

Refusing to Play Assigned Roles for Women and Changing the Plot: Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*

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Introduction

In a wave of feminist movements in the 1970s and 80s, a number of women playwrights cut conspicuous figures. These women playwrights, who played an active part in the 1970s and 80s, focused on female protagonists and dramatized women's lives and predicaments in the patriarchal American society. The women playwrights of the time created female protagonists who take action in order to retrieve agency, unlike the powerless women depicted in postwar plays by men in America, such as Linda Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of the Salesman* (1949) and Blanche Du Bois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

In this essay, I would like to discuss how women's achievement of agency is depicted in Beth Henley and Marsha Norman's plays. These two representative playwrights of this period, in particular, have depicted relationships between women, thrusting men offstage, and their lives in isolation. Especially in their Pulitzer Prize winning works *Crimes of the Heart* (1979) and *'night, Mother* (1983), the female protagonists express their discontentment with playing feminine roles, yet try to gain agency.

One hundred years after Ibsen created the female protagonist Nora, who is imprisoned by domestic roles as mother and wife, but rejects them in *A Doll House* (1879), women in America seem to be still facing the same social pressures to conform. Nora declares that she will not live for others or play the social roles assigned to women anymore, but live for herself. Nora's strong statement of rejection made a big impact on European society at the time. When her husband tries to stop her from leaving by telling her that she has a duty as a wife and mother, she objects:

I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I

know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them. (68)

In Norman's play *'night, Mother*, Jessie Cates's suicide can be considered as a complete rejection of the social environment that deprives her of autonomy. Both the sound of the door closing behind her and the sound of a gunshot at the end of *'night, Mother* express these two women's strong statement of rejection. In both plays, refusal of the situation is depicted as one of the important step to achieve agency.

As the suicide and self-destructive behavior of the female characters are suggested to be partly caused by their loneliness, the importance of helping each other is depicted as a way out of their dilemma. Although *'night, Mother* ends with Jessie's strong statement of rejection, in *Crimes of the Heart*, the three sisters learn the importance of helping each other at the end of the play. As the beginning of the play and the ending of the play form a pair, it shows the improvement of their relationships, and sisterhood is emphasized: the play starts with Lenny, the oldest of the three, trying to blow out a candle that she inserted into a cookie instead of a birthday cake on her thirtieth birthday, and it ends with the three sisters laughing when Lenny tries to blow out the candles on the huge birthday cake Meg and Babe buy for her. By taking care of each other, they "[l]earn how to get through these real bad days" (69). Sisterhood seems to be only temporal in the play, but it is suggested as a means to survive in a harsh reality.

1. Condemned to The Roles of Wife, Mother and Daughter

In *Crimes of the Heart* and *'night, Mother*, female protagonists have been confined to traditional roles attributed to women in patriarchal society. In her book *Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan argues that American women are still deprived of autonomy by being isolated in suburbia because of a traditional vision of femininity that requires women to marry young, have many children, and lead a life as a wife and mother (15-32). The setting of both plays suggest that women are imprisoned by domestic roles. The setting of *Crimes of the Heart* is "[t]he old-fashioned" (4) kitchen, which has four different entrance and exits. As Lenny has brought a cot in the kitchen in order to take care of her grandfather, we can see that she confines herself to the "sanctuary" of women, even though the house seems spacious. In *'night, Mother*, the set of the play consists of

a living room and kitchen, and then there is the door to the bedroom, which is the door which leads to death by suicide. Thus, the play's setting suggests the extreme difficulty of escaping from traditional female domestic roles.¹

The female protagonists' struggles to be good at playing these roles reveal the patriarchal expectation for a woman to be a good mother, wife, and daughter, and if she fails, she is regarded as worthless. More important—women come to regard themselves as worthless. In *Crimes of the Heart*, the Magrath sisters failed to play socially expected roles: Lenny gave up the opportunity to marry a man because of her inability to have a child, Meg pursues her career as a singer though she ended up working at a pet shop, and Babe married a lawyer, but shoots him and is in danger of being sent to prison. Their failure to act properly as a mother and daughter in the society is emphasized by their cousin Chick, who lives next to them. She represents the community's values: she has two children, and her main concerns are her children and becoming a member of a women's social club. She accuses the sisters of behavior that deviates from the community's values, including their mother's notorious suicide. However, by depicting Chick comically, Henley trivializes her and turns her into an unimportant character. As Meg makes fun of Chick by calling her "Little Chicken" and clucking, it is implied that Meg thinks that Chick does not have the courage to resist the community's values.

Lenny, the oldest sister, who becomes thirty in the play, has lost self-confidence as she internalizes the patriarchal value that women who cannot have a child are deficient, which her grandfather planted in her mind, and lives a life of self-denial. Since the three sisters' mother committed suicide when they were young, their grandfather became a nurturer instead, but his care was inadequate—he tended to spoil them unintentionally, as Lenny says that he tried to protect her by telling the truth that men will reject her if they know that she cannot have children, because he did not want to see her hurt (48). He confined them firmly in the patriarchal value system, and therefore his nurturance deprived them of self-confidence and made it difficult for them to gain autonomy.

Accordingly, Lenny has been taking care of her grandfather because her self-consciousness about her own body prevents her from building a relationship with men and leaving home. As Lenny consciously dressed up as a woman, "wearing her powder blue Sunday dress and this old curled up wig" (23) when she took a picture of herself to send to a dating club, we can see that Lenny has lost confidence as a woman. She believes that no man would want to marry her because of her inability to have children; therefore, she takes care of her grandfather instead of nurturing a husband and child, in order to fill her loneliness. She confesses her fear of being alone when her sisters discuss their

lives after their grandfather dies. Even after she met a man named Charlie when she sent her photograph to the dating club, she was not able to escape the control of her grandfather. She told Charlie that they should never see each other without giving him a reason, because of her lack of self-confidence. Her sister Meg explains to her that it is their grandfather's fault that Lenny became too shy with men, and she encourages Lenny when she says that no men will like her that it is only their grandfather who thinks so, and it turns out to be true, as Charlie accepts her when Lenny calls him at the end of the play and tells him about her inability to have a child.

Excessive nurturance from parent to child is depicted negatively as something that ultimately deprives the child of agency. As Meg says that "[t]he thing about Old Granddaddy is he keeps trying to make us happy and we end up getting stomach aches and turning green and throwing up in the flower arrangements" (44), his nurturance was harmful for them. In her study of Henley, Susanne Auflitsch argues that the sisters are obsessed with nurturance because of the loss of maternal care, and try to care for someone (274-275), yet they also cannot provide nurturance like their grandparents. After their grandfather became sick, Lenny tries to take care of her grandfather and her sisters. Yet, Babe points out that Lenny is becoming more and more like their grandmother when she tells her not to make a mess in the kitchen making lemonade, and warns her that too much sugar is harmful for her health. Babe nevertheless offers lemonade to her sisters, though it is too sweet for them to drink.

Their childlike behavior also means that the female protagonists in both plays are in desperate need of maternal care, since their mothers are forced to play the role of a mother and therefore could not nurture children well to develop their autonomous self. Thus, female protagonists try to make up for the maternal care which they could not get when they were children. The lack of maternal care is suggested by the lack of nutritious food in the plays, though the setting of the both plays includes a kitchen, which symbolizes motherhood and nurturance in the traditional view.

In *Crimes of the Heart*, the Magrath sisters suffer from the loss of their mother, who one day committed suicide with her cat. Once the maternal care is lost, it becomes difficult for women to retrieve it, as Jane Flax argues that "[t]he boy receives a promise of another mommy as a reward for the renunciation of his infantile wishes, but the girl receives nothing," and therefore "women's unresolved wishes for the mother is the truth behind Freud's claim that what women wish for in a husband is their mother" (179). Babe, the youngest sister, stays a child as her name suggests, in order to fill the lack of experience of being nurtured adequately in her childhood. She longs for

her mother more than the other sisters, as she lost her parents when she was a child and does not even remember her father well; therefore, she marries a young lawyer in the search for a person who is like a guardian, who protects and cares her, though it becomes clear that she cannot receive the care she needs from the marriage, since her husband turns out to be a violent man. Moreover, she had to play a role of a good wife after the marriage.

In order to make up for the loss of maternal care, the three sisters, especially Babe, become obsessed with eating and drinking something sweet, such as a lemonade with a plenty of lemons and sugar. The lemonade is too sweet for Lenny and Meg, but Babe adds more sugar to her own lemonade.² In the play, food plays an important role to heal female characters, as is often the case in plays by female dramatists. Auflitsch argues that:

In their search for happiness, the female characters, in particular, in Henley's plays continually resort to food as a remedy for every kind of scar. Most of the characters try to compensate for their nervousness and fear, which is most often fear of loneliness, by eating and drinking. The characters' insatiable desire for sweets could be read as a symbolic search for food from a loving mother, especially since, as has been shown, their own mothers failed to nurture them properly. (276)

As their grandfather took them to a restaurant and let them eat banana splits as much as they wanted in order to comfort them on the day of their mother's funeral, sweets and snack foods are depicted as something that heals a sense of loss. However, not only does junk food work only temporarily, but it also becomes self-destructive, as eating too much banana splits made them sick.

According to Nancy Chodorow's discussion about women's early socialization experience, women's lives are embedded in relationships, and their identities are formed through their relationships with others (108-9). However, their relationships with others are confined to their male-defined social roles. For example, in *'night, Mother*, Thelma and Jessie have a low evaluation of themselves, since they are not good at playing those roles. In her relationship with her husband, Thelma felt that she was not a good wife because she could not meet her husband's demands, even though she tried to be what her husband wanted her to be: "He wanted a plain country woman and that's what he married and then he held it against me the rest of my life like I was supposed to change

and surprise him somehow" (31-2). Jessie asks Thelma if she loved her husband, and she admits that she did not love him, but she adds that she could not love him because she did not have what he wanted.

Jessie also tried to meet the expectations of her husband and blames herself that their marriage did not go well because she regularly failed to do what Cecil wanted her to do, such as to gain confidence by horseback riding, but she fell off a horse when she tried. She came to feel that she was not worth being with Cecil if she was not what he wanted. Therefore, she persuades herself that it was a relief that Cecil left, because she would not have to see herself fail to meet her husband's expectation.

Thelma and Jessie's discontent with performing the role of mother is revealed symbolically and comically by their hatred of milk, which traditionally represents nurturing by a mother. When Thelma makes hot chocolate for Jessie, neither of them likes it because of the taste of milk. Thelma says that she hates it since it "coats your throat as bad as okra" (29). Their distaste for milk ironically suggests that they do not fit the role of mothers, as they also could not raise children: Thelma's daughter Jessie cannot fit into society and decides to commit suicide, and Jessie's son Rickey has committed crimes. Although they do not like milk, they continue buying it because they feel that they "should" and that they "have to drink it" (36), as Jessie says to her mother, who finally threatens that she will not drink milk anymore after Jessie dies.

Although Jessie has been trying to resist her mother since she realized her mother's powerlessness as a woman, she ends up repeating Thelma's roles as mother and wife in order to please the men around her. Jessie knows that Thelma has been forced to play social roles since she married her husband, as she heard a story from her father about how he dragged Thelma, who was sitting in the mud, into the kitchen and ever since she has been there, and this male "joke" turns out to be the true story of her life.

As Jessie and Thelma try to fit into the socially expected roles, the roles become their identities, so they cannot escape from their social roles, though they no longer live with their husbands and her son. Jessie points out that her mother got interested in things and started breathing better after her husband died. However, though Thelma says that she was not there for her husband's entertainment or for Jessie's, she cannot find the meaning of her life. Jessie and Thelma realize that they are better without their husbands, but cannot find their identity outside of their social roles because their identity is constructed through performing these roles as suggested in Judith Butler's discussion of gender identity in *Gender Trouble*:

[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. (173; emphasis original)

Their performances in their lives and on stage do not express some absolute gender identity, but create it.

Although Jessie and Thelma both seem to have the same difficulty, they do not seem to be able to help each other to acquire agency by building an equal relationship, because they cannot stop acting as mother and daughter. Moreover, their symbiotic relationship prevents Jessie from achieving agency. Thelma does not seem to regard Jessie as an adult, and thinks little of her autonomy. For example, she helped to find a husband for Jessie, and now she lets Jessie live with her after her husband Cecil left. She has in fact been overprotecting her, not letting Jessie know that she started having epileptic fits since she was five years old, so that she would not have to “feel like a freak” (46), while in *Crimes of the Heart*, the sisters’ grandfather also overprotects Lenny by telling her the “truth” that no men would love her because of her inability to have a child.

As Thelma cannot accept that they are separate, she even feels responsible for Jessie’s suicide, and says it is a punishment for her behavior, such as how she felt about her husband, not having wanted children any more, and smoking too much and not eating right when she carried Jessie. Therefore, Thelma cannot accept Jessie’s suicide as her personal choice, though Jessie tries to persuade Thelma that it does not have anything to do with her. Thelma desperately insists:

Everything you do has to do with me, Jessie. You can’t do *anything*, wash your face or cut your finger, without doing it to me. That’s right! You might as well kill me as you, Jessie, it’s the same thing. This has to do with me, Jessie. (47; emphasis original)

Although Thelma tries to persuade Jessie not to commit suicide, she actually gives her more reasons to do so: Jessie’s husband had a lover, she has had epilepsy since childhood, and people like Thelma’s friend really do not want to meet her. Unlike *Crimes of the Heart*, *‘night, Mother* lacks the possibility of forming an appropriate bond between female characters in order to encourage them to acquire agency—here the relationship with her mother actually prevents Jessie from acquiring it, except by taking her own life.

2. Women's Self-destructive Attempts to Gain Agency

In many feminist plays of the 1970s and 80s, rejection of the idealized feminine roles forced on women by men is depicted as one of the choices for them to acquire agency; however, the situation for women seems to be so desperate that only self-destructive ways are left for them to establish agency. The recurrence of self-destructive behavior of the female protagonists in both plays is conspicuous. For example, in *Crimes of the Heart*, the Magrath sisters' mother hanged herself along with her cat before the play begins, and suicide looms as a possibility for the sisters: the youngest sister Babe actually attempts to commit suicide several times during the play, the oldest sister Lenny has spent a life of self-denial, and the middle sister Meg indulges in self-destructive behavior, such as smoking and drinking. Also in *'night, Mother*, Jessie commits suicide at the end of the play. In this section, I would like to discuss how female protagonists in these plays try to establish agency by destructive behavior.

In *Crimes of the Heart*, the middle sister Meg presents herself as an independent woman, yet she also cannot escape from the influence of her grandfather, and cannot feel a sense of autonomy except in self-destructive ways. Although she knows that she cannot achieve agency unless she leaves her grandfather, she cannot abandon her childish wish to be liked and approved by him. For example, when Lenny accuses Meg of telling their grandfather lies about her career, Meg confesses her ambivalent feelings toward him, which bind her so strongly that she cannot completely escape from him, though she left home for California, or stop caring about him. Meg admits that she knew that she should not have told lies, yet she wanted to see him smiling and happy; however, she continues, "I hate myself when I lie for that old man. I do. I feel so weak. And then I have to go and do at least three or four things that I know he'd despise just to get even with that miserable, old, bossy man!" (42) It seems that if she cares about men, she feels weak; therefore, she tries not to be controlled and influenced by men but to be independent. She pursues her career in preference to marriage and having children, and is sexually active, yet, as her behavior is motivated by resisting her grandfather, it becomes self-destructive.

In her struggles to retrieve agency from men, Meg trivializes men as she admits to Lenny that she has "had way too many men" (47). She tries not care about the men around her, and she even left Doc to move to California to pursue her career as a singer on the day after he injured his leg in a hurricane. She explains that she left him because she "didn't want to care," though the next moment, she admits that she "did care" (50).

She acts like men by treating them as disposable and tries to restore her autonomy by doing what her grandfather despises, but her behavior does not help her to escape from the discourse or from her grandfather. As she keeps caring about her grandfather, doing things that please him or disappoint him, she is trapped inside his value system.

Failing to acquire agency as an adult, the female protagonists try to return to childhood by acting like a child, a time when they did not have to fit into the social roles. In *'night, Mother*, as Jessie's suicide provokes Thelma's dissatisfaction with nurturing someone, Thelma tries to act like a child in order to give Jessie a reason to live by letting her take care of Thelma. However, at the same time, Thelma's childish behavior seems to suggest her wish to return to childhood, like the case of Babe in *Crimes of the Heart*. In order to refuse nurturing someone, she acts like a child: she clearly states that she never liked cooking, that she will not cook anymore, and that she will eat candy and tuna instead of cooking proper meals. She eats junk food in order to console herself and escape from reality in order to deceive herself that life is sweet like a fabrication.

Jessie also expresses her wish to return to childhood though she knows that it is impossible. She regards childhood as the time when the relationship with her mother used to be comfortable for both of them. She describes a baby picture of herself as "somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held and kicked but didn't hurt anybody, and slept whenever she wanted to, just by closing her eyes" (50). However, she answers calmly, "I am what became of your child" (50) when Thelma says that Jessie is her child, and says about this child that she used to be: "It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will" (50). Also when Jessie and her mother try to regain the experience of childhood, longing for maternal care by making cocoa and caramel apples, they find out that they do not like cocoa and remember that they did not like caramel apples either. It seems that the "good old days" are a fantasy, and actually did not exist.

Escapism keeps Thelma alive, while Jessie feels that she does not have things which might keep her from committing suicide. According to Linda Brown, hunger suggests some psychic need, and women eat in order to heal the feeling of emptiness or a "hole" in their soul, but Jessie's hole in her soul is too deep to fill with food. Jessie wishes that she had something she really liked, such as "rice pudding or cornflakes for breakfast" (50), something that might be enough to keep her alive, yet she does not like to eat at all as Thelma suggests when she asks her if she has been living on toothpaste, and she knows that such consolation would not work anymore. Her situation seems more

desperate than that of Thelma's, as she cannot work outside because of epilepsy and her smile which makes people nervous, nor deceive herself to continue her life being locked up in the house. Therefore, she makes a big decision to deal with the situation—to refuse everything by committing suicide.

Both Beth Henley and Marsha Norman depict suicide as an absolute statement of rejection of the social environment that deprives women of autonomy. Suicide is usually considered an irrational or even insane act in America. However, as some critics suggest, Jessie's suicide can be regarded as means to control her own destiny. In studying the history of suicide, Anne Marie Drew argues that suicide has not always seen as a negative behavior. Moreover, she says, sometimes it is a triumph over destiny and time.

In *Crimes of the Heart*, suicide is depicted as an option for female characters in order to retrieve control over their life. For example, Meg tries to control herself and the thing she cannot really control—death, by suicidal behavior. She starts smoking and drinking at the age of fourteen, when her mother committed suicide. According to Babe, Meg started doing strange things, such as looking at the pictures of skin diseases after she found her mother dead. In order to overcome the trauma, she seemed to prove herself that she could endure shocking events. When their cousin Chick criticizes Meg for smoking, saying that it causes cancer, calling a cigarette “a little death stick” (19), Meg answers that “That’s what I like about it, Chick—taking a drag off of death. (*Mag takes a long, deep drag.*) Mmm! Gives me a sense of controlling my own destiny. What power! What exhilaration! Want a drag?” (19) Her joking suggests some desperate need to feel the sense of controlling herself and her life, and the difficulty of the ways to feel agency for contemporary women.

In *'night, Mother*, suicide is also depicted as something Jessie does in order to restore agency: refusing the roles of women and being independent of her mother. She says that suicide is something she does not have to do, and that is what she likes about it. She says that she has been deliberately preparing to commit suicide from the previous Christmas, and decides to execute the plan when she feels well in order to make it clear that suicide is her choice. She has been playing various social roles to fill the expectation of others around her, and suicide is an act of quitting the roles. When Thelma reproaches her for “acting like some little brat” (25), being mad at everything and doing nothing, Jessie tells her that it is time for her to do something about it. However, something like buying new dishes or getting a job does not work, so she decides to kill herself. In one key passage of the play, Jessie regards choosing to commit suicide as similar to getting off the bus before you reach your stop:

Mama, I know you used to ride the bus. Riding the bus and it's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off and the only reason in the world you don't get off is still 50 blocks from where you're going? Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even I ride 50 more years and get off then, it's the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough. (24)

She also compares suicide to turning off the radio when it is noisy and unpleasant, and tries to make her mother understand that suicide is her choice, and that it has nothing directly to do with Thelma—she is taking control of her life, and no one has the right to stop her.

After she announces that she will commit suicide, she explains the reasons why she has decided to shoot herself as something personal, so that Thelma does not have to blame herself, yet as the play continues, she finally says no to her mother, who tries to persuade her not to commit suicide. Moreover, she insists on saying no to everything around her: “No, Mama. This is how I have my say. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say No!” (49) This is when she becomes independent, though her mother cannot accept it. She has been trying to be what other people want her to be, but finally decides that she will no longer try to play those roles. As we see the play begins with Jessie's shocking announcement of her decision to commit suicide, which provokes deep conversation between mother and daughter to reveal their sorrow, provides them an opportunity to understand each other, we watch Jessie finally acquire agency.

Conclusion

From the twentieth century onward, after women playwrights in the 1970s and 80s depicted the predicaments of women in the patriarchal society and women's strong statement of rejection as we saw in *'night*, *Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart*, women started to stop defining themselves by playing the social roles of mother, wife, and daughter, which they have been forced to play in patriarchal society. Instead, women are started to be depicted as defining themselves as they are. For example, in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), women try to accept their body by talking and sharing their experience about their body. By talking directly to the audience, female

characters not only share their experience with each other, but also with the audience. And they also accept their sexual desire in Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room* or the vibrator play (2009). Their social roles I discussed in this essay became merely one of the many choices that women devise for themselves, and female protagonists' rejection of the social roles attributed to women and their struggles to create their own story in *'night*, *Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart* can be considered as the important beginning for women to acquire agency.

Notes

¹ In the film version of the play (1986), it is made clear that Jessie never goes out of the house, but keeps doing housework. Even when Dawson's family drops by and Thelma goes outside to see them, Jessie stays inside and watches them through the opening of a window shade, which emphasize her inability to associate with people and creates the impression that she is locked up in the house.

² Babe's obsession with sugar is exaggerated in the film as she adds more sugar to her coke while she talks with the lawyer, though she eats oatmeal while she speaks in the play.

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