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Plays in American Periodicals, 1890–1918

I wore it one Sunday morning

Susan Harris Smith

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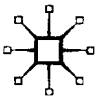

PLAYS IN AMERICAN PERIODICALS, 1890–1918

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2007 978-1-4039-7765-6

First published in 2007 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-53771-6 ISBN 978-0-230-60502-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230605022

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Susan Harris.
Plays in American periodicals, 1890–1918 / by Susan Harris Smith.
p. cm.—(Palgrave studies in theatre and performance)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. American drama—19th century—History and criticism. 2. American drama—20th century—History and criticism. 3. Journalism and literature—United States—History. 4. American periodicals—History. 5. Literature and society—United States—History. 6. Politics and literature—United States—History. 7. Politics in literature. 8. Social problems in literature. I. Title.

PS345.S65 2007
812′.5209—dc22 2007061460

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Phil . . . as always and forever

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Preface

ONE NATION DIVIDED

This book examines a hitherto neglected body of work, plays published in periodicals. To put it simply, between 1890 and 1918 over one hundred and twenty five dramatic texts (American, English, Irish, and Anglo Indian) were published in fourteen American general interest periodicals ranging from elite publications such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Scribner's* to more popular venues such as *McClure's* and *Everybody's Magazine* to progressive magazines such as *Arena* and *Forum*. One key assumption I bring to this work, in concert with other critics, is that the periodicals and the plays in them collectively were an important site of public deliberation, contestation, and intellectual circulation, at once interlocking and in tension. My particular focus on the plays is meant to fill a striking gap in American literary history and to widen the dramatic canon; though most of these plays have received virtually no critical attention, they are as rich in historical and contextual complexity as the more-examined fiction and essays that comprise the literary canon of this period. Therefore, plays published in periodicals are as much part of the study of periodical literature as of dramatic history.

To that end, I consider the plays both individually and as a unique body of work. There are several compelling reasons to do this. First, histories of drama do not consider most of the plays at all. Second, of the plays that do get consideration, their publication in periodicals goes almost unnoticed. Third, no one has considered the presence of drama in American periodicals of this period as a body of work, and only some of the plays have had any notice as individual works. The same is true for histories of periodicals even though drama did the cultural work of the periodical's mission; even the slightest of the plays reveals the attitudes and values working in concert with the prose and poetry selections.

Finally, even though some of the plays are not written by Americans nor are on the face of it on an ostensibly American subject, every play was published in an American magazine because, I will argue, it accomplished some Americanist editorial objective. Therefore, I consider all the plays as doing the cultural work of American periodicals, work that was central to the American project of self-conscious class and nation formation, a project marked by a tension between the desire to be singularly and exceptionally "American" and the equally compelling urge to remain part of what William Dean Howells called "the Larger England," an extended community bound together by a shared code and a shared language. One of the interesting aspects of this unresolved struggle is the transatlantic circulation of American periodicals, which marks the coexistence of attempts to distinguish American culture from European culture and of a desire to be an integral participant in the international arena. Ultimately, the emergence of the United States as a global and imperial power can be understood as part of this effort to forge bonds among the dominant classes of "white" nations.

There are many arguments for accepting this historical periodization not the least of which is that various accounts of both political and dramatic history persuasively make this cut. For many cultural historians these three decades, framed by the Cuban conflict and World War I, comprise the Progressive and Populist era, a time of sweeping reforms and anxiety over the consolidation of business enterprises and monopolistic control, the subversion of frontier individualism, and the perceived threat to American democratic social structure by rising immigration. Furthermore, the drama was engaged powerfully with many of these issues, including the commodification of culture, the production of social stereotypes, the anxiety over labor struggles, social and ethnic strife, and the reluctant participation in the Great War. One important point for this study is that the commercial theatre between 1896 and 1915 was dominated by the Theatrical Syndicate, a domination challenged in 1915 by modernism. As such, the drama of this period, whether written for the stage or the page, shared several characteristics, summed up by Ronald Wainscott as "a dedication to environmental reality, the presentation of a believable society (both rural and urban), and carefully crafted language deemed appropriate for the time, place, and characters of the play. Although social issues would appear periodically in some of these plays, what kept most far from the frontiers of Ibsen was their

approach to dramatic structure, selection of sensational event, and conventional conclusion to the central problem of the play. Nearly all of the American work that ventured into topical material in these years verified 'traditional values' of the age" ("Plays" 264). One way to understand the historical and dramatic relationship is to access the class-based "structure of feeling" (to invoke Raymond Williams's term) that invigorated the social-political transitional work of the failed Reconstruction period.

The periodicals under consideration, despite their range, from conservative to progressive, voiced and shaped the concerns of a very specific group, best summed up as white, Anglo-Saxon, non-immigrant, and middle class or what Richard Ohmann in *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* calls the "PMC," the professional-managerial class. That class created its own mythic heritage and space, a space overwhelmingly white, in which characters of color are marginalized and stereotyped if they appear at all, in Benedict Anderson's well-known phrase, an "imagined political community." The drama participated instrumentally in this imaginative construction of an Anglo-Saxon legacy, a mythic history of whiteness, unity and imperial destiny born of a determination to close the sectional wound between post–Civil War Southern and Northern factions. Not only did the racial superiority of Anglo-Saxons go unquestioned but also the necessity to reproduce within one's own race and class was insisted upon. Finally, it is important to bear in mind the thoroughly integrated commercial basis of periodical publication; most periodicals were commercial commodities dedicated to advertising goods and promoting consumerism as necessary for national economic growth and cultural advancement.

The most comprehensive general history of periodicals is still Frank Mott's multivolume *A History of American Magazines*, though studies of individual periodicals such as Harold Wilson's *"McClure's Magazine" and the Muckrakers* and Arthur John's *The Best Years of the "Century"* and general overviews such as John Tebbel's *The American Magazine: A Compact History* amplify and update Mott's work. In all of these, however, there is virtually nothing about the dramatists or their work though, ironically, a great deal of space was given in the periodicals to debates about the theatre, to theatre reviews, and to concerns about achieving a distinctly American and "literary" drama as well as to the plays themselves. Though Mott notes that there was extensive commentary

on and coverage of the drama, the stage, and shows of all kinds in the periodicals, and that "an important element in the formula for a successful cheap magazine always was a department of pictures of actresses, accompanied by a page or two of stage gossip," he says nothing of the dramatic texts published in the magazines (*History 1885–1905* 255).

Plays in periodicals also have gone unrecognized in cultural studies both of literature and drama. More recent studies of periodicals, for instance Richard Ohmann's *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (1996), Nancy Glazener's *Reading for Realism: The History of a U. S. Literary Institution, 1850–1910* (1997), and Matthew Schneirov's *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America 1893–1914* (1994), focus on fiction and nonfiction, leaving poetry and drama largely unexamined, in order to investigate other concerns pertinent to this study as well: the cultures of letters, the operations of bourgeois culture, the forms of engagement with social issues, and the dominance of realism. Studies of American drama for this period also are largely silent on the matter of drama in periodicals. In Brenda Murphy's *American Realism and American Drama, 1880–1940*, only Hamlin Garland's *Under the Wheel* is mentioned other than Howells's work, which receives extensive treatment. Alan Ackerman in *The Portable Theater: American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage* likewise attends to Howells's work but to none of the other plays in this study. Ronald Wainscott in *The Emergence of the Modern American Theater, 1914–1929* mentions Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* and Marion Craig Wentworth's *War Brides* but only in passing. Of the one hundred and twenty-five plays under consideration in this study, one-quarter were published in *Harper's Monthly* (the lion's share of these are attributed to William Dean Howells and two *farceurs*, John Kendrick Bangs and May Isabel Fisk). Of the others, twenty were in *Forum*, sixteen in *McClure's*, twelve in *Scribner's*, eight in *Century*, three each in *New England Magazine, Bookman, North American Review*, and *Everybody's*, two each in *Cosmopolitan, Arena*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, and only one each in *Lippincott's* and the *Critic*. Obviously, despite their shared general characteristics, the magazines had their own nuanced proclivities, biases, and cultural agendas and different relationships with drama and theatre.

With the exception of the well-known Europeans—Yeats, Shaw, Galsworthy and Lady Gregory—and one American, William Dean

Howells, most of the dramatists, though they were well-known to their contemporaries (though not necessarily as playwrights) are not as familiar today. Of the seventy dramatists all but twelve were American. Of the one hundred and twenty-five plays, fifty-one were written by women and most of the women were American. Thirty-two plays are set in the past (Biblical, Anglo-Saxon "England," Puritan America, Ancient Greece, and France during the Revolution), eighty-two are set in the present, and five in the future. Of the sixty-nine that are set in America, with one exception (Hamlin Garland's *Under the Wheel*), all have urban settings; the rest are set elsewhere (usually Europe). Twenty-seven of the plays are in verse and sixty-six are illustrated. Of the one hundred and twenty-five plays only about seven could be described accurately as dramaturgically "experimental."

Because the voices were as often raised in discontent as in content, a contentment haunted by ill-concealed anxiety, I describe the writers as "dis/contented." Specifically, I want to think of the periodicals as a "site," a socially constructed phenomenon with peculiar types of often strained relations operating within it, relations that were the foundations of a collective identity for a particular class, a self-identified "Anglo-Saxon" middle class in a dynamic and unstable state of turmoil and anxiety. This study will trace and analyze both the unified fronts predicated on a certain degree of unity and conformity that provided temporary contentment and the genuine disagreements within the class about culture and politics, which produced irruptions of discontent. A wide range of opinions are voiced in the drama, from the most virulent dismissal of immigrants to well-intentioned engagement with progressive causes; all are framed by middle-class objectives, not the least of which was to locate and naturalize the leadership of the nation by that class alone. As I will stress, the drama in particular was a powerful agent in the attempt to establish and sustain difference and distance between the middle and the lower classes and between the Anglo-Saxon and the various "Others."

The general goals and rationales of the project are set up in chapter 1, "Varieties of Dramatic Experience": to capture what Raymond Williams calls the "felt sense"of life for the privileged middle-class readers in America who were invested in the production of what Benedict Anderson describes as "the national imaginary," an imaginary that fostered American racism, consumerism, nativism, and imperialism, themselves extensions of what William Dean Howells's approved of as the "Larger England."

The chapter sets forth the varieties of dramatic literature readers would have encountered in the periodicals with particular attention to class.

Chapter 2, "Cultures of Social Distance and Difference," examines the strategies used to create a distinct social audience in a closed cultural zone: the inter- and intratextuality of periodical literature as it pertained to the drama; the dependence on specific cultural knowledge; the total exclusion of African Americans as citizens or subjects in the drama; the voyeuristic framing of immigrants; and the creation of a privileged consumer-reader class. That class generated numerous ways of naming themselves, their culture, and their values: respectable, genteel, cultivated, and traditional; values reaffirmed by the plays. It is a class decidedly and insistently in the middle, portraying itself as above working and poor people and below wealthy and aristocratic people, circling the wagons against all Others.

This middling conservatism is dramatized in the most gendered group of plays, those about women. Chapter 3, "Women as American Citizens," considers the ways in which women were positioned to reject suffrage and accept conservative expectations of marriage, particularly within their own class, how women (but not men) were ridiculed lightly for their "feminine" foibles and how women were presented as "naturally" charitable. Marriage within one's own class was presented as necessary for social stability and the reproduction of Anglo-Saxons as essential to combating the "race suicide" that was threatening the "civilized" citizens and imperiling the nation's strength.

One way for a periodical to secure an elite cultural zone, the demonstrable sign of being "civilized," was to resort to the traditional "high" cultural forms, genres, and themes that were accepted markers of refinement and good taste. Chapter 4, "Cultural Displacement," proposes that though verse plays and plays on religious, historical, or mythological subjects made claims to such "higher" ground, aesthetically and morally, this was a strategy, first, to enable the dramatization of suicide, adultery, fallen women, and sexual depravity, second, to naturalize religious miracles, indulge in extreme sentimentality, and romanticize racism and monarchism, and, third, to de-nationalize and naturalize the plays of Irish and East Indian playwrights to serve "American," specifically nationalist, needs.

In conclusion, chapter 5, "Dis/Contented Citizens," looks at the plays that were openly critical of contemporary American social and political issues—particularly the economic abuse of laborers, "white slavery"

(prostitution), monarchy, and World War I—noting the culturally conflicted work of "progressive" polemical pieces purporting to support a demographically broad democracy. The discontent was not just thematic; the most inventive dramaturgy marks many of these plays that participate in the emergent Modernist experiment.

Therefore, situating the plays in their original periodical context establishes both their autonomy as works of literature and their participation in the complexities of the cultural conversations transpiring in the monthly press. Furthermore, the varieties of dramatic experience speak not only to an aesthetic range, from conventional melodrama to experimentation with "modern" forms, but also to the extensive cogent engagement with political and social issues that characterize the thematic concerns. As I have said, the work of this project is driven by the need to bring to attention plays that, individually or collectively, deliberately or unconsciously, have been overlooked and to locate that work in their periodical context, a context that emphasizes a shared history and cultural alliances but also countenances a focus on social and political differences and divisions marked by race, ethnicity, gender, and class. By considering the plays in their periodical context, we can hear the authority with which they spoke to their readers and can better understand and reassess their impact on the culture they were so instrumental in both reflecting and producing. It is, of course, impossible to reconstruct the entire historical and cultural fabric within which the plays operated but it is possible to listen to each voice participating in the cultural conversation. Because most of these plays will be unfamiliar to contemporary readers, examination of the cultural work necessitates detailed recapitulations of the themes and subject matter of each play. This avoids the danger of positing a distinct and coherent ideology but does encourage marking the rhetorical practices and strategies, dramaturgical devices, and thematic patterns that recur.

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Acknowledgments

My thanks are few but heartfelt: to Don Wilmeth for his consistent support and eagle eye, Nancy Glazener for her thoughtful and insightful interventions, and Jim Burke for the photographs. And, of course, Phil who is always by my side.

1. Varieties of Dramatic Experience

I begin this examination of dramatic texts in American general interest periodicals at the turn of the twentieth century with a contentious question that I hope will be answered by the work itself, namely, "Why bother?" Literary histories ignore their presence and plays are no longer published in such periodicals; nonetheless, periodicalized dramatic literature played a significant role in the social constitution of the middle class as citizens and consumers. The cultural hypothesis that modalities of feeling are social and public, not only personal or private, was introduced by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* in 1977. This concept, which he termed "structures of feeling," has become central to methodologies that relate the extraordinariness of imaginative literature to the ordinariness of cultural processes and that attempt to understand their connections to a historical period. As he explained, "we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt . . . not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelated continuity" (132). Crucially, Williams stressed the ways in which literature articulated an alternative to dominant views and, thus, to the politics of social order and social change.

Raymond Williams also reminds us, in *The Long Revolution*, that the most difficult thing to grasp in studying any particular period is the "felt sense" of the quality of life at a particular place and time, a sense of the ways in which particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living (47). The felt sense of life I want to recover is that of a privileged group of Americans at the turn of the last century, from 1890 to 1918, a time in which a new social order, managed by the growing middle class, a professional-managerial class, engaged in the project of achieving a "modern" and "national" cultured status through the activity of reading,

which was a consumer activity. The consumption of culture encouraged and enabled the reader-consumer to bask in an expanded world of goods to be purchased, behaviors to be examined, and lands to be claimed for nation building. The coast-to-coast consolidation of America was secured through the agency of the railroad system and consequent articulation of wealth and power as the national desiderata. The new American national identity, a modern identity promoted by mass culture, mass advertising, and mass anxiety, was one of patriotic material advancement at home and rationalized righteous expansionism abroad. It was also highly unstable, an imagined formation erected precariously on wishful assertion rather than discernible fact.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the middle class understood itself to have definite cultural commitments to self-improve as both readers and consumers, to participate in and contribute to an America that was presented to them as a cultural and political success dependent upon their full cooperation and adherence to a narrowly circumscribed national norm. The axiom of social harmony upon which a post–Civil War nation depended was predicated on class cooperation if not co-option. Benedict Anderson's definition of nation is, by now, quite familiar; in *Imagined Communities* he says that nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The rise of the nation-state was, as Anderson argues, driven by a growth of "national consciousness" that was enabled by the print medium. Though America ostensibly was one nation, in fact it was divided between a literate class and others (some native-born, some immigrant) who were illiterate or poorly educated in English. For the print medium this distinction was a foundation on which the community of the nation-state could be constructed. Etienne Balibar calls such a community a "fictive ethnicity," noting the "great competing routes to this: language and race usually operate together, for only their complementarity makes it possible for the 'people' to be represented as an absolutely autonomous unit" (96). At stake at the American turn of the century, so its dominant class was told, was the survival of the Anglo-Saxon race, the race that William Dean Howells characterized as the "Larger England," an extended community bound together by a shared code and a shared language (*Laureate*).

The construction of national identity and values was carried out not only in legislation, such as the Immigration Act of 1881, which assigned responsibility for assessment to the federal government and allowed a medical examination, for example *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), that legitimized racial segregation; the Naturalization Act of 1906 in which knowledge of English became a requirement; the restriction of Japanese in 1907, and the 1917 Literacy test, but also in the periodicals that collectively were an important location for public contestation, deliberation, and intellectual circulation about race and immigration. The drama in periodicals, I argue, was complicit to a large degree in the formation of a racially restrictive, ethnically exclusionary, and Protestant Anglo-American identity, often modeling such behaviors and attitudes for the readers while reflecting the foundational unsettled anxiety about the issues.

Benedict Anderson also argues that the construction of the imagined nation-state of America required not only "republican institutions, common citizenships, popular sovereignty, national flags, anthems, etc." but also the necessary corollary, "the liquidation of their conceptual opposites: dynastic empires, monarchical institutions, absolutisms, subjecthoods, inherited nobilities, serfdoms, ghettos, and so forth" (81). Such "official nationalism," he continues, was a highly effective "anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community" (101). One reason the dominant group felt an urgent need to promote an official nationalism was that, at base, it did not feel unified. As David Blight forcefully demonstrates in *Race and Reunion*, his history of the aftermath of the Civil War, in fact the nation was not grounded in shared civic ideals because "a segregated society demanded a segregated memory." Consequently, "the many myths and legends fashioned out of the reconciliationist vision provided the superstructure of Civil War memory, but its base was white supremacy in both its moderate and virulent forms. This concerted effort to "forget" what had transpired and to introduce a national mythology that yoked reunion with racism he calls "segregated historical memory" (361). One of the prominent means of promulgating the myths and legends of civic union was through the wide-spread distribution of print media directed at the middle-class consumer.

At the turn of the century in America, one of the ubiquitous vehicles in the realm of print media was the periodical: technological advances

having made possible the dissemination of both "quality" and "pulp" magazines to a wide audience. The target audience for periodicals interested in drama was driven by a passion for self-improvement and education; they supported the lyceum and Chautauqua movements, home-study correspondence courses, morally uplifting fiction, and special interest clubs. The quest for self-improvement was not new; Burton Bledstein notes that mid-nineteenth-century Americans depended on the "guidebook, the manual, handbook, or book of reference in order to function—*by the book*—" (10). Periodicals also filled that function. According to Frank Mott, between 1860 and 1900 as the American population doubled, the number of daily newspapers grew from 387 with an average circulation of 12,000 and doubled again between 1890 and 1915. Also American periodicals grew, from 700 in 1865 and peaking at 5,500 in 1900, during which time more than a thousand new magazines were founded. Carolyn Kitch's estimations also speak to staggering growth; she maintains that "in 1865, there were nearly 700 hundred titles with a total circulation of about four million; forty years later, in 1905, there were some 6000 magazines with a total audience of sixty-four million, averaging four magazines per household. By the same year, ten American magazines had readerships in excess of half a million" (*History 1885–1905* 4). The fortunes of all periodicals during this period rose and fell with the stock market but the cheaper and more "popular" periodicals such as *McClure's, Munsey's*, and *Cosmopolitan* gained in strength as they sold increasingly more advertising; that is, they were directed to the reader as consumer. The consequence was a huge audience of readers and it is not too much to claim that the popular or "general interest" magazines revolutionized mass communications between 1893 and 1918. In 1893, S. S. McClure established *McClure's* to compete with the four quality or genteel periodicals, *Atlantic Monthly, Harper's Monthly, Scribner's*, and *Century*, and it was also the year in which Frank Munsey cut the price of his magazine to ten cents.

In *The End of American Innocence*, an early intellectual history of the cultural and political legacy of the turn-of-the-century "custodians of culture" and the "revolution" against them between 1912 and 1917, Henry F. May speaks powerfully to the tensions and debates carried on in the periodicals as well as in other public forums. Although May falls too easily into the evolutionary Victorian/Modern dichotomizing formulation that marks many cultural histories, he argues that three