

Gender, Genre, Textual Strategies

Women Playing Women in Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*

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MISS LIZZIE ... And you'll play me.
– Pollock (*Blood Relations*, 20)

A quarter of a century is – in my view – ample time for Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* to have become an uncontested part of the drama canon in Canadian literature. Her peers rightly rewarded its merits when the very first Governor General's Award for drama was given to this play in 1981. It has been performed not only across Canada but in the U.S. and Europe as well. The published play, as well as its stagings, have received wide-ranging critical attention representing a great variety of approaches. On this occasion I would like to dwell on the metadramatic aspect of the play with a stress on the context of European drama. I do not wish to downplay Pollock's own remarks about classical and more modern theatre – "Shakespeare's totally irrelevant to me. I don't care if I see another Ibsen before I die. I'm simply not interested in what I refer to as 'museum' theatre" (Pollock 1982, 116) – still, if we take a closer look at *Blood Relations*, there are motifs that remind us of earlier masterpieces of European drama. Susan Stratton rightly points out that

Mr. Borden's destruction of Lizzie's birds recalls Jean's destruction of Julie's bird in *Miss Julie*. Pollock keeps the outcome of Strindberg's play before us, as Lizzie considers the possibility of taking her own life. (Stratton 2000, 69-70)

It might be interesting to elaborate on how woman-hater Strindberg's motif is recontextualized in a play that is considered by some critics as a 'feminist' play (see Bessai 2000, 46; Pollock 1982, 118; Wyile 1997, 191). We might also add F. Garcia Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* to the list of European plays: The Maid tells the story of her 'feminine' husband whose hobby was keeping finches, and when she got angry with him once, she killed all the

small birds with a pestle (*La casa de Bernarda Alba*, 152). Bernarda Alba, although a woman, holds similarly strict and conservative views about the place of women in social and family hierarchies as does Mr. Borden in Pollock's drama.

Searching for still more parallels, I would like to point to *Les Bonnes* by Jean Genet: In this one-act play, two maids regularly act out scenes with a role-change concerning their ambiguous relationship with 'Madame' in her absence. There are moments when they seem to adore her (after all, she even gives them elegant dresses that she no longer needs), but in a split second, their love turns into hatred; as Genet puts it in his stage directions, "Leur oeil est pur, très pur, puisque tous les soirs elles se masturbent et déchargent en vrac, l'une dans l'autre, leur haine de Madame" (Genet 1963, 8).¹ First they only wanted to cause her sorrow by denouncing her lover, then they work out a scheme to kill her. Finally, they carry on this role-playing even after Madame's return, and Claire, who plays Madame, drinks the poisoned tea her sister, Solange, has prepared. Their usual role-playing involves Claire acting out Madame's role while Solange becomes Claire – at one moment in the play, however, Solange mixes up her real identity with her fictional identity so that Claire has to remind her of the change.

SOLANGE ... Car Solange vous emmerde!

CLAIRE (affolée) Claire! Claire!

SOLANGE Hein?

CLAIRE (dans un murmure) Claire, Solange, Claire.

SOLANGE Ah! oui, Claire. Claire vous emmerde! Claire est là, plus claire que jamais. Lumineuse! (*Les Bonnes*, 24-25)²

The scene underlines the strong theatricality of the play – it actually starts with dressing up and choosing the accessories – and the mirror (just like in the dressing room of the theatre) is an important part of the props. Genet makes it very clear that throughout the play the actresses should avoid giving the illusion of reality: "Les actrices retiendront donc leurs gestes" (Genet, 7), "il faut que les actrices ne jouent pas selon un mode réaliste"

1 "The expression of their eyes is pure, very pure, because every night they masturbate each other and unload their hate of Madame into each other" (my translation).

2 SOLANGE: ... For Solange says: to hell with you!

CLAIRE [panic-stricken]: Claire! Claire!

SOLANGE: Eh?

CLAIRE [in a murmur]: Claire, Solange, Claire.

SOLANGE: Ah! Yes, Claire, Claire says: to hell with you! Claire is here, more dazzling than ever. Radiant! (*The Maids*, 44)

(Genet, 10).³ This standpoint is underlined by the playwright's wish that all the three female roles in *Les Bonnes* should be played by male actors.

Speaking of Pollock's play, Susan Stratton mentions that

Blood Relations is also about how we perceive role-playing itself. There is considerable use in the play of dreams, game-playing, images. ... Most evident of all in this complex of non-naturalistic devices is the central device of role-playing. ... (Stratton, 73)

Pollock employs a very subtle system in her play: It starts with the 'outer play,' that is, the opening scene of the Actress⁴ and Lizzie having Sunday afternoon tea, then soon moves to the 'inner play,' involving not only role-playing, but changing roles, conceiving situations, acting them out, watching the other person act, and commenting on the action. These two levels are closely interwoven – "the play and the play-within-the-play ... are not structurally detached from one another. The actors of the outer drama form an integral part of the inner play. Lizzie ... stage[s] and perform[s] the dramas of [her] own existence" (Loiselle 1992, 97).

Genet did not intend to offer a sociological study of maids, and "il ne s'agit pas d'un plaidoyer sur le sort des domestiques" (Genet, 11) – on the contrary: "c'est un conte, c'est-à-dire une forme de récit allégorique" (Genet, 10).⁵ The playwright wants to reveal the monster inside us: "ces bonnes sont des monstres, comme nous-mêmes quand nous nous rêvons ceci ou cela" (Genet, 10).⁶ This idea is very close to Sharon Pollock's view: When asked if she wanted the audience to "consider more than Lizzy [sic] Borden's history," she admitted "all of us are capable of murder given the right situation" (Pollock 1982, 123). Pollock did not wish to write a documentary play, even if *Blood Relations* is based on a real unsolved murder case. As she admitted, "I found myself using an historical situation for a metaphor for a much more contemporary women's theme" (in Bessai, 54). We can agree with Diane Bessai who states that:

Formally and philosophically Pollock has virtually created an anti-documentary play; she has moved from a critical corrective to history ... to an implicit critique of documentary drama's basic assumption that the truth can be demonstrably discovered in an investigatory dramatic structure. (Bessai, 57)

3 "The actresses will thus restrict their gestures," "the actresses must not play according to a realistic mode" (my translation).

4 There are certain irregularities in the capitalization of the article in "the Actress" in the play. In direct quotations, I follow Pollock's original spelling.

5 "it is not meant to be a treatise on the fate of domestics," "it is a tale, that is, a form of allegorical narrative" (my translation).

6 "these maids are monsters, like ourselves when we dream of this or that" (my translation).

The historical raw material undergoes re-evaluation, re-arrangement, and critical interpretation in the creative process: After all, it has to obey dramaturgical rules and evoke the events through an actress's point of view on how to render the artifice of staged events. Acting out a sequence of events on the one hand aims at illustrating what happened in the past, on the other hand, having these events acted out by professional actors draws attention to their fictitiousness. A historical event, thus undergoes a delicate process in the hands of the author; historical material is being played with.

Pollock's construction of the character of Harry and her use of material from transcripts of the inquest and trial, however, are only the most conspicuous examples of her manipulation of historical detail for dramatic purposes. Various other elements of the play demonstrate the way in which the play is not simply attempting to hold up a mirror to history but is a complex mesh of already textualized reflections on the Borden household, the murders, the trial, and Lizzie Borden's life after her acquittal. ... (Wyile, 199)

... Pollock, through her modulation between fidelity to historical detail and a more intertextual stitching together of and elaboration on material from various sources, and through her situating of the historiographical representation in the subjective, interested, dramatic perspective of the Actress, underlines history not as a neat, transparent mimesis of the past but as an assembling of (already constituted, already semiotized) fragments. ... (Wyile, 201-2)

The first version dealing with what could be called the "Borden" theme – *My Name Is Lisbeth* (1975) – is, as Diane Bessai calls it, "a naturalistic exercise reflecting her [Pollock's] hobby interest in violent crime" (Bessai, 53). In that play

there is no Actress, no 1902 frame, just the depiction of the events of 1892 in the Borden household. Later, the Actress and the role-playing device are introduced. Still later, the Actress's role is strengthened to the point at which it dominates the play. Even after she published the script in 1982, Pollock extended its metadramatic suggestions further in a production she directed. (Stratton, 72)

In the published version of *Blood Relations*, the opening scene shows the Actress rehearsing a text, and it soon turns out that the time is exactly ten years after the trial of Lizzie Borden. As a follow-up to a Sunday afternoon tea ritual, the Actress asks Miss Lizzie to "paint the background again," hoping that Miss Lizzie will "give something away" (*Blood Relations*, 20). She, on the other hand, suggests a game in which the Actress will play her role while Miss Lizzie takes the role of Bridget, their maid. The Actress thus becomes Lizzie, while Miss Lizzie becomes Bridget or Emma. Herb Wyile calls this a "layered theatricality: Pollock the playwright is writing scenes for an actress playing an Actress playing Lizzie Borden" (Wyile, 201). In the first act, Miss Lizzie seems to be more secure in her role – but the Actress

"is a trifle tentative in the role of Lizzie" (23), as the stage directions reveal. Miss Lizzie enjoys this game and "the Actress/Lizzie's comments as she guides her into her role by 'painting the background'" (24). In Act One, from time to time we are reminded of the role playing: Miss Lizzie is partly a dramaturge, partly an audience⁷ watching the Actress personify her and act out Miss Lizzie's imagined (or real?) steps towards a murder. This strategy slightly changes in Act Two.

In the second act, the Actress becomes much more active and involved in her role of Lizzie; she is ready to enter into situations with the imaginary characters – while in the first act it was Miss Lizzie who suggested a game, in the second act Lizzie (that is, the Actress) invents games, for example, with Dr. Patrick (61). The peak scene is Lizzie's version of acting out the murder (64) – soon after that she falls on her knees before Bridget (Miss Lizzie) asking her to help hide the signs of the crime. The Actress here is not only acting but becomes a dramaturge herself: She instructs Bridget (Miss Lizzie) on how to behave so as to mislead the police. (65) Then, in a kind of pantomime – a highly non-realistic mode of acting – the Actress (Lizzie) "slowly raises the hatchet very high to strike" Mr. Borden. A few minutes later,

Miss Lizzie is at the foot of the stairs. She moves to The Actress, reaches up to take the hatchet from her. When Miss Lizzie's hand touches The Actress's, The Actress releases the hatchet and whirls around to face Miss Lizzie who is left holding the hatchet. (68)

This dumb show prepares the final words of the play with all their ambiguity:

THE ACTRESS: Lizzie. She takes the hatchet from Miss Lizzie. Lizzie, you did.

MISS LIZZIE: I didn't. The Actress looks to the hatchet – then to the audience. You did. (70)

As Stratton sums it up, "Lizzie's life remains an enigma, but the Actress's dramatic portrayal is vivid and arresting. The Actress outshines her subject, and the drama eclipses whatever the reality might have been. The art is more real than life" (Stratton, 77).

Diane Bessai calls this dramatic structure "playful" (Bessai, 56) – but the game becomes very serious. In her opinion,

7 This solution underlines the postmodern quality of the play, since "One of the most important features of postmodern metafiction and metadrama is the dissolving of the barrier between reader and text, often accomplished through the inscription of the figure of the reader/audience in the text" (Wyile, 197).

... The difference from the other historically-based plays is *Blood Relations'* metaphoric rather than causal focus on the present, for which the vehicle is organically theatrical.

The new structure comprises a play-within-the-play performed in 1902, ten years after the murders. ... In this "dream thesis" enactment of the two days leading to the murders, the other participants emerge in flash-back as required. ... This allows Miss Lizzie the role of director ... when she is not playing Bridget. ...

... the "affair" is based on the Actress's own fascination with the ambiguity. ... Ironically, the Actress, who starts out tentatively playing Lizzie under Miss Lizzie's guidance, by the second act has taken over the part so completely and convincingly that she has forgotten her friend in the intensity of her own performance. Indeed she seems to have forgotten that it is performance and so for a time she has become Lizzie Borden, or her own idea of her. ... finally Miss Lizzie refuses to accept the Actress's version, even though she helped her friend to discover it. Instead she coolly answers with the literal truth of what she and the audience were on the verge of witnessing, saying "I didn't. You did." (Bessai, 54-55)

Playing roles is present on two levels in the play: As we have seen, the theatrical element with the change of roles gives a special twist and stressed ambiguity to the case. But if we care to look behind the surface and try to disclose what led Lizzie Borden to this murderous act, it is clear that she could not accept the *social roles* she was supposed to play. As the fictitious Mrs. Borden puts it, "She's incapable of disciplining herself like a lady ..." – even as a child, she was playing boy-games and had scabs on her knees (28). But, of course, the main problem is that at thirty-four she is not yet married. She – or to be exact, the Actress as Lizzie – protests against Mr. Borden's scenario: "You want me living my life by the Farmer's Almanac; having everyone over for Christmas dinner, waiting up for my husband; and *servng at socials!*" (39). She is aware of her difference from average people – there are some really illustrative metaphors (like the story about the sick puppy) showing how those who do not fit others' expectations are treated. We can agree with Denis Salter when he states that:

Moving effortlessly back and forth from 1902 to 1892, *Blood Relations* has many of the thematic and structural features of a *fin-de-siècle* play. Victorian faith in normalcy, family life and traditional roles for women is being disrupted from within by repressed desires, dependent thinking, aberrant behaviour and (covert) lesbianism. Whereas Lizzie is the wayward daughter who must pay a price for her unconventional ideas and actions, her sister Emma is the dutiful daughter who embodies the traditional moral values we are supposed to admire. (Salter 1989, xxv)

Having looked at the presence of role-playing in *Blood Relations*, let us cite Pollock's comments on her medium, that is, the theatre so as to illustrate Rosalind Kerr's statement about "Pollock's own increasingly self-reflexive remarks about her work" (Kerr 1996, 201).

I think that I know the medium I'm writing for because I've worked in it, not only as an actress but in all sorts of other capacities – back stage, on stage, in front of house. Maybe

the most important thing I learned from that concerns physical space, how the physical space the actors are working on really defines and colours the text and what happens to it, the rhythms of what occurs. (Pollock 1982, 116)

... I was working as an actress back in 1971. ... I'd played almost every grain elevator town in the West. ... I naively thought I was going to change the world and that the theatre was the place to do it. I was going to alter men's minds by touching their hearts. ... (Pollock 1982, 389)

... For me the theatre is a way of knowing reality, and at its core is a single vision – the playwright's. ...

I was told when I started that if I was serious about writing, I had to move to Toronto. ...

... In some parts of this country even the most traditional Canadian plays are still considered experimental. ... (Pollock 1982, 390-91)

Even though we are being produced in the major theatres and the small, the playwright remains outside the stage door. Seldom is he seen as an essential or integral component of the theatre process. ...

For most playwrights interaction with a company takes place only during rehearsals. ... the playwright is cast in the role of spectator. ... (Pollock 1996, 391)

Sharon Pollock's first-hand experiences of various aspects of theatrical work greatly contributed to the strong theatricality of *Blood Relations*. She used female actors to play female roles, but the modes of acting include traditional realist – or, we could even say, psycho-realist ones à la Stanislavsky – and pantomime representations. The dialogues and the stage instructions alike are carefully organized so that the tension culminates in the imagined murder scene and then leaves the audience with the task of solving the mystery.

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