

Chapter 9

The Legacy of the Terrible Mother Archetype in Post-War British Drama: Ann Jellicoe's *The Sport of My Mad Mother*

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ABSTRACT

*The theatre provides the playwrights with a public platform through which they open up a more comprehensive framework to reinterpret the concept of the feminine. The chapter, in which translation remains a fundamental instrument that will be utilized to offer new interpretations to old ideas about the feminine, explores how the post-war British woman playwright Ann Jellicoe translates a women-related myth and reinterprets the concept of the feminine in *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (w.1958, r.1962). In this context, the chapter focuses on the concept of the Terrible Mother archetype which represents the female creative power as well as the potential for destruction in the play within a special reference to Jung's premises on the archetypal nature of the femininity and maternity. Thus, the chapter indicates that Ann Jellicoe, taking on board and challenging the perceived social, ideological, and psychological ideals of femininity, reclaims the legacy of the female strength.*

INTRODUCTION

During the decade of the 1950s that followed the end of the Second World War, the British witnessed important political events ranging from the return of a Conservative government in 1951, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 to the military crisis at the Suez Canal in 1956 (Bennett, 2000, p. 38). The period also covers significant events regarding women's social, cultural, and political status, which creates new social and experiential frameworks. A series of significant legislative and cultural events took place in the aftermath of the Second World War that marked the transition of women's roles in both the

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private and public sphere. As of the First World War, one of the most immediate effects of the Second World War was women's presence in the visible public workplace for a short time. To some extent, the women who appeared in public workplaces expressed "a wide range of suppressed female emotions... and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape" of middle-class women who were dissatisfied with their domestic duties (Showalter, 1982, p. 159). During the period with which this chapter is concerned, in terms of popular thinking, women were still characterized by *biology*. To put it more accurately, women were regarded as passive, irrational, and nurturing, thus marriage was regarded as "an indispensable condition" for woman's happiness, social status, and economic prosperity (Klein, 1983, p. 10). The reduction of femininity to the above mentioned characteristics aimed to reinforce women's subordination to men and to persuade them to give up their work in the public sphere. Thus, in the cultural climate of post-war Britain, the "images of the potent, virile male and responsive, passive female" (Aragay, 1994, p. 6) intended to isolate women from the public world and to persuade them to conduct their duties primarily as wife and mother for which they were seen to be most naturally suited. In this regard, it should be acknowledged that the changing requirements of economy, as identified by many theorists and historians, influenced the concept of womanhood and motherhood from the industrial revolution onwards (Hirsch, 1989; Kaplan, 1993). That is, the middle-class mother of the Victorian era occupied a different position from the new middle-class mother of the 1920s, as to some extent was the mother of the 1950s and so on.

The presence of women in public workplaces produced numerous debates as to whether a woman could be considered to be a *feminine* woman while she was involved in the public realm (Gale, 1995, p. 36). In his letter to Verena Ballmer-Suter on 24th January 1959, Carl Jung writes that women's public workplace experience would cause the "masculinization" of women that would disturb the *natural* male/female balance within a culture (Jung, 1976, p. 477). Indeed, Jung's point here affirms that a woman would fulfill her ambitions through the love of a family and realize her creative urges through childrearing (Gale, 1995, p. 36). It is possible to assert that, as such anxiety of women presence in workplaces became publicly articulated, the ground was laid for a new wave of oppressive patriarchal environment. To put it differently, the war had legitimized the idea of "the working mother" (Lewis, 1992, p. 98); however, women's isolation from the public sphere was encouraged by the propagation of the "ideology of domesticity" (Sinfield, 1989, p. 205) and "culture of femininity" (Lewis, 1992, p. 99) in post-war Britain. It is, therefore, no coincidence that womanhood and especially motherhood have been a focus of many plays written by women in the post-war period during which attitudes and approaches to these concepts altered rapidly. These plays cannot be used to contemplate reality; however, they can be examined as social/cultural documents and may be seen as a product of, and reflective of, the particular social and cultural framework within which they are produced. More importantly, it is therefore acknowledged that theatre provides women with a public platform through which they can engage with social discourses and an attempt to effect *change*. As Hart (1989) notes, "the woman who ventures to be heard in [theatre] takes a greater risk than the woman poet or novelist, but it may also offer her greater potential for effecting social change" (p. 2).

In theatrical production after the Second World War, 1956 received special attention due to the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. For much of the play, it is centered on Jimmy Porter who represents 'angry young men' who rail against the changing social conditions in England and busy themselves with the disaffection with upper-middle-class, women and culture. It is therefore argued that Jimmy's fear of national decline following the dismantling of the British Empire and frustration with the diminution of British male privilege have laid the ground for the misogynistic interpretations of the play.

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