

Feminism in Rachel Crothers' Major Works

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Crothers was the most successful American woman playwright in the early part of twentieth century. Crothers represents and celebrates the New woman. *Criss Cross, The Three of Us, A Man's World, Young Wisdom, Ourselves, A Little Journey, He and She, Nice People, Mary the Third, Expressing Willie, Let Us Be Gay, As Husband Go, When Ladies Meet* and *Susan and God*, these plays deal with some of the problems of women during her period and are remarkable plays. Crothers works are the embodiment of new woman and it shows her interest in the character of New Woman and some of the issues of social and moral hygiene with which many woman reforms allied themselves. Crothers plays also continuously reflected the need of woman's economic independence, so that she was no longer demeaned by marriage as her only form of financial security and so that she could regard herself as a dignified, adult and purposeful member of the social world.

KEYWORDS

Moral Hygiene; New Woman; Marriage.

Rachel Crothers was the most successful American woman playwright in the early part of the 20th century. She was a teacher of acting and herself briefly an actress, wrote dozens of plays in her career that spanned three decades. Although women have very rarely been accepted as directors, she directed and cast most of her own plays, often designing the sets as well. She dramatized many of the problems facing women: the conflict between marriage and career; motherhood and career; the unfairness of the double standard; the loneliness of the single career woman; the hollowness of many marriages; the opposition faced by strong successful women.

Crothers in a lecture she gave at the University of Pennsylvania described her own attitudes and her principles of

structure. The lecture, given was titled "The Construction of a Play". The substance of her general attitude can be found in what she says about life. Life, she says, must be molded under the same firm principles as the drama. We could expect her characters, therefore, to adhere to high moral standards. She goes on to say that drama mirrors life; but we must keep in mind that life, as she sees it, will also adhere to her standards. Evidently, this kind of life is the only kind she knows, for she further states that whatever happens on the stage has "happened out there, in reality before it ever got on to the stage. The stage reflects life, it doesn't invent it".

Crothers represents and celebrates the New Woman. Beginning with her earliest plays, she exposes the fiction about women created by the patriarchy to

reinforce its paradigms of womanhood. In a 13 February 1912 interview with the Boston Evening Transcript, Crothers said that she chose women as her central characters because:

women are in themselves more dramatic than men, more changing and a more significant note of the hour in which they live. If you want to see the signs of the times, watch women. Their evolution is the most important thing in modern life.

The tension between women's increasing awareness of herself as a human being and man's desire to maintain the status quo is illustrated in her plays

In *Criss Cross* (1899), an early play not professionally produced, the heroine bears a cross of unhappiness when she sacrifices her love for a man in deference to his prior commitment to her cousin. Because this woman is so perfect, there is no way she could condone the violation of a vow. Gottlieb observes that in *Criss Cross*, Crothers presents a New Woman who has feelings of love and tenderness for a man, which must be suppressed. This woman has been the guardian of her young cousin who is in love with the same man, and thus, it is the stronger woman, a writer, one who is independent, who must sacrifice. The critic argues that Crothers here demonstrates how "one social punishment for the New Woman was to deny or thwart her need for romantic love," a need which she expresses poignantly.

In *The Three of Us* (1906), Crothers' first professionally produced play, the perfect heroine Rhy Mac Chesney is a forceful and fearless woman who has courage in herself. She rejects the man, although she does not turn him over to another woman. The play is about how Rhy faced the world when Berresford the villain and Towley her sweetheart questions about her dishonor. Rhy decides to do without her suitor when he requires her to swear that she is a virgin and that she has not been compromised in her visit

to another man's hotel room. She is not only morally superior, but she expects her virtue to be accepted without question when Steve accepts her conditions. The play achieves a happy ending without compromising the heroine's integrity.

Continuing her scrutiny of the unfairness of a male-dominated world, Crothers anatomized the power of the patriarchy through its manifestation in the double standard in *A Man's World* (1909), a social problem drama that concerns the relationship between Frank Ware, feminist and novelist, and Malcolm Gaskell, a reporter, as it is affected by their attitudes toward the double standard. Frank, raised by her writer father "to see - to know - to touch all kinds of life" discerned very early the limitations put on women. While living in Paris, Frank and her father take in a young unmarried pregnant woman whom Frank see "suffer the tortures of hell through her disgrace". When the woman dies giving birth, Frank adopts the baby boy whom she names Kiddie. In protest to the death of the woman, Frankie writes a book entitled "The Beaten Path", in which she condemns the double standard that punishes sinful women while giving sinful men a pass. Years later, after falling in love with Gaskell, she discovers he is kiddie's father. When Gaskell, who had abandoned kiddie's mother without knowing of her pregnancy learns of his paternity, he claims male prerogative and refuses to acknowledge that he's done anything wrong. Frank therefore rejects him.

In dramatizing Frank's conflict, Crothers reflects the social forces that shaped women's activities, aspirations and value at the time she writes. Frank's attack, on the double standard has overtones of the social purity ideal of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's. Frank through her social welfare activity and her writing make her private grievances a matter of public concern, and in the process gives herself a platform. Crothers in the climax portrays Frank a woman who challenges

sexual politics, and sacrifices her union with a man who resists her challenge, by affirming her sense that it is a man's world indeed.

Crothers, like most feminist era, argues not for more sexual freedom for women but for a single standard of abstinence and fidelity for both sexes. In the play, *Ourselves* (1913), a wealthy and philanthropic young woman rescues the heroine from a reform home for prostitutes and engages her as a domestic servant. In her new surroundings, the heroine is sufficiently awakened to the possibilities of a better life to break finally with the vile "cadet" to whom she has formerly been subservient. But she suffers from a sense of loneliness which she ascribes to an inhibition of the joy of life. In this state of mind, she falls easily a victim to the seductions of the brother of her benefactor, -- a young artist whose somewhat frigid wife has made the mistake of allowing him to go his own way without question or remonstrance. The discovery of this relation creates a crisis in the family and a fourth act is appended in which this distressing situation is discussed from the point of view of all the characters in turn.

In the next play *Young Wisdom* (1914), Crothers satirizes the dangerous tendency of very young people to tangle their minds up with ideas which they are not yet sufficiently mature to comprehend. This play is about two sisters Miss Mable and Miss Edith Taliaferro. The elder sister comes home from college with her head seething with advanced ideas of love and marriage. One of these ideas is that people should live together before getting married, in order to test their adaptability to each other. Her younger sister is about to be married to a harmless young man whom she has known all her life; and she now persuades him, much against his will to elope with her so that they may put into practice the theories that have been preached to her. But this elopement afflicts the elder sister with a consternation that

had not been dreamt of in her philosophy; and dragging along a young man whom she has been holding at arm's length because of her lack of faith in marriage she dashes in pursuit of the younger and more impetuous pair. All the four are reunited in a farm house that is inhabited by an artist who looks upon life with the sagacity of a more extend experience; and this artist leads the truant girl's home to their distracted parents. The comedy is closed with two marriages.

A Little Journey (1918) was the first play written by Crothers to be nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In this play, as well as in *Mary the Third*, Crothers manipulates the plot to gain the desired effect. In this play, a train wreck brings the heroine to her senses and she realizes what a hero the man she has met on the train really is. *A Little Journey* was set entirely on a westbound train over the course of a four day trip. *A Little Journey* tells the story of Julie Rutherford, a proud but broken young woman who believes that things cannot possibly get any worse until disaster strikes. In the grand tradition of travelogues it showcases an eccentric and charming array of passengers; there's the auburn-topped lady from New York, excruciating funny in her ultra-sophistication and yet human; there are two young college lads, awkward ,yet lovable; there's the sweet young girl, traveling with her deaf grandma; the self-centred plutocrat who travels in the drawing room; an unmarried mother; Jim west, the big-hearted westerner; and Julie Rutherford, the girl who finds real life after having been hedged about and bound by conventions and traditions. Julie's down on her luck, and Jim is a lovely rancher who's survived his own troubled life journey. Jim falls in love, but Julie sinks deeper into despair and until a dangerous detour gives them an unexpected chance at happiness.

In the play *He and She* (1920), Crothers dramatizes the conflict of a New Woman who has already made her

commitments as wife and mother, but is still in the process of defining her role and ordering her priorities. Ann Herford and her husband, Tom, are architects whose seventeen years of happy marriage seem threatened when each submits a separate entry to a contest for a frieze design. Ann wins the \$100,000 prize but soon comes to recognize that she has won it at the cost of probably losing her husband and of neglecting her daughter, Millicent. She declines the prize, prepares to spend time with Millicent in Europe, and knows that she has lost neither the money nor Tom, since he was second and will now be the winner.

The issues involved in Ann's decision to forfeit her commission to Tom are not simply her commission to being a mother verses her commitment to being an artist, but the conflict between the ways in which she will seek her identity and measures her worth. For Ann, as for others of Crothers' women, art becomes a way of expressing her female identity. Ann's responses in the play makes us realize that she is very much rooted in her identity as a woman that is not only as a mother but also as an artist as she regards art as an affirmation of women's potential.

In her next play, *Nice People* (1921) she featured the young Tallulah Bankhead, Katharine Cornell, and Francine Larrimore as three spoiled young flappers, who in 1920, have allowances of \$20,000 a year, and spend \$80.00 on a single spree. Crothers spends the first act displaying the vacuous materialism of these young women, and then has the protagonist, Teddy Gloucester, rescued from her empty life by a young man who shows her the joys of a rural life raising chickens. Like other Crothers' heroines, Teddy discovers the satisfaction of economic independence, even from an extremely wealthy family. When her father offers to buy her young man for her in the end, she replies:

I'd like to see you try. Why do you want to dispose of me? Let me do it

myself. First of all, I want to be left alone – to think. Men aren't everything on earth.....Regardless of you – or any other man in the world, I'm going to take care of myself (*Nice People*, 184).

In *Mary the Third* (1923), Crothers treats the marriage proposal with an irony that is totally missing from Crothers's early plays. The irony is achieved by a manipulation of the structure. The Mary of 1870 is the grandmother, and the Mary of 1897 is the mother of the Mary of the present, who is the central character of the main play. The main body of the play is concerned with growing changes in attitudes towards marriage.

In the play, *Mary the Third* discovers that both her mother and grandmother have lived lives totally without romance and without much love. Mary is affected by the discovery and decides to live with her suitor without marriage. She is too fine; however just as fine in the long run as the previous heroines she backs, so she and her suitor pledge their undying love for each other and promise to marry, protesting all the while that their love will be different. The next play *Expressing Willie* (1924) is a comedy about a man, who through the urging of his mother, finds himself obscenely wealthy in long Island. With new found money and an increased ego, Willie smith finds himself on an unfamiliar plane, involved with free thinkers and all that accompanies sordid wealth – until his former unsophisticated girlfriend arrives and pits Mid-western values against the idle rich. By the time Willie realizes he has been a self-centered fool, it may be too late.

In other three later plays, *Let Us Be Gay* (1929), *As Husbands Go* (1931), *When Ladies Meet* (1932), Crothers changes her concept of the ideal heroine. The early plays deal with social freedom, and so the heroine stands firmly, and often alone, on

her principles. In the middle plays, the heroine is concerned with sexual freedom only temporarily. In the end, she chooses a conventional life married to an idealized hero. *Mary the Third* is really a transition play with respect to Crothers' concept of character and structure. The main purpose of a few plays prior to *Mary the Third* appears to be to bring the ideal hero and heroine together.

Let Us Be Gay, the first play in the group, is a stylish, romantic comedy, with very little dialogue devoted to a concern for a woman's place in a man's world. The question of the double standard is confined to the action in the prologue. Crothers uses the prologue for a purpose to justify Kitty's reasons for divorcing her husband, Bob. In the prologue, Kitty and Bob battle over Bob's attentions to another woman. Bob protests that the affair has nothing to do with his love for Kitty, but she asks him to leave. She suffered extra humiliation because Bob's mistress has told her of the affair. Bob slams the door and vows never to return. The purpose of the rest of the play, three acts in all, is to bring Bob and Kitty back together.

At the climax of the action, both Kitty and Bob realize that their lives since their divorce have been frivolous and empty. At the end, Bob asks Kitty to come back to him, and takes her in his arms. At first, she tries to hold him off. The romantic ending does not presume that Kitty and Bob will now live happily ever after. It presumes, instead, both are much wiser, and know that sexual freedom does not always bring happiness. The ending is not strung out; the idea has been woven into the action of the play.

The same disapproval of too much sexual freedom is also woven into the structure of *As Husbands Go*. The prologue is set in Paris, where Lucile and a woman traveling companion are both having a romantic fling with their escorts. Lucile, however, is married, and promises her European lover that she will return to

America and seek her husband for a divorce. The purpose of the action in the play is to bring Lucile and Charles back together.

In Act one, the two women return from Europe, and Charles immediately senses that something is wrong with his wife's attitude. In Act II, both European men arrive at Lucile's home, both intending to claim the two women. Lucile's friend, Ronnie, however, instead of pursuing his romance, becomes friends with Charles. The climax of this friendship is the big scene in Act Two, when Ronnie discovers how worthy a person Charles really is. In Act Three, Lucile grows increasingly dismayed over the growing respect between the two men. Finally, she receives a note from Ronnie telling her he has returned to Europe. Lucile is left without romance, but still has a man who will give her stability. Again, however, the reconciliation at the end of the play does not presume happiness ever after. What it does presume is that even without romance, married life is a better choice than a series of casual affairs.

Crothers, in *When Ladies Meet* drops any attempt to idealize the hero. There is no prologue, but the first scene of the play functions as an introduction to the situation, and shows the man and his mistress together. The play builds gradual realization on the part of both women that the man is worthless. It is a play where the two women meet and discover their respect for each other, and decide to have nothing more to do with the man. The ending leads to the conclusion that sexual freedom, particularly of the extramarital variety, leads only to unhappiness.

There is a thread of idealism that runs through all of Crothers's plays to this point. The women change their moral standards as Crothers's play writing years pass, but they find, after all, that the change in moral standards does not make them happy. Actually then, they search for an ideal relationship in the wrong places in

Crothers' view, and in the end must make a compromise.

Although *Susan and God* (1937), the last of Crothers' produced plays, was named the most outstanding play of the season by the Theatre Club, it is little more than a satire of the Oxford movement, and its protagonist, Susan Trexler, genuinely unlikeable. Crothers caps off her concept of idealism in *Susan and God* (1937), her last play, and the third one nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. The theme of the double standard and the censuring of male attitudes are confined to the relationships of minor characters to each other. The major theme is a parody of idealism in Susan, the major character. The purpose of the play is to bring Susan to the realization that her idealism is artificial, and that loving God requires a commitment of the "heart" rather than a religious gesture. Susan marks the climax of a gradual change from the playwright's concept of the ideal woman character to one who is idealistic with flaws. Because Susan gradually recognizes her own imperfections, the action moves steadily to an acceptable conclusion within the world of the play. Susan's husband, Barrie, is a drunk, but Susan is just as drunk on pseudo-religious fervor. Since the characters are balanced, the outcome is held in suspense, and we do not really know until the end whether or not Barrie and Susan will be able to sober up in their own way. The husband-and-wife relationship and the religious theme are linked together carefully in the total action of the play

In her later plays as in Crothers's first works, women decide to forgo love with a particular man, but there is a notable difference. In the earlier plays, the superior woman yields her interest in the male to another, perhaps weaker woman in an action indicative of the "noble" self-sacrifice held up to woman as ideal in this particular mythic mode of womanhood. Instead of silent suffering and surrender, the new women undergo a course of self-

discovery that allow them to realize the unworthiness of the man who lies to them both. Crothers brought the New Woman—strong, talented, and intelligent—onstage; many of her woman-centered dramas focus on the social problems that arise when woman's human rights conflict with the patriarchal order. Considering that she wrote at a time when for the majority of her audience the overriding question of a woman's life drama concerned who, and sometimes whether, she would marry, Crothers's creation of at least of one strongly feminist play in each of the last four decades of her career—*The Three of Us* (1906) and *A Man's World* (1909), and *When Ladies Meet* (1932)—is remarkable. Even her social comedies respond to issues raised by the woman question.

Crothers allows audience to see the arguments about woman's perspective, both her own and those of her characters, some of whom mature from their romantic dependence on man as the imagined vehicle of fulfillment to achieve both a sense of self and freedom from the male ego's limited perception of her. Dramatically, her work is important in the history of the development of serious social comedy in America.

As Crothers was the embodiment of new woman, some of her protagonist symbolizes new woman on stage. Crothers was especially interested in the character of the New Woman and in some of the issues of social and moral hygiene with which many women reforms allied themselves. Crothers plays also continuously reflected the need of woman's economic independence, so that she was no longer demeaned by marriage as her only form of financial security and so that she could regard herself as a dignified, adult, and purposeful member of the social world. Plays like *He and She*, *Mary the Third*, *The Three of Us*, *A Man's World*, *When Ladies Meet*, *Susan and God* and other few plays portray new women on stage.

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