

Fitzpatrick, Lisa, and Shonagh Hill, eds. *Plays by Women in Ireland (1926-33): Feminist Theatres of Freedom and Resistance*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022. 265 pp. ISBN 978-1-350-23463-5

Mária Kurdi

This anthology of five plays written during the Free State years in Ireland closely follows *Irish Women Dramatists 1908-2001* edited by Eileen Kearney and Charlotte Headrick (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2014). Both books support the idea that, although not really visible and acknowledged until the last couple of decades, there has been a female tradition in Irish playwriting throughout the last century running parallel with the much earlier identified one of male authors. The collection under review here differs from the book by Kearney and Headrick, in which the group of seven plays spans the last century, whereas the works Fitzpatrick and Hill included, *Distinguished Villa* by Kate O'Brien (1926), *The Woman* by Margaret O'Leary (1929), *Youth's the Season — ?* by Mary Manning (1931), *Witch's Brew* by Dorothy Macardle (1931), and *Bluebeard* by Mary Devenport O'Neill (1933) all came to life within less than a decade. Thus they reflect on similar or intertwining problems that many individuals experienced during the period, from various angles and using idiosyncratic dramaturgies.

Fitzpatrick and Hill contextualize the plays in their critically informed general introduction to the volume, as well as in the authors' respective portraits to enhance the sense of connections for the reader of today. The editors depict the culture of the Irish interwar era as largely inward-looking and morally restrictive due to the new Irish state's postcolonial nationalism, as patriarchal as before or even more so, and its strong ties with the Catholic Church. Despite the fact that female participation in the revolutionary movement leading up to independence in 1922 was considerable, the government of the state-building years discriminated against women, assigning to them chiefly domestic roles and curtailing their ambitions to take part in public affairs. However, as Fitzpatrick and Hill claim, "[A]gainst the conservatism of the period, a counterculture of experimentation was evolving: most obviously evidenced through the establishment of the Peacock stage at the Abbey Theatre in 1927 and the Gate Theatre in 1928[.]," adding that both the Abbey and the Gate produced women playwrights' works in the 1920s and 1930s, including some of those featuring in this anthology (3-4). It should not be overlooked, though, that there were cases when the male theatre managers or censors asked for changes in the text (Fitzpatrick and Hill 8). The respective plots of the five plays selected for this book are all grounded in the

contemporary social world of contradictions, long-surviving conventions, and moral controversies, inspiring the reader to identify core themes, subtle devices, and spatial metaphors that span across the texts in various forms and with diverse emphases. The primary theme of the plays is women's emotional life and sexuality versus the expectations that they become self-effacing wives and mothers according to the Church-supported cultural and political ideals of the Free State.

Although set in England, the problems depicted in *Distinguished Villa* can be seen as those of post-independence Irish middle-class life. There are three women in the play: Mabel, a housewife, Gwen, her younger sister, and their lodger named Frances. Mabel is proud of being highly respected in the neighborhood for the neatness of her home and her spotless observation of moral norms. Gwen is engaged to John, who begins to take more interest in Frances when recognizing the latter girl's relaxed and kind attitude to him and becoming aware of their personal similarities. Another young man, the flamboyant Alec, confesses his love for and proposes to Frances but is rejected by the girl, who notices the superficiality of her suitor's character. The unfolding love between Frances and John and their dreams of a life together is fatally shattered when the pregnant Gwen lies that John is the father of her child due to a brief sexual adventure together and now he must marry her out of duty. Indeed, Alec, with whom Gwen had a fling, is the father, but he shirks taking responsibility. The tragic outcome of the play is all the more enhanced by Mabel's husband, Natty's depression and suicide, after he suffered from the coldness and selfishness of his wife for years. A telling, structural device of *Distinguished Villa* is the juxtaposing and contrasting of crucial scenes, for instance, the one in which Gwen ties John to her by lying that the baby is his, with the farewell scene of the lovers, Frances and John. The young women's difference becomes also underscored: Frances shows strength in giving up her love while Gwen is too weak to go on as an unmarried mother, and instead enters a loveless marriage for the social protection it provides. At the end, John says: "Things like this are done slowly. Our methods are refined in *Distinguished Villa*" (67). "Things" involves Natty's ruined life and tragic death, first of all, but also the dubious result of Mabel's imposition of her rigorous views on Gwen. O'Brien offers here a ruthless critique of the destructive moral principles of the era. Calling the house a "distinguished villa," a designation so much favored by Mabel, is deeply ironical and as a spatial metaphor its meaning can be extended to post-independence Irish society with its hypocrisy and the inculcated need to keep up appearances at all cost.

The Woman by Margaret O'Leary is set in the country where the love of the land and the tending to animals is one of the sustaining forces, anticipating the plays of John B. Keane. However, the focus is on Ellen Dunn, to whom the title refers as "the woman," the generic term underscoring her essential difference from the other female characters in the play, her mother, her present lover, Maurice O'Hara's mother, and Kitty Doyle, a childhood friend of Maurice, secretly in love with him. Ellen affirms that she does not want to live like other women, broken in by their husbands to become self-effacing wives and mothers, but look for a lover with whom she can go to a faraway country where the sun always shines, and they can be free from the material needs and greed which characterizes "this dirty hole [is] driving me mad" (106). Maurice is not her first lover; she has been changing them to find the "real"

partner, but in vain. In the final scene with all the others around her, the power of Ellen's character reveals itself: disappointed also in Maurice's love she bravely decides to go ahead alone to reach a perfect land, which can only be beyond this world, mesmerizing even those hostile to her by awakening their secret desires. The similarity with the last scene of the heroine's facing death boldly in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* is striking. Though *The Woman* had some admirers when produced on the Abbey stage, its reception remained mixed according to Fitzpatrick and Hill, probably because the contemporary audience could not understand the heroine's restlessness and contradictory behavior (69-70). O'Leary, in fact, provides a context for Ellen's extremism. She lives with her mother and brother in a seedy place, witnessing manifestations of their greed day by day. Moreover, at one point in the play she makes a vague reference to a kind of childhood trauma, perhaps severe abuse, she experienced: on hearing Maurice's mother about God's protection of humans, she retorts: "Why didn't he protect me then - a little helpless child?" (115).

Mary Manning's *Youth's the Season* — ? is a city play described as a "tragi-comedy of Dublin life." The main characters are Mrs Millington, her children Deirdre, Connie, and Desmond, and their close friends, Toots and Terence. The Millington family belongs to the Anglo-Irish middle class, living in a house where the eighteenth-century furnishing of the drawing room represents traditions and some faded elegance like its mistress'. It is the setting of acts one and three, encircling act two, which is set in Desmond's art studio, a place of fluidity where he arranges a party to celebrate his twenty-first birthday. Deirdre, Connie, and Toots, in their own ways, seem to embody the New Woman: Deirdre studies at university and looks down on romantic love; Connie is in love with Terence, a minor poet who drinks too much and has no financial security, while Toots believes in personal freedom. However, the social expectations and rigorous norms of post-independence Dublin determine their life course even if indirectly. When Deirdre is facing the possibility of losing her suitor, the hospital doctor, Gerald to another woman, she feels utterly jealous and uses very conventional tactics to keep the man. Connie is rejected by Terence, whose identity crisis culminates in restlessness and self-hatred, leading to his suicide on the day following the party. The girl escapes her disappointment by accepting the proposal of the businessman Harry, model of the He-Man whom official Ireland needs to maintain normalcy and achieve prosperity. The play ends with Toots's sobbing and shouting: "I can't unlock the door! Help me, Desmond! Somebody! Let me out!" (217). Her futile effort to run out of the drawing room where Terence has just shot himself dead, and a bewildered Desmond is promising to buy a bowler hat and work in the office of his father instead of cherishing dreams about becoming a designer, is symbolic of a young woman's confined life in the Ireland of the time.

Fitzpatrick and Hill claim that the first three of the plays can be described by stage realism, yet their women "characters' irrepressible corporeal energies, as expressed in the stage directions, are undeniable" (8), which is most conspicuous in the volatile acts of Ellen Dunn, "the woman." However, the realistic nature of these three plays is complicated by structural, spatial, and linguistic devices, which certainly distinguish each, suffice it to refer to the Wildean overtones of the talk of those young people in *Youth's the Season* — ? who can be called a lost generation. *Witch's Brew* and

Bluebeard operate with a more experimental aesthetic, using supernatural and folklore elements to represent performative female identities. Macardle's *Witch's Brew* evokes reminiscences of Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), but the supernatural journeys of the bride characters in the respective plays are just the opposite of each other. In the latter work, a fairy child lures the young bride away from her husband and family, while Macardle's Una is saved from the influence of the witch and pagan beliefs by the love of fifteen-year-old Nessa, her sister-in-law. Nessa is ready to make a blood sacrifice for Una but Kiaran, the saintly hermit, interferes: the shedding of his blood and the blest water he sprinkles over her bring Una back to ordinary life. In Yeats the strength of pagan beliefs, in Macardle, that of Christianity, becomes emphasized. *Bluebeard* by Mary Devenport O'Neill adapts the myth in the form of a ballet-poem where the physical movements, dance and singing of the ghosts of the six murdered former wives express feminine triumph over Baron Bluebeard's patriarchal dominance and cruel deeds.

An invaluable merit of the anthology under review here is that it comprises two plays which have never been available in print, and three which were published close to the time of their writing in the 1920s or 1930s, but not reprinted since. As Fitzpatrick and Hill assert, "It is our hope that making these plays accessible will lead to their revival, fuller inclusion in teaching and scholarship, and consequently, a reframing of Irish theatre history" (13). Given the unfailing scholarly interest in the history of modern Irish drama and its gendered innovations, this wish will hardly remain unfulfilled.