

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes. The upper portion is dominated by various shades of blue, ranging from a deep, dark indigo to a slightly lighter, more vibrant cerulean. The lower portion is dominated by various shades of red, from a bright, fiery orange-red to a darker, more muted crimson. The brushstrokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a bold, high-contrast visual that suggests the intensity and passion of drama.

Modern Anglophone Drama *BY* **Women**

COMPILED & EDITED BY **Alan P. Barr**

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PETER LANG

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Lady Gregory	9
<i>The Rising of the Moon</i> (Ireland, 1907)	12
Ama Ata Aidoo	21
<i>Anowa</i> (Ghana, 1970)	24
Sharon Pollock	77
<i>Blood Relations</i> (Canada, 1980)	80
Judith Thompson	129
<i>The Crackwalker</i> (Canada, 1980)	133
Stella Kon	179
<i>Emily of Emerald Hill</i> (Singapore, 1984)	182
Renée	215
<i>Wednesday to Come</i> (New Zealand, 1985)	218
Alma De Groen	255
<i>The Rivers of China</i> (Australia, 1986)	258
Tess A. Onwueme	303
<i>The Reign of Wazobia</i> (Nigeria, 1993)	306
Susan Pam-Grant	345
<i>Curl Up and Dye</i> (South Africa, 1993)	349
Christina Reid	401
<i>Tea in a China Cup</i> (Northern Ireland, 1983)	404
Marina Carr	451
<i>Portia Coughlan</i> (Ireland, 1996)	455

INTRODUCTION

To discover an unanticipated treasure of wonderful dramas is an exhilarating and bewildering experience. Five years ago, frustrated by the absence of any plays by women from any of the anthologies of modern Continental drama, I compiled *Modern Women Playwrights of Europe*. It was a wide-ranging and daunting—even presumptuous—undertaking: ferreting out the remarkable plays written by European women. That project, motivated by the very real needs I experienced in teaching drama, had an unexpected consequence. There emerged a less visible, less recognized, far more widespread (and daunting) library of plays written in English by women beyond the borders of the United States and England. Because the British, in attempting to outreach the sunset, had cast such a broad colonial net, they left in the wake of their retreating empire a blossoming literature in English that dotted the globe.

In countries like Singapore, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, English had evolved into a (or the) literary language. With sometimes similar and sometimes very different objectives, many of these countries, in the twentieth century, created a significant and impressive literature in English, some of it drama, and some of that by women. Because drama, as an extremely public and social genre, presents different problems and opportunities than poetry or fiction, and because women—especially in more public spaces—confront particular hurdles, establishing that there was a significant body of plays by women and collecting it posed an alluring and rewarding challenge.

My methodology was fairly straightforward. I searched the national literary and dramatic histories of countries that produced literature in English (excluding the United States and England) and contacted scholars who worked in these areas to discover what existed and where I could find it. The journey, with its many seductive detours, was replete with unexpected revelations. The correspondences with scholars and archivists were both delightful and essential.

My criterion for this collection, conceived as a companion to the European one, was exactly the same. I was interested in plays whose literary quality was worthy of international recognition. I had no bias toward political content, feminist views, or gender orientation. The argument that continues to rage amongst feminist theoreticians about the appropriateness or acceptability of realism-naturalism did not seem to pertain when looking at actual plays. I was as engaged by the realism of *Wednesday to Come* and *Tea in a China Cup* as I was by the

2 Introduction

non-linear structure of *The Rivers of China* or the extraordinary lyricism of *The Crackwalker* and *Portia Coughlan*. Ultimately, it was the dramatic quality of a play rather than its conventions or convictions that recommended it. (This should not be taken to imply that I lack partisanship or that the ensemble does not reveal strong views.)

A prejudice that did prevail was for scripted, literary drama. A great deal of drama by women is improvisational and workshopped or collaborative. Much of the historical tradition in, for example, most African countries, in Malaysia, and in India, was oral and performative, incorporating dance, music, and audience participation. This presents a double jeopardy or limitation, analogous to what Frances Beal long ago described as the jeopardy of being black and female. Still, limiting as it may be, it is almost unavoidable because of the amorphous and unwieldy nature of "texts" beyond the scripted. Since I explicitly staked out the province of "anglophone," this narrowing was all the more difficult to avoid.

Inevitably, because the regions that now produce literatures in English were once colonies, these plays (except for Lady Gregory's "still-colonial" *Rising of the Moon*) are reasonably seen as "postcolonial." Postcolonial has of course burgeoned into a major literary discipline, including an immense range of compelling writing and a huge, ever-expanding body of scholarship. I want, here, only to mention briefly some observations in this context. Each of the ten national situations that produced these plays is unique: to be an ex-colonial in Nigeria bears little resemblance to being one in New Zealand. None, I assume, would consider New Zealand, Canada, Australia, or that recent "economic miracle," Ireland, to be "third world" or developing countries. Singapore, another economic engine, has a very different experience from Ireland, just as Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa have from each other. Northern Ireland is ambiguous even in terms of its being colonial, postcolonial, or "other." What each country here does have in common with the others are: a) the urge to explore and understand its own history; b) to establish that the country (Canada, say) really does have a history of its own that is worth knowing; c) that the complexities and distortions in the history demand reexamining (*Anowa* and *Tea in a China Shop*); and d) that the history of former colonies is inexorably scarred. For women this is further complicated by the secondary role to which they have been characteristically relegated (a point that is made in almost all of the plays). Much more apparent than I found it to be in Continental drama, the

women writing these plays are dealing from the underbelly of the political process.

Each country also had to face the problem of a language, divergent as the specifics of their situations were. In places like Australia, New Zealand, and even English Canada, where the idea of a competing language had been obliterated, there remained the often-emotional question of accent or properness. It frequently took decades for them to assert their own, non-West End English dialect as valid. This could become part of the defensiveness or insecurity that went with considering yourself in the backwaters. In a place like Singapore, the practicality and increasing ubiquity of English coerced its acceptance—but in an adapted, colorful local variant, whose layers and voices Stella Kon beautifully records. South Africa, via a very different path, likewise arrived at a version of English that accommodates Afrikaans inflections and, as Pam-Grant reproduces it in *Curl Up and Dye*, Zulu. Fair or not, English is to a certain extent a real and marketable asset, a political and cultural cash nexus. The adaptations that I have discovered and delighted in comprise a symphony of Englishes, rich in local color and distinctness. Neither in Auckland nor in Delhi is it tenable to hold to Received Standard English, any more than it was in Dublin—or Edinburgh, not to mention Liverpool. (Christian Mair's volume, *The Politics of English as a World Language*, 2003, usefully addresses this.)

Inevitably the question arises are plays by women different from plays by men. My sample is necessarily small, but it is tempting to notice patterns in these eleven plays, plays (again) chosen solely for their literary merit. Repeatedly, the experience of feeling trapped, having no genuine home, and being desperate to escape recurs. Anowa is different and belongs nowhere. Emily enters the hostile environment of Emerald Hill as an insecure fourteen-year-old bride, and though she succeeds in gaining control of it, she finds herself alone and alienated—ironically admonishing her daughter Doris that she should not rush into marriage just to escape her. *The Rivers of China* and *Tea in a China Cup* both feature women who have to leave their homes. Lizzie Borden and Portia Coughlan are almost pathologically driven to get away.

Although I have only used “dystopic” in the introduction to *The Rivers of China* (echoing its critics), the term would appropriately describe the worlds that many of these dramas present—the economically distressed setting of *Wednesday to Come*, or Reid's fatally

4 Introduction

hostile Belfast, or the psychologically disorienting ones of Sharon Pollock, Judith Thompson, or Marina Carr.

Occupying an inhospitable, rejecting space, the women in these plays are an angry cohort. Lizzie Borden, in *Blood Relations*, is angry enough to hatchet heads; couples in *The Crackwalker* live an existence that bizarrely swings between unreasoned affection and unprovoked violence; Emily Gan is a study in repression. Renée's Iris Kaye is simply angry—as is Beth in *Tea in a China Cup*, “because it's all a lie.” Behind Portia's erratic behavior is her wrath. She shares with Anowa a pervasive discontent that their husband and societies cannot comprehend.

With fury comes the need to be strong, which turns out to be another pattern among these women. Wazobia learns strength after being supported at the end of her appointed reign, by the other women. Lizzie resolves that she is strong, “a woman of decision,” in *Blood Relations*. That equally describes the superficially so different Emily Gan. Perhaps no play in the volume is as impatient with weakness or sentimentality as *Wednesday to Come*. From *Anowa* to *Portia Coughlan*, to a greater or lesser extent, a premium is placed on the need for the women to be strong. Sometimes, as with, Anowa and Portia, strength is insufficient and they do not survive. In *The Crackwalker*, *The Rivers of China*, and *Curl Up and Dye*, the world still batters them. But throughout, fortitude is a central value. Iris risks being seen as hard and Portia as erratic, and Mansfield is terminally ill. Still, each embodies a determination and will that is obviously valued. The form their strength takes is also noticeably different from that of traditional male protagonists; it is not geared toward heroism so much as hard-headed practicality and survival. We find neither Rambos nor Wonder Women.

The strength associated with the women often derives from their being supported by surrounding generations of women. *Wednesday to Come* is only the most extensive example, with four generations of the family, from Granna to her great granddaughter Jeannie all formidably present. *Tea in a China Cup* and *Portia Coughlan* importantly present three generations in a family, even if not exactly harmoniously supporting each other (Carr's earlier play, *The Mai*, like *Wednesday*, manages the unusual feat of staging four generations). The disarray to be found in *Anowa* and *Emily* and *Portia* results when the matrilineality fails. It is simultaneously striking that, in a group of plays where generations of women are so prominent, many of the protagonists violently reject, fail at, or are excluded from that most traditional of

female roles, motherhood: Anowa, Theresa in *The Crackwalker*, Portia, Lizzie, and Emily. Although family is not a factor in Onwueme's play in the same explicit way, Wazobia is empowered when the women, acting like family, rally to her, routing the arid, tradition-bound patriarchal structure. Male-authored plays do not seem to include generations of men—*Hamlet*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *All My Sons*, notwithstanding.

A political mantra out of 1960s feminist politics that became hackneyed was that “the personal is the political.” One striking effect of some of these plays is to see how, in a way that is neither didactic nor polemical, that notion is given new flesh. Again, *Wednesday to Come* is a prime example. Iris and her mother Mary and daughter Jeannie are struggling, unempowered individuals, caught in a wrenching economic depression. We watch as they, as individuals, respond with decisions and actions that are essentially political. *Tea in a China Cup* focuses on a house of women who are surrounded by partisan, sloganeering male “activists” (including the pictures of the three “honorably” sacrificed generations of men soldiers—a telling contrast to the live women actually present on stage). They have, however, the realities (and the debris) of this bellicosity to deal with—effectively making Beth's personal attitudes and her decision to take the Belleek china cup and saucer political. Wazobia begins as an adolescent thrust by chance into a political situation, and in the course of her regency is transformed into a subversive political force. Emily, in her monodrama, could not be more personal in her focus, and her decades-long engagement with her husband and family is profoundly political. She asserts her pre-eminence as the matriarch/owner of Emerald Hill (hollow as that status proves to be). In different, though tenable ways, dramas as unlikely as *The Rivers of China* (where in a highly personal therapeutic setting, Mansfield and the Man are fighting for a place in the world) and *Curl Up and Dye* (where the women in the hair salon are battered by the surrounding racist and sexist political and economic structures) similarly give meaning to the connection between the personal and the political. Rolene is brutalized by Denzil because they live in a brutalizing society. Finally, in Lady Gregory's *Rising of the Moon*—a selection yet to be mentioned—the Sergeant (in a small, all-male cast) makes a momentous political decision for entirely personal reasons.

The clamor equating the personal and the political likely derives from the sense that the world has not fitted women nor women the world; they feel alien, not quite belonging. Again, play after play ex-

6 Introduction

hibits this and the corresponding search for an identity, including occasional toyings with sexual ambiguity. Most overtly in the 1922 scenes of *The Rivers of China* at Fontainebleau, Gurdjieff chides Katherine Mansfield's desire to find out who she is: "Who am I"—a good question, he goads. It is as if in the wake of Nora's having slammed the door in Ibsen's *Christiania* in 1879 to discover who she was, many of these twentieth century figures are also closing the doors behind them, willing to enter a risky, dubious, not-yet-explored world and ill-defined identity. Anowa is distinguished by being different. Emily Gan is a master of voices, but the person behind the ventriloquist remains indefinite. It is unclear if Lizzie Borden is a murderer; she acts like one (the historical jury did not think so). Portia is at best an incomplete, divided person, unable to disentangle herself from her dead twin. Compounding the perplexing issue of determining an identity is a world that would (inhumanely) assign roles (gendered, but also others). *The Rivers of China* includes the confused or altered sexual identity of the "Man" and the assumption that the women doctors must be nurses. Watching his behavior (acquiring slaves and goods, but not wives), Anowa questions Kofi Ado's manhood. Portia's ghostly twin, Gabriel, "looked like a girl" and sang in a beautiful, high voice, and Wazobia prevails in insisting that a woman can be king. In a postcolonial context where forging a national identity becomes paramount, it is not surprising to find the kindred quest for identity as a woman a recurring subject.

Theatre, like language, can be both a political and a social force. English colonial theater (generally Western-oriented and touring) was an important instrument in extending the culture and the language of the "mother country." It could also, as it did in South Africa, become an effective subversive force, appropriating the language as it questioned the political and social (including gender) structures. The transformations in the second half of the twentieth century that occurred in old dominions, like Canada, New Zealand and Australia, from conservative polities into modern liberal societies was rehearsed in the theatres and accompanied by the achievements of the women's movements. The parallel between the situations of the colonials and the unempowered women did not go unnoticed.

I placed at the beginning of this volume Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*, written over half a century before the next play, with no women in the cast, and perhaps only belonging here because it was written by a woman. Other early plays could certainly have served to suggest the initial presence of women in the modern thea-

tre. Because, however, of the importance of the Abbey Theatre and of modern Irish drama and because of Lady Gregory's importance to both, I chose her gem-like, politically and psychologically-conscious one-act drama. It served to extend the visible range of plays women were writing and as an implicit counter to the suspicion that women do not do well with male characters, especially when they function in a political capacity (almost the obverse of the perspective in Reid's play).

More curious is the omission of any Indian drama. Indian playwrights incline to be far more likely to write in an Indian language than in English. There was, however, one play that I dearly wanted to include, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997). Kindly, genteelly, but firmly, Ms. Padmanabhan explained, in declining my invitation, that she was uncomfortable having her play ghettoized (whether among women's plays or "third world" plays). I understood her decision and reassured her that she was in the estimable company of Nathalie Sarraute, who consistently refused to appear in women's collections.

This introduces the large subject of literary taxonomy. Is it legitimate and defensible to bind works together because they happen to be by women, and why? When presuming to offer works that could vie for canonical status, does this inherently suggest that they are being judged by separate and thus unequal standards? (The same question confronts any gay, or national, or ethnic collection, or, for that matter, categories such as postcolonial.) In this instance, I could only strive to be a gatekeeper of quality. I would add that the results of this sorting did include revelations (some of which are abstracted in this introduction) worth noting. Ultimately, though, the proof is in the pudding, and the reader the gourmet. To the argument that it is unavoidably problematical to select according to gender, I would respond, yes,...but. These plays rarely appear in anthologies and are usually unavailable outside of large libraries; better, it would seem, to have a women's anthology than no anthology and little access to this literature.

LADY GREGORY (1852–1932)



Although there were scattered companies and touring theatre troupes in Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the remarkable flowering of Irish drama dates from the turn of the twentieth century. In 1897, Lady Gregory met with W. B. Yeats and Edward Martyn in Galway and laid the groundwork for the Irish Literary Theatre, which began in 1899 and metamorphosed into the Abbey Theatre in 1904, adding the more experimental Peacock stage in the 20s. The Abbey, which burned down in 1951 and was reopened in 1966, became the venue dedicated to the nurturing of Irish plays. It early featured the works of Yeats, Gregory, J. M. Synge, George Moore, and Martyn.

The impulse and history of the Irish National Theatre Society (The Abbey Theatre) are inextricably linked with contemporary political events. The fissures of Irish society were all vividly evident in the tumultuous first decades of the Abbey: loyalty to England, sectarian and class strife, and even cultural versus political nationalism. They affected everything from its funding (Annie Horniman, its most munificent backer, was adamant that the theatre focus on culture not politics) to the aims and content of plays (Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* provoked one of the more raucous controversies in the world of drama, for its ostensible besmirching of Irish dignity).

If Irish drama can roughly be divided into three more-or-less discrete periods (the early years, from Lady Gregory to O'Casey, the 1960s and 1970s of Brian Friel and Tom Murphy, and the Celtic Tiger third-wave since the 1980s), Lady Isabella Augusta Persse Gregory was at the heart of its first chapter. Born into the Protestant Ascendancy of the west of Ireland (Galway), she experienced a very conservative upbringing at her father's near-feudal estate. Especially after marrying the diplomat Lord Gregory, traveling to the Continent, to British-ruled India and Egypt, and moving to Coole, she became increasingly skeptical of the imperial enterprise. The artists and thinkers she met built upon her early bookishness, leading her from

Unionism to a commitment to Irish cultural nationalism. She spoke Gaelic, collected and translated Irish folktales and myths, and was allied with such leaders of the cultural revival as Douglas Hyde.

Her principal accomplishments were as a writer, first of prose and then of plays, as organizer, fundraiser, managing director, and champion of the Abbey, and as particular friend of Yeats. Critics quibble whether she was a sufficiently radical advocate of Irish independence or a temporizing, vestigial late-Victorian Ascendant. But no question exists about her steady commitment to the Irish culture and its drama, her strong defense of Synge's *Playboy* in 1907 and of Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, after it was banned by the London censor in 1909. She was the primary force sustaining the Abbey Theatre—and thus the exciting beginnings of the Irish Dramatic Movement, an experience she set out to record in *Our Irish Theatre* (1913).

Ambiguous as it may be to settle Lady Gregory comfortably on the spectrum from landlady to nationalist, from social conservative to feminist, her place in theatrical history and thus in turn-of-the-century Irish history is unarguable. She was a primary force in the Irish Literary Revival; her estate at Coole became the salon of Irish culture.

Lady Gregory's forty-two plays, which include translations from Molière, are mostly short and generally comic. Sometimes they are exquisitely timed comedies, like *Spreading the News* (1904); often she is particularly attentive to reflecting Anglo-Irish speech mannerisms (even using a west Irish Kilkartan dialect). Her persistent interests are in making art prevail over partisan loyalties, dramatizing the virtues of good faith versus the temptations of betrayal, fashioning a humane, primarily cultural nationalism, and in presenting deft vignettes of character rather than histrionic events.

Contrasted with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), which Gregory and Yeats co-authored, *The Rising of the Moon* (1907)—perhaps her most enduring drama—emphasizes a compassionate resolution to the fractiousness and even fratricide defacing Ireland. Its appeal is to personal connectedness and to the human commonalities (empathy) rather than to harsh, destructive divisions.

Although the props, a poster, barrel, wig and hat, approach the physical comedy of Chaplin, the struggle of the drama is really within the Sergeant: between his personal sympathies and inclinations and the colonial uniform he wears. Tersely, succinctly, the drama of conflicting loyalties crystalizes, inevitably with a particular piquancy for

an audience that would have been starkly and intensely divided over whether the officer was a traitor or was portrayed too sympathetically. Teasingly, Lady Gregory suggests the Sergeant may have found the man for whom he was looking.

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