  
See, Claire Armitsead, 'A Rough Diamond Finds Her Setting', *Guardian*, 30 April 1992, p. 23.
2. Pam Gems, Letter to Rachael Turner, unpublished manuscript, 18 January 1999.
3. Armitsead, p. 23.
4. Pam Gems in correspondence with Lizbeth Goodman, 22 January 1992.  
See, Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 17.
5. Teresa De Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 9.

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† Gems's handwritten production notes on copies of unpublished plays and other useful resources made available for reference at: The Shakespeare Institute

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\* Photocopies of all unpublished plays by Pam Gems can be obtained from her agent:

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## APPENDIX

### PAM GEMS

#### CHRONOLOGY OF PRODUCTIONS

- 1972 • *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* (play for children)  
Produced at the Cockpit Theatre, London for the Christmas season.  
Presented by the Women's Company. Directed by Ed Berman.
- 1973 • *My Warren*  
• *After Birthday*  
Two monologues produced at the Almost Free Theatre, London: June 1973.  
Summer lunchtime season. Presented by the Women's Company.  
Directed by Ed Berman.
- *The Amiable Courtship of Miz Venus and Wild Bill* (short play)  
• *Sandra* (short play)  
Both produced as part of the all-women's season at the Almost Free Theatre,  
London: October 1973. Produced by the Sphinx Theatre Company.  
Directed by Sue Parrish.
- 1974 • *Go West, Young Woman*  
Produced at the Roundhouse Theatre, London: 11 June 1974.  
Presented by the Women's Theatre Group. Directed by Sue  
Todd with Anne Mitchell.
- 1975 • *Up in Sweden* (short play)  
First produced at the Haymarket Studio, Leicester: 5 July 1975.  
Presented by the Women's Playhouse Trust.  
Directed by Anne Mitchell.
- 1976 • *The Project*  
First produced at the Soho-Poly, London as part of the Spring  
lunchtime season: February 1976. Presented by the  
Women's Playhouse Trust. Directed by Ed Berman.<sup>†</sup>
- *My Name is Rosa Luxemburg* (translated from Marianne Auricoste)  
• *The Rivers and Forests* (translated from Marguerite Duras)  
Two short plays first produced at the Soho-Poly, London as part of  
the Spring lunchtime season: April 1976. Presented by the  
Women's Company. Directed by Sue Todd.
- *Guinevere*  
First produced at the Edinburgh Festival: August 1976.  
Fringe production. Presented by the Women's Playhouse Trust.  
Directed by Caroline Eves.

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<sup>†</sup> *The Project* was not seen again until it was re-titled *Loving Women* in 1984 for a production at the London Arts Theatre.

- *Dead Fish*  
First produced at the Kundry's Theatre for the Edinburgh Festival: August 1976. Fringe production. Produced by the Women's Company. Directed by Caroline Eves. Retitled as *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, the play transferred to the Hampstead Theatre Club, London: 8 December 1976 - 28 January 1977. Directed by Nancy Meckler.
- 1977 • *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* transferred to the Mayfair Theatre, London: 10 February - 18 March 1977. Presented by Michael Codron by arrangement with the Hampstead Theatre Club. Produced by the Women's Company. Directed by Nancy Meckler.<sup>†</sup>
- *Queen Christina*  
Opened at the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon: 9 September 1977 - 25 April 1978. Produced by the RSC. Directed by Ron Daniels and Penny Cherns. Starred Sheila Allen as Queen Christina.
- *Franz into April*  
First produced at the ICA, London as part of their December lunchtime season. Produced by the Women's Playhouse Trust. Directed by Frank Hatherley. Starred Warren Mitchell as Franz.
- 1978 • *Ladybird, Ladybird* (short play)  
First produced at the King's Head Theatre, London: 10 April 1978. Presented by the Women's Playhouse Trust as part of their Spring lunchtime season. Directed by Sue Parrish.
- *Piaf*  
Opened at the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon: 5 October 1978 - 10 May 1979. Produced by the RSC. Directed by Howard Davies. Starred Jane Lapotaire as Piaf.
- 1979 • *Guinevere*  
Fringe production opened at the Gulbenkian Studio, Newcastle: 8 - 16 March 1979. Produced by the RSC. Starred Suzanne Bishop as Guinevere.
- *Ladybird, Ladybird* tours with *Sandra* for six weeks.  
Opened at the King's Head Theatre, London: April 10 1979. Performed and produced by the King's Head Theatre Company. Directed by Sue Parrish.
- *Piaf* transferred from the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon to the Aldwych Theatre, London: 1 June 1979 - 27 June 1981. (Production and cast as 1978)<sup>††</sup>
- *Uncle Vanya* (Gems's version of Chekhov's play)  
Opened at Hampstead Theatre Club, London: 22 November - 1 December 1979. Produced by the RSC. Directed by Nancy Meckler. Starred Nigel Hawthorne as Vanya.

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<sup>†</sup> In December 1977, Alison Fiske was awarded 'Actress of the Year' (Society of West End Theatre Awards) for her performance as Dusa.

<sup>††</sup> In December 1979, Jane Lapotaire was awarded 'Actress of the Year in a New Play' (Society of West End Theatre Awards) for her performance as Piaf.



- 1980 • *The Treat*  
Fringe production opened at the Soho-Poly, London: 20 April 1980.  
Presented and produced by the Women's Playhouse Trust as part of their 'Women's Evening' season. Directed by Bill Pryde.
- *A Doll's House* (Gems's new version of Ibsen's play)  
Opened at the Playhouse Theatre, Newcastle: 15 October - 21 November 1980. Presented and produced by the Women's Playhouse Trust. Directed by Annie Castledine.
- 1981 • *Piaf* transferred from London's West End to the Plymouth Theatre, New York: 28 July 1981 - 3 March 1982. Original production and cast from 1978. Production received a Tony award.
- 1982 • *Sandra* new production opened at Soho-Poly, London: 17 - 22 May 1982. Produced by the Women's Playhouse Trust. Directed by Sue Parrish. Starred Carole Harrison as Sandra.
- *Uncle Vanya* (Gem's version of Chekhov play) - new production  
Opened at Lyttelton Theatre, London: 18 May - 11 October, 1982. Produced by the National Theatre Company. Directed by Michael Bogdanov. Starred Michael Bryant as Vanya.
  - *Queen Christina* (revised version) opened at the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn, London: 27 May - 19 June 1982. Produced by the RSC. Directed by Pam Brighton. Starred Chrissie Cotterill as Christina.
  - *Aunt Mary*  
Opened at the Warehouse Theatre, London: 24 June - 24 July 1982. Presented by Omega Projects Ltd. Produced by the RSC. Directed by Robert Walker. Starred Alfred Marks as Mary.
- 1984 • *Loving Women*  
Produced at the London Arts Theatre: 1 February - 31 March 1984. Presented and produced by David Jones and Jonathan Gems. Directed by Philip Davis.
- *Camille*  
Opened at the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon: 4 April - 15 September 1984. Produced by the RSC. Directed by Ron Daniels. Starred Frances Barber as Camille.
  - *The Cherry Orchard* (Gems's version of Chekhov play)  
Opened at Haymarket Theatre, Leicester: 5 August - 3 September 1984. Presented by Jonathan Gems. Produced by the National Theatre Company. Directed by Sue Dunderdale.
- 1985 • *Pasionaria*  
First produced at the Newcastle Playhouse: 13 - 27 May 1985. Presented and produced by the Women's Company. Directed by Sue Dunderdale. Starred Denise Black as Delores Ibaruri.
- *Camille* transferred from the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon to the Comedy Theatre, London: 29 October - 30 November 1985. Production and cast as 1984. Presented by Frank and Woji Gero, Frederick Zollo, William Suter, Harold Thau, Eddie Kulukundis, John Wallbank and Bernard Sandler.



- 1986 • *The Danton Affair* (Gems's play adapted from *The Danton Case* by Stanisława Przybyszewska)  
Opened at the Barbican Theatre, London: 15 July - 23 September 1986.  
Produced by the RSC. Directed by Ron Daniels. Starred Ian McDiarmid as Robespierre and Brian Cox as Danton.
- 1987 • *Camille* opened at the Long Wharf Theatre, New York:  
10 February - 8 August 1987. Production as 1985.  
Starred Kathleen Turner as Marguerite Gautier.
- 1991 • *Uncle Vanya* (revival) (Gems's version of the play by Anton Chekhov)  
Opened at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith: 14 - 31 August 1991.  
Produced by the Renaissance Theatre Company and directed by Kenneth Branagh and Peter Egan. Starred Richard Briers as Vanya and Peter Egan as Astrov.
- *The Blue Angel* (adapted from the Heinrich Mann novel)  
Opened at the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon: 29 August 1991 - 28 April 1992. Produced by the RSC and presented by arrangement with Mark Furness and John Newman for Barry O'Brien Ltd. By arrangement with Stoll Moss Theatres. Directed by Trevor Nunn.
- 1992 • *Uncle Vanya* (revival) (Gems's version of the play by Anton Chekhov)  
Opened at the Cottesloe Theatre, London: 25 February - 9 May 1992.  
Produced by the National Theatre Company and directed by Sean Mathias.  
Starred Ian McKellen as Vanya and Anthony Sher as Astrov.
- *The Blue Angel* transferred from the RSC's Other Place Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon to the Globe Theatre, London: 20 May - 27 June 1992.  
(Production and cast as 1991)
  - *Queen Christina* (revival fringe production)  
Produced by the Absolute Theatre Company at the Man-in-the-Moon Theatre, London: 29 October - 21 November 1992.  
Directed by Andrew Pratt. Laura Cox played Christina.
- 1993 • *Yerma* (revival of the play by Federico Garcia Lorca)  
Translation by Pam Gems and Tony Yates.  
Produced by the Tightrope Theatre Company at Studio 2, Battersea Arts Centre, London: 4 - 28 February 1993. Directed by Tony Yates.
- *Piaf* (revival)  
Opened at the Piccadilly Theatre, London: 13 December - 18 June 1993.  
Presented by Bill Kenwright and produced by the Sir Peter Hall Company. Directed by Sir Peter Hall. Starred Elaine Paige as Piaf.
- 1994 • *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (revival)  
Opened at the Etcetera Theatre, London: 15 March - 3 April 1994.  
Produced by the Masque of Angels Theatre Company.  
Directed by Lisa Napier.
- *Deborah's Daughter*  
Opened at the Library Theatre, Manchester: 22 April - 15 June 1994.  
Produced by the Sphinx Theatre Company.  
Directed by Sue Parrish.



- *The Seagull* (Gems's version of the play by Anton Chekhov)  
Opened at the Olivier Theatre, London: 7 July - 28 August 1994.  
Produced by the National Theatre Company and directed by John Caird. Starred Dame Judi Dench as Arkadina.

**1996 • *Stanley***

Opened at the Cottesloe Theatre, London: 1 February - 17 August 1996.  
Produced by the Royal National Theatre Company. Directed by John Caird.  
Starred Anthony Sher as Stanley Spencer.<sup>†</sup> Immediately transferred to Cort Theatre, Broadway: 3 September 1996 - 17 April 1997. (Production and cast unchanged)

- *Marlene*

Opened at the Oldham Coliseum, Lancashire: 9 - 26 October 1996.  
Presented by Michael Rose Ltd. and Michael Redington Ltd. in association with Oldham Coliseum Theatre for MR (Marlene) UK Ltd.  
Directed by Sean Mathias. Starred Sian Phillips as Marlene Dietrich.

**1997 • *Marlene*** transferred from the Oldham Coliseum to the Lyric Theatre, London: 3 April - 13 September 1997. (Production and cast as 1996)

**1998 • *The Snow Palace***

Opened at the Wilde Theatre, Bracknell on 22 January 1998. Toured for eight weeks until 11 March 1998. Produced by the Sphinx Theatre Company. London premiere: Tricycle Theatre, 30 November - 19 December 1997.  
Directed by Janet Suzman. Starred Kathryn Pogson as Stanisława Przybyszewska.

- *Marlene* (premiere - Germany)

Opened at the Leverkusen Theatre, Berlin on 28 June 1998. Touring Germany until 27 February 2000. Produced by the Berlin Renaissance Theatre Company.  
Directed by Helmut Nordmann. Starring Judy Winter as Marlene Dietrich.

**1999 • *Piaf*** (premiere - Sweden)

Opened at the Stadtsteatern, Stockholm on 2 September 1999. Toured for six weeks until 14 October 1999. Produced by the Kvinnoöde Theatre Company.  
Directed by Benny Fredriksson. Starred Helena Bergström as Piaf.

**2000 • *Piaf*** (premiere - Sydney, Australia)

Due to open at the Footbridge Theatre, Sydney on 21 June 2000.  
Full programme of dates yet to be confirmed.  
Produced by the Melbourne Theatre Company. Directed by Adam Cook.  
Caroline O'Connor to play Piaf.

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<sup>†</sup> Production received: BBC award for 'Play of the Year, 1996'; *Evening Standard* award for 'Best Play, 1996'; Olivier award for 'Best Play, 1996' and Tony award for 'Best Broadway Play, 1997'.

<sup>‡</sup> Production list compiled by:

*British TheatreLog*, British International Theatre Institute Journal, vols 16-21 (1975-1980),  
*London Theatre Record*, vols 1-10 (1980-1989), *Theatre Record*, vols 1-9 (1990-1998)