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**Progressive Achievement Begins with the Arts:  
“Modern Drama” Reflects the Sophistication of Gender Equality**

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### **Progressive Achievement Begins with the Arts:**

#### **“Modern Drama” Reflects the Sophistication of Gender Equality**

Progressive achievement begins with the arts. In the sense that “progressive” achievement involves beneficial social reform, it can be said that the arts are at the origin of that process. Progressive reform must begin with an idea, and ideas find their first expression in the arts. In recent human history, one art form has been particularly consequential with regard to implementing social reform: Theatre. Among the arts, writing is perhaps the most efficient modality for clearly transmitting ideas about social reform, and the *playwright* has been the sort of writer whose work has received the most attention. Naturally, in modern times the theatre also takes the technologically enhanced forms of cinema and television—in considering the performing arts as one unified group one must also acknowledge that the writers of theatrical productions are able to influence society with empathy and immediacy that is unique among the various forms of literature.

Society is moved in the direction suggested by a popular theatrical production. Literature is timelessly influential; the Performing Arts are immediately influential, swaying the audience all at once. If the arts are the origin of social reform, and if writing is, among the arts, particularly influential, the writings associated with modern drama can be said to have been an extremely prominent social force in modern times.

This paper is intended to show that modern drama and gender equality developed together in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a powerful social movement, the Women’s Rights Movement was bound to occur as society became more sophisticated; the power of that movement reveals

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just how crucial *drama* is to social reform, because the evolution of drama so closely reflects society's progress toward gender equality. After a brief period of resistance by a patriarchal society, the movement toward gender equality became an overwhelming force. The idea of gender equality was cultivated in the minds of modern people by playwrights, who had captured and portrayed the truth of gender oppression.

### **A Lack of Receptivity:**

#### **Female Playwrights are Disregarded in a Patriarchal Society**

All societies in the history of humanity have long been characterized by a common, subtle source of imbalance. That imbalance is the unequal treatment of women in the arts, sciences, and professional life. Lewis (1993) expounds an understanding of the “patriarchy” as a series of individual acts involving abuse and exploitation of women, especially male power over women, which is largely responsible for the historical subordination of women. Society has always been, and still is today, a patriarchy—though modern times have seen a more sophisticated and balanced approach to gender roles.

The depiction by modern drama of women in their struggles against an oppressive patriarchy still had not been accompanied by much actual empowerment within the industry. Women have been the writers of various works, but their contributions have been largely overlooked. One search of twenty-nine comprehensive studies of modern drama, for example, showed only four female playwrights who were mentioned in more than one source (Kelly, 1996). This lack of acknowledgement has not been the result of a lack of activity by women in

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the industry. James Ellis and Joseph Donohue (1985) provide a list of 189 female playwrights of the nineteenth century in England alone (p. 301).

*Brander (1916) Reasons the Women lack Potential as Playwrights*

What is it that caused female playwrights to have been overlooked? A 1916 book by Brander Matthews entitled *Book about the Theater* provides a controversial answer to that question. Matthews addresses what he refers to as the “problem” of female dramatists. He explains that women have less worldly knowledge than men—women cannot write excellent plays, he contends, because they are not knowledgeable enough to do so! Women can act, and they can even write prose, he explains, but they lack the “inexhaustible fund of information about life which is the common property of men”—a resource that he finds to be uniquely crucial for playwrights. According to Matthews, women can succeed in writing novels, because the novelist does not need to explore [. . .] the, “crises of existence” (p. 118). In order to write for the theatre, one apparently needs a more profound understanding of life. Matthews concludes that the under-representation of women as playwrights results from the, “relative incapacity of women to build a plan, to make a single whole compounded of many parts, and yet dominated in every detail by but one purpose” (p. 120).

*Clark (1925) Associates ‘Good’ Writing with Masculinity*

Matthews was not the only chauvinist to mistake the lack of appreciation for women’s contributions for a lack of ability among women. Barrett Clark (1925) wrote an exhaustive work

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 entitled *Study of the Modern Drama*, in which he expands on Matthews's faulty reasoning. Matthews missed the obvious fact that his conclusion about a lack of talent among female playwrights is representative of the same supremacist ignorance that caused women's contributions to go unnoticed, and Clark went on to miss yet something more: Clark determined that the reason women do not make good playwrights is that "good" writing must be manly writing. That is to say, he argued that good writing is writing in which the "feminine note" is concealed.

Clark observed that plays by women seemed rare, especially women from particular cultures: "I have neither seen nor read a single play by a Spanish or Italian woman" (309). He also observes that the few good plays written by women all had one trait in common: They all conceal the "feminine note." Clark asks, "Do you discover in any of these the feminine note? [. . .] "If so, what is it?" (309) Clark believes that in order to well, one must write like a man.

Just as the cultural relativist wrongly concludes that actions are moral or immoral depending on whether or not they are popularly accepted in his or her culture, one should perhaps be called a "gender relativist" if he wrongly concludes that art is either "good" or not depending on its popular acceptance in a society dominated by men. To believe that the lack of acclaim for works written by women is attributable simply to a lack of talent among women requires denial of the reality of gender oppression in society. Because real oppression has occurred, trends of "popularity" among various productions do not accurately represent human tastes.

*Oppression and Misconception*

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Matthews and Clark do not necessarily represent the popular opinion of their generation. Much valuable insight has surely been lost throughout human history as the contributions of women have gone unnoticed. The mechanism by which this happens is not attributable to any deficiency of the female gender, but rather to the tendencies inherent in human nature. Only a very sophisticated society can overcome the oppression that has continued throughout history. Great female playwrights have been ignored for the same reasons as other great women have been ignored: It is not manly to be out-performed by a woman!

As a result of that mechanism, many plays written by women have gone un-produced, and many have been seen only in theatres that would bring minimal acclamation (Kelly, 1996). This is especially true of plays that were written by women and also involved major parts played by women. Throughout the history of modern drama, however, a gradual change has taken place. Early modern drama continued the tendency of a patriarchal society to ignore the contributions of women, but change was initiated when the “new theatres” of England and America established a refreshing trend: In order for theatrical productions to be seen as *progressive*, they needed to graduate from the stale, old ways of the past. The empowerment of women became one of the qualities that made “modern” drama different from the drama of the past.

### **Gradual Empowerment:**

#### **Appreciation for Female Talent in a Progressive Society**

Henrik Ibsen is considered to be the “father” of modern drama. Kelly (1996) suggests that this title was given to him partly because of his, “dramatic portraits of middle-class women

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confronting the social, legal, and psychological limits of gender roles—the same roles being challenged by women activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (p. 1).

Though this father figure who is credited for much of the uniqueness of modern drama is also remembered as one who contributed to efforts related to gender equality, it is also true that his intentions were not specifically inclined toward making such a contribution. As a result of his contribution to the Women’s Rights Movement, he was honored at a banquet held in his honor. When the toast was proposed, Ibsen explained:

I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement.... True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (Ibsen, 337)

What is to be made, then, of the association of modern drama with gender equality? If any characteristics of modern times make them more sophisticated than times of the past, the progressive movement toward gender equality is certainly one of them. Modern drama can be said to enhance equality, and enhanced gender equality is part of what makes modern drama what it is. Nevertheless, Ibsen denies that his agenda involved any such modification of drama; he was trying to describe humanity, and his description brought to light the injustice of gender oppression. What Ibsen saw was a social imbalance that caused women to be mistreated, their talents to be ignored, and their potential to be unfulfilled.

Perhaps modern drama, like Ibsen himself, has *inadvertently* helped to change societal perceptions that have led to the oppression of women. Writers and directors are in the business of providing drama and inspiration, not promoting women’s liberation. However, in the process



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of seeking out stories of inspiration from the real world, the artists cannot help but acknowledge the ongoing plight of the female gender and the heroism of their perseverance. In the interest of drama, the passion and heroism that are available in the stories related to women's issues are excellent focal points.

### *The Progressive Quality of Modern Drama*

Nicoll's 1937 study of modern English drama between the years 1900 and 1930 reflects a change that took place with regard to the acknowledgement of female playwrights. He writes about three women whose theatrical writing was particularly impressive among works of early modern drama: Clemence Dane, Elizabeth Baker, and Githa Sowerby. Nicoll celebrates these works and praises their female writers, acknowledging the creative potential of the female gender. In particular, he offers much praise for the "intensity" of *Rutherford and Son*, a play written by Sowerby in 1912. About this play, Nicoll writes, "A broader spirit breathes from it" (384).

Nicoll presents modern drama as a step in the direction of greater awareness—an approach that is consistent with his acknowledgement of female accomplishments in the field. This "modern" style of drama is distinguished from its predecessors, in part, by the same admirable, progressive qualities associated with the fight for gender equality. Endeavors associated with the Women's Rights Movement were as sensible as they were threatening to men in power, so they appealed to playwrights. Many truths at the heart of the Women's Rights Movement found expression in modern drama before being actualized in reality.

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Has there ever been good reason to wonder whether the historical under-representation of women as playwrights is caused by a lack of potential or by popular neglect? Clearly, no lack of creative potential exists among women, because great female playwrights have proven that they are just as capable as men. Unfortunately, however, a sort of psychological inertia is still at work, causing heroism and leadership to be commonly associated with masculinity even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Popular conceptions reflect the gender related oppression from a less sophisticated era in human history.

### **Conclusion**

The body of works included in the canon of modern drama does not accurately represent the creative potential of the female gender. However, gender based oppression seems to be coming gradually to an end. In 2007, women hold leadership positions all over the world, and their contributions to the arts are significant. Gender oppression was a characteristic of a less civilized time. The great social significance of drama is attested to by the fact that modern drama so closely reflects the gender equality movement—in fact, with careful attention one can observe that progressive social reform is always *preceded* by dramatic illustration. Modern drama is the way that we humans collectively mull over new ideas, and for that reason it is very meaningful among the arts.

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