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**RESISTING ROLES:  
WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND DRAMATURGY IN  
BRITISH THEATRE DURING THE NINETIES**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy

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Jenny E MacLeod

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## ABSTRACT

Within a patriarchal framework women are neither expected nor allowed to be violent. The assumed codes of acceptable gender behaviour locate violence as a legitimate expression of masculinity. Thus, when a woman transgresses expected gender roles her actions are regarded as a sign of her inherent madness, sexual deviancy or even an indication that she is not a woman. The increased representation of violent behaviour by women in Britain during the Nineties and the social phenomenon of girl gangs emphasised these stereotypes and the scripts attached to them, particularly within popular culture. This thesis critically analyses the stereotypes of women who transgress gender roles and the structures that produce them through an in-depth examination of selected play texts which emerged within this context. In doing so the thesis contributes to the relatively unexplored area of dramaturgical representations in Britain during the Nineties of women who engage in violent behaviour,

Chapter One examines the context of late Twentieth-Century Britain, identifying key socio-economic and cultural characteristics, which may have impacted upon female identity and the representation of female acts of violence, including the notion of a feminist backlash. Chapter Two focuses on the portrayal of girl gangs, and considers the plays' treatment of causes of female violence in relation to the essentialist theories of Nineteenth-Century male criminologists and contemporary media representations. The body and issues of control and transformation are the subject of Chapter Three, which draws upon methods from phenomenology to identify female acts of violence as a product of both predetermined and cultural forces. Chapter Four considers the construction of stereotypes in relation to narrative structures and identifies a correlation between an alternative, fragmentary approach to narrative structure and non-restrictive representations.

Central to the thesis are gender stereotypes of women as role breakers within a patriarchal structure and how the play texts problematise these representations through postmodernist, resistant aesthetic strategies. The thesis concludes, that by adopting postmodernist resistant aesthetic strategies, the play texts offer a progressive position of critical inquiry inspiring a more pluralistic understanding of women who engage in violent behaviour and their stories.

**RESISTING ROLES:  
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IN BRITISH THEATRE DURING THE NINETIES**

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**Boo** (aggressively) This is a story about me and Marie and the posse that we used to move with. It's about chatting shit getting fucked, getting high and doing our crimes and the shit that be going down in the yard innit.

**Marie** Right.

**Boo** We's from Hackney. People talk a lot of shit about Hackney when they ain't never been there, and they talk a lot of shit about yards when they ain't never met none. So me and Marie we come to tell you a story that is FI'REAL. Innit Marie.

**Marie** Word.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1) The 'Other' Project

In 1997 I was working for the National Youth Theatre as a Drama Workshop Tutor at HMP Bullwood Hall, a prison and remand centre for women in Essex.<sup>2</sup> A male colleague and I ran a weekly drama class. We covered a range of drama activities including trust exercises, improvisation, devising, dance, voice and script work. Our aim was to provide the girls with a broad-based insight into drama and performance, a creative outlet for their thoughts and worries in a relaxed and trusting environment. Our role was not as therapists, thus we were not concerned why any of the girls were in prison or what they had done and this was not something we sought to uncover. However, if one of them wanted to talk about their story then we

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.6

<sup>2</sup> Although the National Youth Theatre is widely known for its theatrical productions and courses for young people, they also run a very successful outreach programme, often in conjunction with the Prince's Trust, working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with drug problems and in prison.



were happy to listen, within the context of the workshop, although it was more common and perhaps inevitable for variations of their stories and experiences to emerge through improvisation and characterisations.

Prior to visiting Bullwood Hall I had only worked with male young offenders and initially felt quite anxious about working with young female offenders. As a young woman, I was treated by the male young offenders with a combination of sexual fascination and old fashioned chivalry and respect, they seemed to find it difficult to call me by my name as opposed to the more formal, prison regulation 'Miss.' However, the same gendered rules do not necessarily apply in a female prison. I felt distanced from these young women, culturally and socio-economically. I had grown up in the countryside, in a secure, middle-class family. I had worked hard at school and had since achieved relative success in both my personal and professional life. By contrast, many of these young women had grown up in a harsh, inner-city environment, were from broken homes and had not been offered the same personal and educational opportunities.

At the same time, the behaviour of young women, particularly in the form of girl gangs, received an increased amount of media attention prompting headlines such as: 'Gentle sex indulges in thrill-seeking violence, girl gangs raise fears of female swing to aggression,' 'Gangs put boot into old ideas of femininity,' 'Girls creating new female identity through violence,' 'Girls found to be as violent as boys,' and 'A rare killer instinct that is becoming an everyday danger to

femininity.’<sup>3</sup> The press portrayed women who engage in violent behaviour stereotypically and over-simplistically, focusing upon their gender as central to their transgressive behaviour, thus feeding into the fear and fascination that has pervaded the representation of those women throughout history. Perhaps my anxieties were in part a result of such representations and perhaps I was also buying into stereotypes of criminal and violent women.<sup>4</sup>

After working with the group for a short while it became apparent that these women were misrepresented and misunderstood by society. Although the work we were doing was geared towards building confidence through creativity, I became increasingly aware of a whole other project, the gulf between representational and material spheres: who these women were according to media representations and popular public perceptions and their real characters and identities according to themselves and from my own observations.

This study has emerged out of my experiences at Bullwood Hall and is, in a sense, the ‘other’ project. I am not attempting to speak for those women, but am drawing attention to the way in which a collection of plays, during the Nineties, sought to open up a dialogue to critically address the representation or rather misrepresentation of women who engage in violent behaviour in contemporary British society.

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<sup>3</sup> As they appear: Eleanor Mills, *The Observer* 24<sup>th</sup> September 1995, Rory Carroll, *The Guardian* 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1998, *Electronic Telegraph*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1998, *BBC News Online: UK* 20<sup>th</sup> January 1998, Colette Douglas-Home, *Daily Mail* 18<sup>th</sup> November 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study I will refer to the term stereotype to mean a simplified one-dimensional image, perception or construct of a person which can be limiting and narrow, often used at the expense of other more complex images and perceptions.

## 1.2) Aims and Inquiry

What is it that causes a person to be violent towards another person?

Is anger caused by predetermined biological urges or is it a product of external forces?

Does our understanding of such violent behaviour change if the perpetrator of the violence is a woman?

When women behave violently they are not only breaking with social and possibly criminal rules, but they are also breaking gender *roles*. They are deviating from codes of feminine behaviour considered appropriate for women within a patriarchal social structure. Therefore, stories – both real and dramatised – of women who engage in violent behaviour continue to be of fascination to the public for the simple reason that within a patriarchal framework, women are not supposed to be violent. As Bronwyn Naylor explains: ‘Women are by and large, not expected to be violent. Current gender relations, and the social structures built on those relations, are premised on women’s non-violence.’<sup>5</sup> Liz Kelly comments: ‘Women using violence or abuse seem to be acting outside and against constructions of femininity and motherhood. This is in contrast to men, for whom using violence is consistent with traditional masculinity.’<sup>6</sup> And Marianne Hester, Kelly and Jill Radford suggest: ‘The way violence is used and acted out in relationships,

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<sup>5</sup> Bronwyn Naylor, ‘Women’s Crime and Media-coverage: Making Explanations,’ in R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P Dobash & Lesley Noakes (eds.), *Gender and Crime* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p.78

<sup>6</sup> Liz Kelly, ‘Unspeaking Acts,’ *Trouble and Strife* 21, Summer 1991, p.15

encounters and institutions is specifically gendered and constructed by, as well as a reflection of, the power relations which constitute hetero-patriarchy.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when a woman within the patriarchal structure does transgress assumed gender roles her actions are regarded as a sign of her inherent madness, sexual deviancy or even an indication that she is not a woman, and so cause for excess attention and ridicule.

This study addresses certain stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations in contemporary British society of women who display violent behaviour, through an examination of several plays first written and performed in London during the Nineties: plays which, it is suggested, were responding to the wider cultural and socio-economic shifts occurring during that time. Central to the study is an analysis of the construction of stereotypical gender roles in a patriarchal society. Drawing upon issues around postmodernity as a historical condition and postmodernism as a resistant aesthetic strategy, the study aims to indicate the way in which the play texts occupy a position of postmodernist critical inquiry with regard to the causes and nature of violent behaviour by women, both in content and narrative form.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly & Jill Radford, introduction, in Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly & Jill Radford (eds.), *Women, Violence and Male Power* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), p.4

<sup>8</sup> A resistant, postmodernist aesthetic strategy was first coined by Hal Foster when he called to the political artist under postmodernism to be resistant rather than transgressive. 'A postmodern of resistance...arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the "false normativity" of a reactionary postmodernism.' Hal Foster, *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. xii. Drawing upon Foster and Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping, Philip Auslander suggests the political artist in the postmodern culture occupies 'a role which incorporates the functions of positioning the subject within dominant discourses and of offering strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms.' Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance, Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.61

### 1.3) Research Methodology

The core method of research has been archival, using primary material such as play texts and drawing upon critical reading such as books and articles. To develop a greater understanding of the plays particularly within the context of Britain in the Nineties, secondary resource material from when the plays were first produced in London, such as theatre reviews, production photographs and interviews with writers and directors has also been used.

In order to gain a sense of British society in the Nineties, research was also undertaken in the fields of sociology and economics. This was largely critical material but also included the study of quantitative data in the form of statistical studies and surveys. As the study also focuses upon the *representation* of violence, newspaper and magazine articles from the Nineties provided an overview of the various reactions and misrepresentations of women who display violent behaviour.

Although the inspiration for the study came from my practical work as a drama workshop tutor with young offenders, the research carried out, the research methods and the study as a whole, have been concerned with the written word (play texts) and predominantly the effect of written material, particularly newspaper articles on public perceptions. This approach was adopted because it was felt that the primary material, the play texts were part of a combined reaction on the part of playwrights in the Nineties, to the representation and misrepresentation of women who display violent behaviour.

#### 1.4) A Dramaturgical Approach

The decade witnessed more and more new writers...while men behaved badly, so did women.<sup>9</sup>

In the Nineties, there was a surge of new plays, particularly by young and first-time writers, centred upon several prominent theatres in London, including the Royal Court, The Bush and Hampstead Theatres. During this period, violence perpetrated by women was just one aspect of violence that was being explored in the theatre. New plays with an extremely sexual and violent content became a regular feature in studio spaces and small theatres across Britain, particularly in London. No subject was considered too contentious, no performance style too graphic, leading many theatre critics and commentators to describe this period in British theatre as exhibiting a new brutalism, a new form of nihilism or 'in-yer-face' as Aleks Sierz comments:

The decade witnessed more and more new writers (as well as some older hands) being drawn to the extremes of experience. Ideas were kidnapped and taken to the limit. If drama dealt with masculinity, it showed rape; if it got to grips with sex, it showed fellatio or anal intercourse; when nudity was involved, so was humiliation; if violence was wanted, torture was staged; when drugs were the issue, addiction was shown. While men behaved badly, so did women. And often the language was gross, the jokes sick, the images indelible. Theatre broke all taboos, chipping away at the binary oppositions that structure our sense of reality. Although drama has always represented human cruelty, never before had it seemed so common.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.30

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.30

Each of the plays considered here emerged during this period and were a part of the taboo-breaking aesthetic Sierz identifies. Moreover, as texts the plays can be understood as a response to the representation of women who engage in violent behaviour in other texts during the Nineties, particularly news reports, popular fiction and films.

The first two plays discussed, *Ashes and Sand*, (Judy Upton 1994) and *Yard Gal*, (Rebecca Prichard 1998) explore issues surrounding female acts of violence within the girl gang. Both dramatists reference contemporary issues such as pre-menstrual tension and socio-economic conditions. Further, their critique of these issues appears to be grounded in a personal commitment to the subject. For instance, in the introduction to *Ashes and Sand*, Upton talks about her own misspent youth and lack of opportunities, while Prichard wrote *Yard Gal* in conjunction with the Royal Court and Clean Break Theatre Company. Clean Break was set up in 1979 by two female prisoners at Askham Grange prison. It is a company run by ex-prisoners for prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-offenders, with the aim of expanding the skills, education and employment opportunities of those women, through the production of original theatre. Clean Break claims to provide a voice for female prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-offenders, while educating the public about the issues regarding women and crime. *Yard Gal* draws upon Prichard's experiences following a period of eleven months as a Creative Writing Tutor at HMP Bullwood Hall. Within the context of this study *Ashes and Sand* and *Yard Gal* sit well together, in that they provide a good introduction to certain more commonly known causes of

violent female behaviour, but with differing perspectives through the dramaturgical strategies employed.

*Yard Gal* is primarily a narrative piece. The central characters, Marie and Boo, take the audience on a journey through their previous lives as yard gals. The use of flashback and the progressive structure – Marie and Boo are no longer yard gals at the end of the play – suggests that their violent behaviour and involvement with a girl gang was a transitory period in their lives. Thus, Prichard's presentation of the causes of violence in a girl gang works as a contrast to newspaper representations and stereotypes of women with innate and irreversible instincts, arguing instead that such violence is a cultural construct and therefore can be changed.

By comparison, *Ashes and Sand* offers a more ambiguous representation of women who display violent behaviour. Upton refuses to prioritise one cause of violence over another and so acknowledges both biologicistic and cultural causes of violent behaviour by women. Upton's approach to characterisation and her invocation of but then challenge to stereotypical representations can be understood in relation to postmodernist resistant performance strategies. Marvin Carlson explains:

The possibility, even the necessity, of critique if not subversion from within performance activity has become widely accepted, but the most effective performance strategies for such subversion remain much debated. The central concern of resistant performance arises from the dangerous game it plays as a double-agent, recognizing that in the postmodern world complicity and subversion are inextricably intertwined. Resistant theorists and performers have been very much aware of Derrida's warning that 'by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts...by using against the edifice the instruments



or stones available in the house...one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating...that which one allegedly deconstructs.<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand Upton appears to be challenging the notion of biological determinism at the root of most stereotypes of women who display violent behaviour by drawing attention to the effect of socio-economic and cultural conditions on the behaviour of the girls. Yet, at the same time, she also dramatises the stereotypes so as to critically examine them, and by doing so is at risk of reinscribing the very structures she aspires to deconstruct. Thus, although precarious in that such an approach can be seen to perpetuate certain stereotypes, it will be shown here as having the potential to be a critical dramaturgical strategy to encourage audiences to adopt a less restrictive, simplified understanding of women who engage in violent behaviour.

The third play, *Blasted* (Sarah Kane 1995) does not foreground acts of violence by women in the same way as the other dramaturgies in this study. Rather the play examines the impact of large-scale political violence on inter-personal violence and human behaviour. The character of Cate, who does engage in violent behaviour is presented within a chaotic environment, the effect of which is shown on and with her body, raising questions regarding stereotypes and the encoding of gender on the body within a patriarchal structure. Kane's approach towards dramatic structure, offers a further point of inquiry with regard to the representation of women who engage in violent behaviour. Reflecting the chaos and lack of a

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<sup>11</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance, A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.173-4. Carlson's quote from Jacques Derrida is from, Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man,' *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p.135

moral framework within the postmodern world, Kane draws upon alternative narrative structures and historical forms of representation. Occupying a similar resistant position as Upton, Kane walks a tightrope between complicity and subversion; drawing upon extreme images of violence in order to critique them.

The interactions between gender, violence and narrative structure is further explored in, Philip Ridley's *Ghost From a Perfect Place* (1994) and Phyllis Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss* (also 1994.) Ridley's play continues the theme of girl gangs in Nineties Britain, using them as a point of contrast to the patriarchal male gangster predominate in the East End of London during the 1950s. *Ghost From a Perfect Place* initially stands out in this study as the only male-authored text, however I am interested to see how Ridley deals with the representation of women who display violent behaviour, particularly in light of certain comments suggesting his portrayal of women in the play was anti-feminist.<sup>12</sup>

In *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, Ridley reflects upon female identity and the representation of girl gangs in the Nineties, focusing on the act of storytelling as the characters tell stories to try and make sense of their lives. Within this context, the study suggests that the character of Rio who does engage in violent behaviour, is presented as a device to disrupt the traditional narrative structures associated with Aristotle and classical realism and their suggested patriarchal undertones, thus creating a space from which a female voice and subjectivity can emerge.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Billington attacked the play as 'profoundly anti-feminist' and Paul Taylor in *The Independent* suggested that the last section of the play does not 'do feminism any favours.' For a comprehensive catalogue of the reviews see *Theatre Record*, vol xiv, Issue 8, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1994, pp.438-445. Sierz offers a good account of these reactions to the play and the subsequent responses of Jenny Topper, the Artistic Director of Hampstead Theatre, and Matthew Lloyd, the Director of the play. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre British Drama Today*, pp.40-2

Phyllis Nagy, as an American is also an outsider in a study which focuses very pointedly on the context of Britain in the Nineties. Moreover, *Butterfly Kiss* follows in one of American Theatre's great traditions, by offering a critique of the American family. However *Butterfly Kiss* was produced on the British stage at the same time as the other works discussed in this study and so can be understood as contributing to a period in British Theatre.

In *Butterfly Kiss* Nagy mirrors the complex character of Lily, who kills her mother, with an equally complex and unpredictable narrative structure. From this, I argue that a fragmentary postmodernist approach to narrative structure creates a more appropriate framework from which to tell Lily's story.

### **1.5) Areas of Study and Framework: From Social Stereotypes to Storytelling**

The study begins in Chapter One, with a consideration of the cultural and socio-economic climate of Nineties Britain, identifying forces that may have contributed to a shift in female identity and a feminist backlash. Of fundamental importance is the relationship between postmodernism, identities and the emergence of popular culture Nineties phenomena such as girl power, laddism and girl gangs and their subsequent stereotypical representations in the media.

Although the study refers to statistical surveys undertaken during this period, the representation of violence in relation to public perception is questioned, pointing to the irresolvable differences between material and representational spheres. The chapter concludes by proposing that during this period play texts took on a dual role

of reflecting and then challenging popular culture representations of women who engage in violent behaviour.

Chapter Two develops further the history of stereotypical representations, focusing particularly on the suggestion that a woman's behaviour is caused by her biological difference to man. The study then analyses the characterisation of women who display violent behaviour and the proposed causes of their violence as portrayed in the girl gang, as depicted in Judy Upton's *Ashes and Sand* and Rebecca Prichard's *Yard Gal*. The chapter suggests the plays move towards multiplicity in their treatment of these women and the causes of their behaviour, which although ambiguous in its acknowledgment of stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations, produces a more progressive, critical approach to the subject.

Chapter Three continues the move towards plurality and considers the impact of cultural forces on the causes and expression of women who engage in violent behaviour in relation to their bodies. Extending the focus of the study to Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, the discussion here analyses the representation of the female body which engages in acts of violence both as a material construct in space and as a symbol of female power and emancipation, drawing attention to issues of control and transformation. The chapter, influenced by phenomenology, aspires to understand the bodies of women who display violent behaviour in accordance with Toril Moi's lived body and Elizabeth Grosz's concept of the *produced* body, a fluid changeable construct that bears the marking of its past as well as its potential for the future.

The final and Fourth Chapter shifts the emphasis from characterisation and the fictional world of the plays to consider the narrative structures through which the stories of the women are told, expanding the dramaturgical material to include the depiction of girl gangs in *Ghost From a Perfect Place* and the act of female matricide in *Butterfly Kiss*. Through analysis, attention is drawn to the employment of postmodernist resistant aesthetic strategies in relation to narrative structures and feminist interpretations of traditional narrative structures. The chapter suggests that women who engage in violent behaviour as portrayed in the play texts are used both as a device to disrupt dominant narrative structures and the hierarchies they perpetuate, and as a point of interruption to wider patriarchal structures in society. Thus, identifying links between an alternative more fragmentary approach to narrative structure and a non-restrictive representation of women who display violent behaviour.

#### **1.6) Conclusions and Contributions**

The study highlights the ways in which the play texts use postmodernist, resistant aesthetic strategies to adopt an alternative position from which to address gender stereotypes of women who behave violently and the cultural structures that produce them. Furthermore, despite the ambivalence produced by a postmodernist approach, the emphasis on plurality and alternative perspectives engenders a progressive, non-restrictive critique of female acts of violence, generating a collection of representations, responding to the shifts and changes within contemporary society.

To this end, the study contributes to a largely undeveloped area of dramaturgical research: the representation of women who engage in violent behaviour in Britain during the Nineties. While there has been a certain amount of critical writing on British theatre and new writing during this period including commentary by Boles, Dromgoole, Saunders, Sierz, Wade and Wandor, the representation of female perpetrators of violence has remained largely unexplored.<sup>13</sup> A distant 'Other' to the seemingly more pressing issue of the graphic dramatisation of violence popular among new writers at the time. Sierz – although undoubtedly useful to this study – is predominantly concerned with an 'in-yer-face' aesthetic that is experiential rather than critical and his discussions of female characters who display violent behaviour are contained within the context of masculinity and male violence.

In the field of sociology theorising female acts of violence is a developing field and while the amount of studies undertaken has grown considerably over recent years, the sociological research in this area rarely extends to literary or dramaturgical representations, an omission I hope to begin to address.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> William C Boles, 'Violence at the Royal Court, Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*,' *Theatre Symposium, A Journal of the South Eastern Conference*, No.7, 1999, pp.125-35; Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwrights* (London: Methuen, 2001); Graham Saunders, 'Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and The Theatre of Extremes' (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today* as mentioned earlier; Leslie A Wade, 'Violence on the Fringes of Acceptability, Postmodern Violence and Human Solidarity: Sex and Forks in *Shopping and Fucking*,' *Theatre Symposium*, pp.109-15; Michelene Wandor, *Post-war British Drama, Looking Back in Gender* (London: Routledge, 2001)

<sup>14</sup> Frances Heidensohn, *Women and Crime* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1996). Heidensohn makes interesting comparisons between real and literary images of violent women. Others include, R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P Dobash & Lesley Noakes (eds.), *Gender and Crime*, Lynda Hart, *Fatale Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994); Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Alice Myers and Sarah Wight (eds.), *No Angels, Women Who Commit Violence* (London: Pandora, 1996)

Boo's comment referenced at the beginning of this introduction exemplifies that women who behave violently are increasingly beginning to talk about how their lives and acts of violence are often misrepresented and misunderstood. This study in attempting to continue that communication, reveals how several plays when considered as a whole, worked to dismantle the patriarchal rhetoric and dispel the mystery surrounding the representations of such women, to develop a critical base from which to understand and theorise the representation of women who engage in violent behaviour.

# 1

## Female Violence: The Epidemic of the Nineties?

**Lauren** What hope for me of a life like that? Hayley reckons it's possible, that all it takes is money and she thinks we can make that kind of money. But I can't see it, we've been talking about going away somewhere exotic for three years. When's it going to happen? I've been offered a job at last. Washing up in a restaurant -- crap...It's no good starting something that's going nowhere. There's nothing for people like us, nothing.<sup>1</sup>

These are the sentiments of working class teenager Lauren as she flicks through a magazine, in Judy Upton's *Ashes and Sand* (1994). Frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities, Lauren, and her equally disillusioned friends, form a girl gang and create their own financial opportunities through violent crime.

*Ashes and Sand* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London in December 1994; a somewhat timely opening as the week before, a gang of girls had attacked celebrity model Liz Hurley at knifepoint in a London street. For the press the closeness of these events was no coincidence but rather confirmed their fears surrounding the latest moral panic. Girls were becoming more violent and girl gangs were a shocking social phenomenon sweeping the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays: 1* (London: Methuen 2002), p.22-3



A report in 1993 suggested that although women account for only one in ten offenders, approximately one third of violent crime stories reported in newspapers concern the alleged offences of violent women.<sup>2</sup> Thus it would seem, for violent women their gender is paramount, as Susan Batchelor suggests: 'Girl violence is newsworthy because of the gender of the offender, not the crime she has committed...nowhere is the violence of young men reported as 'boy violence.'<sup>3</sup> High profile cases such as that of Beverley Allitt and Fred and Rose West and frequent reports on the apparent rise of girl gangs and girl bullies in the school playground, fuelled the opinion that violent behaviour by women was increasing.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines the context of late-Twentieth Century Britain and considers those forces that may have contributed towards a shift in female identity and feminism leading to the increased portrayal in the theatre of women who engage in violent behaviour. It is an examination which will entail defining key socio-economic and cultural characteristics of Nineties Britain for instance consumerism, identity and popular culture. Furthermore, the chapter will draw upon notions of the postmodern, both as a historical condition and as a resistant aesthetic strategy, to map the development of female identity as portrayed in the theatre during the Nineties.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Williams and Julie Dickinson, 'Fear of Crime: Read All About It? The Relationship between Newspaper Crime Reporting and Fear of Crime,' *British Journal of Crime* 33, 1993, p.33

<sup>3</sup> Susan Batchelor, 'The Myth of Girl Gangs,' *Criminal Justice Matters*, no. 43, Spring 2001, p.26

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Allitt was convicted in 1993 of four counts of murder and nine counts of grievous bodily harm towards babies and small children in her care while she was working as a nurse. In 1995 Rose West was convicted of the murder of 10 women and girls. Fred West, her husband was also charged with the murders but was never convicted as he committed suicide while awaiting trial.

## Defining Violence

Violence is an intrinsic part of human life. It has been a primary force in the shaping of society for thousands of years, from world wars to inter-personal disputes. The past is so entrenched in violent conflict it seems an inevitable part of the future. Yet despite this, it remains difficult to define. As a form of behaviour, violence can be an unstable and uncontrollable act. As a theoretical concept it is no less volatile. Therefore, while there is a need here to offer a definition, the very nature of the term resists it. Thus, I would describe this 'definition' less as a finite, fixed definition and more a collection of definitions, a 'flexible' understanding of a term that is open to change depending on the circumstances.

Professor Elizabeth Stanko, Director of the Economic and Social Research Council, Violence Research Programme, (ESRC – VRP) acknowledges that descriptions of violence can vary enormously. For a recent ESRC VRP publication, *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* Professor Stanko described violence as:

Any behaviour by an individual that intentionally threatens, attempts to inflict, or does cause, physical, sexual or psychological harm to others or to themselves. An individual may commit an act of violence or intimidation with the support of a group or even the state. Depending on the circumstances, violence may be considered acceptable, unacceptable, lawful or unlawful. How an act is labelled also varies depending on the context within which it occurs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A Stanko, *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* (Surrey: Economic and Social Research Council Violence Research Programme, Royal Holloway University of London, 2002), p.3

Stanko's definition emphasises what I would consider the main areas of contention surrounding the definition of violence; the use of physical and/or non-physical behaviour, intentionality, impact, context and lawful/unlawfulness.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) violence is:

The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterised by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.<sup>6</sup>

What is most apparent with the OED definition is the use of physical force, suggesting that there must be a physical interaction in order for behaviour to be described as violent. This implies that non-physical, psychological or verbal behaviour is not violence. Yet this would appear not to take account of recent laws in the UK, which state non-physical acts, like telephone harassment, can be a form of violence and punishable by law.<sup>7</sup>

Writing in 1985 on male violence against women, Stanko defined violence as physical behaviour only, which contrasts with her more recent interpretation. Then she suggested that although a range of actions may be harmful to women, only those that actually involve physical force could be called violent.<sup>8</sup> R Emerson Dobash and Russell P Dobash, who have published widely on issues concerning gender and crime, similarly restrict their definition of wife battering to 'the

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* vol xii (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp.221-2

<sup>7</sup> The Protection from Harassment Act (1994) makes it an offence to 'pursue a course of action that amounts to harassment', and to 'put a person in fear of violence'. It does not, however, define harassment, and many instances of unacceptable behaviour are amenable to prosecution under these provisions. See Suzanne E Hatty, *Masculinities, Violence and Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2000)

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth A Stanko, *Intimate Intrusions: Women's Experience of Male Violence* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1985), p.4

persistent direction of physical force against a marital partner or cohabitant.’<sup>9</sup> And Lisa Price, who supports the definition provided by Dobash and Dobash, claims that without a distinction between physical and non-physical behaviour the use of the term violence will become increasingly expanded to a point where it becomes meaningless and actions that are not intended to be violence are classed as such.<sup>10</sup> For example; in scenario one, if person A hits person B accidentally and did not intend to harm B then A’s behaviour would not be considered violent. But if in scenario two, person A pestered person B over a substantial period of time with derogatory verbal and psychological abuse, should A’s behaviour then be classed as violent? If violence is defined as purely physical – as Dobash, Dobash and Price suggest – A’s behaviour in scenario two would not be classed as violent, but according to the 1994 Harassment Act, A’s behaviour could be described as violent. Thus it would appear that fundamental to the meaning of violence is the role of intent and the impact of the abuse, physical or not. But how easy is it to prove intentionality?

To understand the degree to which intent features within a violent act, it is helpful to try and create an understanding of violence from the perpetrator’s position. If the perpetrator intended to harm the victim but did not use physical force, then the intent of the perpetrator should be enough to class the act as violent. In 1978, Jalna Hanmer argued that a sociological definition of violence must take

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<sup>9</sup> R. Emerson Dobash and Russell P Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against Patriarchy* (London: Open Books, 1979), p.11

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the contrasting definitions of violence particularly against women, see Lisa S Price, *Making Rape a War Crime: The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and It’s Treatment of Sexual Violence*, unpublished PhD thesis (Leeds Metropolitan University, 1999), p.20

into account the use of threat as well as force, an understanding of violence that is described as the instrumentalist conception, where the use of intentionality is implicit. Liz Kelly's definition of violence also includes intent and non-physical violent behaviour:

Violence/abuse is the deliberate use of humiliation/threat/coercion/force to enhance personal status/power at someone else's expense, and/or constrain the behaviour of others, and/or to get one's own needs/wants met at other's cost.<sup>11</sup>

Dorie Klein and Jill Radford expand the definition of violence even further to include not just physical force, threat and coercion, but any form of harm that is considered to be preventable. The definitions of Kelly, Klein and Radford seem to be from the perspective of the victim in that they take into account any form of threatening behaviour which encroaches upon and intimidates another person/s. Thus, the act becomes defined by the impact it has. If a person is hurt, that person is a victim of violence regardless of what or who hurt them and why.

An individual's understanding of violence can also vary according to age, social background and experiences. A recent study undertaken by Glasgow University, *A View From The Girls: Exploring Violence and Violent Behaviour*, supported by the ESRC, found girls' understanding of violence is not necessarily compatible with an adult, academic or legal understanding.<sup>12</sup> Susan Batchelor, who was involved in the Glasgow study suggests many of the girls they spoke to (800

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<sup>11</sup> Liz Kelly, 'Unspeakable Acts,' *Trouble and Strife* 21, Summer 1991, p.14

<sup>12</sup> *A View from the Girls: Exploring Violence and Violent Behaviour*, Violence Research Programme, Economic and Social Research Council, research team, Dr Michele Burman, Dr Jane Brown, Ms Susan Batchelor (Glasgow University) Dr Kay Tisdall (Edinburgh). For more information, see [www.gla.ac.uk/girlsandviolence/](http://www.gla.ac.uk/girlsandviolence/)

teenage girls in total took part in the research), regarded verbal abuse as more harmful than physical violence, which again invokes the role of intentionality and impact.

For many people, deciding whether an act is violent or not can depend on whether the act is considered criminal; is the perpetrator breaking the law? Violent crime as defined by the Home Office can be divided into three primary groups; violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery. There are then 41 sub-categories of recognised violent crime within these three groups ranging from murder to common assault.<sup>13</sup> While some of the categories clearly involve violent behaviour, for example, murder and rape, there are others, such as harassment and procurement, which are more ambiguous. But although the Home Office list may be helpful to identify specific violent crimes, it does not distinguish between physical, verbal and psychological violence, nor does it make any particular reference to intentionality or impact.

The lawfulness or unlawfulness of violence becomes even more complex with regard to political or state violence, when a country or group feel there is a very real threat to their interests and enters into conflict with another country or group. In this context, violent behaviour can become commonplace and can also be considered lawful. This can result in a rather contradictory situation, where violent behaviour occurring simultaneously and within the same political framework is considered acceptable on one level, during state-led conflict, but unacceptable in a domestic context with regard to inter-personal violence.

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<sup>13</sup> For the full list see [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs/chap2/](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs/chap2/)

While this study will concentrate on specific incidents of inter-personal violence, the influence of political or state violence is also reflected upon, particularly the relationship between political and inter-personal violence. During the Nineties, British forces, operating as part of the United Nations, were involved in several violent conflicts around the world including Northern Ireland, Iraq, Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia. Not only can state-led conflicts affect public perceptions of violence, but they may also impact on inter-personal violence. In *Blasted*, Sarah Kane connects political violence in Bosnia with inter-personal violence in Britain, describing the rape of a young woman in a Leeds hotel room as the seed and the war in Bosnia as the tree: 'I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peace-time civilisation.'<sup>14</sup>

Taking all of this into account, I will define violence as the behaviour, physical and non-physical, of an individual or a collective towards another individual or collective which can be described as threatening or antagonistic, causing the recipient/s to fear for their safety. Of primary importance is the intent of the perpetrator/s and the impact on the victim/s. The lawfulness or unlawfulness of the act should be secondary and should not, for instance, alter the definition. However, most of the violent behaviour referred to in this study, both in terms of social and cultural context and the play texts, is regarded as criminal. Violence can have different meanings to different people depending on context and circumstances and the definitions referred to here will relate very much to the focus of the study, Nineties Britain and the representation of women who display violent behaviour.

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Kane interviewed by Dan Rebellato, 'Brief Encounter Platform,' Royal Holloway College, London, 3 November 1998. Quoted by Graham Saunders in, *Love Me or Kill Me,* Sarah Kane and *The Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.39

### **The Nineties: A Violent Decade?**

In the Nineties, there were several changes in the handling of and representation of violent crime, which may have led to the perception of Britain as a more violent society than previous periods in history. From the growth of news reporting in the media, both in terms of the level and the manner of news reports concerning rare but violent crimes – the murder of Stephen Lawrence (1993) and the abduction and murder of James Bulger (1994) – to the high profile of government-led initiatives to combat crime and violence.<sup>15</sup>

However, the relationship between the media and violent crime is long-standing and predates the Nineties, as this 1901 quote by the educationalist John Trevarthen shows:

Gangs of young roughs and thieves are no new thing in London and other large towns...though something like a scare has been produced by paragraphs in popular newspapers...The result has been numerous leading articles in various papers, with reports of speeches and sermons on the subject, followed as usual by letters from people, some of whom are evidently very imperfectly informed on the subject.<sup>16</sup>

As Trevarthen suggests, 'bad' news stories have and will always interest the media because they make 'good' financial sense selling more newspapers and/or attracting more television viewers. They can also incite public reaction, as occurred frequently

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<sup>15</sup> The term media can be a rather general term used in a variety of ways by a multitude of organisations. For the purpose of this study media will be used to indicate the news reporting media: newspapers, television and radio.

<sup>16</sup> John Trevarthen, 'Hooliganism,' *The Nineteenth Century*, 49, p.84, as quoted by Graham Murdock, 'Reservoirs of Dogma,' Martin Barker and Julian Petley (eds.), *Ill Effects, the Media / Violence Debate* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.157



during the Nineties, particularly in relation to violent crimes and youth subcultures such as girl gangs.

### 1.1) Subcultures and Moral Panics

Sociologist Mike Brake comments that subcultures are essentially masculine, working-class and often emerge during the period of transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>17</sup> They can occur at a time when young people feel let down by the culture around them and so group together with others, who feel equally disaffected to form their own, collective identity separate to the identity forced upon them by their family, social background or school. However, while a subculture may choose to create an identity outside of the dominant systems, the images associated with youth subcultures are often drawn from popular culture and so the subculture is still very much a part of the mainstream.

In post war Britain there has been a number of youth subcultures, from the teddy boys in the Fifties, the mods and rockers of the Fifties and Sixties, the skinheads and the hippies in the Sixties and Seventies to the punks in the Seventies. All of these, except perhaps the hippies in the Seventies, were, as Brake points out, primarily concerned with issues of masculinity and male identity and therefore ultimately could only offer young women a secondary role within the group. The peripheral role of young women in the pre-Seventies youth subculture can be understood as a reflection and reinforcement of the wider roles expected of men and women in a patriarchal society. I propose that in the Nineties the girl gang was

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<sup>17</sup> Mike Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures, Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980)

more akin to a youth subculture than a traditional gang within the criteria of the subculture laid out by Brake.

The link between youth subcultures and criminal and/or violent behaviour is not a new phenomenon. Since the mid-Nineteenth Century, social commentators, politicians and journalists have often found it convenient to associate moral decline with a predominantly male, working class, delinquent youth, regardless of other perhaps more serious crimes. The reason being, as Croall explains: '(A)tttributing "crime" to specific groups, focuses attention on these groups, justifies harsher control measures and diverts attention away from the wider issues of social inequality.'<sup>18</sup> This form of scapegoating and stereotyping of certain groups in society, predominantly youth, is often the result of scare-mongering campaigns, or what has been more recently referred to as moral panics.<sup>19</sup>

Abercrombie and Warde describe a moral panic as an interaction between 'the media, public opinion, interest groups and social control agents, such as the police, producing an amplifying effect.'<sup>20</sup> Stanley Cohen, who has written extensively on youth and society, particularly the demonisation of youths during moments of public hysteria, further points out that:

Societies appear to be subject every now and then to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people....One of the

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<sup>18</sup> Hazel Croall, *Crime and Society in Britain* (Harlow: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 1998), p.313

<sup>19</sup> Sociologist Jock Young is cited with first using the term moral panic in the late Sixties in relation to public concern over an apparent increase in drug abuse. See Nicholas Abercrombie, Alan Warde et al. *Contemporary British Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Polity Press and Blackwells, 2000), p.517-8

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.518

most recurrent types of moral panic in Britain since the war has been associated with the emergence of various forms of youth culture (originally almost exclusively working-class, but often recently middle-class or student based) whose behaviour is deviant or delinquent. To a greater or lesser degree, these cultures have been associated with violence.<sup>21</sup>

Although Cohen was writing prior to the Nineties – he focused specifically on a number of events that took place between rival groups of youths during the summers of 1964 and 1965 – his comments seem no less relevant to the Nineties and the attitudes surrounding girl gangs. It is the ‘stylized and stereotypical’ representation of certain groups or persons referred to by Cohen that will become a particular focus of this study in later chapters as I examine the representation of the girl gang and violent female behaviour in the specified play texts.

## **1.2) Media Expansion and Government Initiatives: Prevention or Promotion?**

While I am suspicious of the bulk of media representations of violence in the Nineties, a suspicion I will return to later when I examine the representation, or to borrow from Debbie Cameron the ‘framing devices’ of women who display violent behaviour, the role of the media in the Nineties was different to other periods due to the development of media and communications technology.<sup>22</sup> The introduction of satellite, cable and digital television as well as email and the Internet, created a global revolution in terms of information accessibility and communications efficiency. Dedicated newspaper and television news websites and television channels providing immediate round the clock news bulletins, led to an increase in

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1980), p.9

<sup>22</sup> Debbie Cameron, ‘Wanted: The Female Serial Killer,’ *Trouble & Strife* 33, Summer 1996, p.22

the reporting and accessibility of news stories to the public. This additional coverage, particularly of high profile violent crimes and of female violence and girl gangs (the afore mentioned mugging of Liz Hurley), could have heightened public awareness of violence, leading some members of the public to have an exaggerated and unrealistic understanding of the levels and role of violence in contemporary society.

Government-led initiatives to target specific types of crime can also raise the profile of those crimes. While the initiatives are primarily undertaken as crime prevention, they can have a negative impact in that they create an exaggerated image of certain crimes, re-direct public attention towards selected crimes and do not necessarily respond to the needs of young people involved in crime, such as young women, perhaps caught up in prostitution and drug abuse. Thus, highlighting more visible crimes such as street crime can lead to an unwarranted fear amongst the public of going out alone, resulting in deserted communities which are then more vulnerable to crime, as social commentators Hough and Mayhew suggested as early as 1983:

Increasingly it is being said that fear of crime in Britain is becoming as great a problem as crime itself. Criminologists suggest that preoccupation with crime is out of all proportion to the risks; that fear is needlessly reducing the quality of people's lives; and that fear of crime can itself lead to crime – by turning cities at night into empty, forbidden places.<sup>23</sup>

One government initiative during the Nineties was the installation in many cities and towns across the country of closed circuit television (CCTV). Similar to other initiatives, the purpose of CCTV was crime prevention, but the scheme was

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<sup>23</sup> Hough and Mayhew in Nicholas Abercrombie, Alan Warde et al. *Contemporary British Society*, p.526

criticised for displacing crime into areas and communities that did not have CCTV. Moreover, the installation of CCTV has also been accused of creating a lack of trust leading to less interaction between neighbours and a loss of community.

Thus, although the scapegoating and stereotyping of youth subcultures in society was not new to the Nineties, the media and the government's increased attention to violent and criminal behaviour during the Nineties, could have caused some people to have an exaggerated opinion of violence. In order to ascertain whether such perceptions amongst the public were justified, it is important to consider those fears and concerns in relation to actual levels of violence according to official statistics, although arguably statistics as a representation of actual violence can be misleading and in some cases only exacerbate the problem.

### **Quantifying Violence in the Nineties**

The official statistical indicators of violent behaviour used by the government in the UK are taken from criminal statistics and crime surveys. Criminal statistics are published annually and relate to criminal offences that are recorded by the 43 police forces in England and Wales (there is a separate report for Scotland) and to offenders dealt with by formal police cautions, reprimands, warnings, or criminal court proceedings. Crime surveys are also published annually, although prior to 2001 they were published bi-annually and during some periods every four years. They are based on a random public survey of sample questions regarding an individual's personal experience of crime within a given time period,

usually a year.<sup>24</sup> A comparison of findings from both criminal statistics and the British Crime Survey suggests that in general, violent crime rose steadily throughout the Nineties.<sup>25</sup>

However, there are several areas of debate when using the results of statistical surveys to quantify violent behaviour. The main point of tension with criminal statistics and crime surveys is that they relate only to violent behaviour that is criminal. Verbal or non-physical violence, which may have the same impact on the victim as physical violence, and which is referred to in this study, is less likely to be represented in these surveys. (The 1994 Harassment Act may change this.) A further point of weakness with the use of criminal statistics is that they only relate to 'known' crimes those that are recorded by the police. It is widely assumed by criminologists and social commentators that most incidents of violent behaviour are not reported to any official bodies, what is often referred to as the 'dark' or 'hidden' figure. This would suggest that the actual level of violent behaviour is higher than official statistics.<sup>26</sup> Finally, while crime surveys do help to bridge the gap between criminal statistics and actual violent behaviour they are random surveys and so can only provide an indication of trends in violent behaviour.

The lack of information regarding violent behaviour not recorded by the police or reported to crime surveys means it is impossible to ascertain a clear understanding of the nature, causes and impact of violence in British society in the

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<sup>24</sup> The British Crime Survey (BCS) was introduced in 1982. Since 1992 the BCS has covered only England and Wales, with a separate crime survey for Scotland. For further details on Criminal Statistics, Scottish Criminal Statistics, The British Crime Survey and the Scottish Crime Survey, see, [www.statistics.gov.uk/](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/)

<sup>25</sup> See Elizabeth Stanko, *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* pp.35-41

<sup>26</sup> An example of this is the level of domestic violence. Research has shown that only 1 in 9 assaults are reported to the police. See *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* p.20

Nineties. Even a comparison of data between the Nineties and other periods proves problematic due to changes in cultural attitudes towards violence and methods for recording violent and criminal behaviour.

For example, in the Victorian era, inter-personal physical violence between men, which would in the Nineties have been a criminal offence and likely to be punishable with a prison sentence, tended to be considered a customary as opposed to a criminal act.<sup>27</sup> Therefore there would be less cases of inter-personal violence recorded during the Victorian period, but it does not necessarily follow that there were less incidents of inter-personal violence taking place. Similarly, it is only in recent years that cases of sexual and domestic violence against women have begun to be taken seriously both by the public and official institutions such as the police and legal system. In June 1994 an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill made it a statutory offence for a man to rape his wife.<sup>28</sup> This change has been reflected by an increase in the number of incidents of sexual and domestic violence recorded in criminal statistics and reported to crime surveys, but that does not mean that there has been an increase in the number of incidents overall.

The use of statistics and surveys to establish levels of violence in society should be treated with caution, paying attention not just to the information included but also what is not included. Even so, it would appear that the increase in levels of violent behaviour as indicated in crime statistics and surveys during the Nineties, was thought to be rather more conservative than anticipated, actual levels. This

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<sup>27</sup> S. D'Cruze, (ed.), *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950: Gender and Class*, (London: Longman, 2000) as quoted in *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* p.9

<sup>28</sup> Hazel Croall, *Crime and Society in Britain*, p.199

implies that the growing public concern towards violence was warranted. But if there was an increase in violent behaviour what was the cause?

## **Creating Monsters: Causes of Violence in Nineties Britain**

### **1.1) Dramatised Violence**

In the values and mores of modern society we have created a quagmire from which monsters are bound to emerge.<sup>29</sup>

The causes of violent behaviour can be infinite and wide-ranging; therefore, I aim to focus firstly on an those area that tended to emerge repeatedly in court cases, newspaper reports and government reports as being the cause of violent behaviour during the Nineties; the media and popular forms of entertainment. I then wish to address another perhaps more viable cause of violence; socio-economic conditions. From this, I hope to identify those areas that could have contributed to an increase in violent behaviour in Nineties Britain.

Popular forms of entertainment containing dramatised violence; films, television programmes, computer games, novels and magazines, have often been quoted as causing violent behaviour. In his article: 'The Fallacy of Contextual Analysis as a Means of Evaluating Dramatized Violence,' J. D. Martinez argues there is a causal link between dramatised and social violence in America:

During this explosion of actual violence on our streets, we have also witnessed an explosion of dramatised violence on our screens. This apparent correlation between entertainment violence and the rising crime has engendered a passionate debate about whether there exists a causal relationship between media violence and actual aggression. For the medical, public health, and

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Neil, 'Shots Straight to the Heart of our Sick Society,' *Sunday Times News Review*, March 17<sup>th</sup> 1996, p.5



scientific communities, however, the debate is over. They agree that a causal relationship indeed exists between media violence and aggression.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Martinez's convincing position and his reference to various studies carried out in the United States supporting his claim, I would contend that the media debate is not over but is perhaps a little more complex.

During the Nineties the popularity of films with a particularly graphic violent content, Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), as well as the novels, *American Psycho* (Brett Eastern Ellis, 1991) and *Trainspotting* (Irvine Welsh, 1994), gave weight to the case against the use of dramatised violence in popular forms of entertainment. In this climate, connections were regularly made by academics and journalists between dramatised violence and the rise in social violence, with anti-media discourse becoming particularly heightened following a high profile violent crime. During the 1994 James Bulger trial, the film *Child's Play 3* (1988) was referred to as a significant contributory factor in the violent behaviour of the two ten year old boys found guilty of James's murder, despite there being no firm evidence to support the claim. Similarly, following the Dunblane massacre in 1996, journalist Andrew Neil wrote in the *Sunday Times*:

There are some crimes so horrific that they make us wonder what kind of country we have become....It should be cause for concern that, in the values and mores of modern society, we have created a quagmire from which monsters are bound to emerge...far too much of what passes for popular entertainment pollutes our society and creates a new tolerance in which what

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<sup>30</sup> J.D. Martinez, 'The Fallacy of Contextual Analysis as a Means of Evaluating Dramatized Violence,' *Theatre Symposium, A Journal of the South Eastern Conference*, No. 7. 1999, p.78

was thought to be beyond the pale becomes acceptable. Young minds are particularly vulnerable.<sup>31</sup>

Neil like Martinez asserts that there is a direct link between dramatised violence and violence in society, calling upon a long-held tradition of thought, which can be traced back to the Nineteenth Century and the graphic depiction of violence in the melodrama.<sup>32</sup>

However, I would contend the history surrounding the links between dramatised and social violence would suggest dramatised violence was no more likely to have contributed towards a rise in violent behaviour in the Nineties than in previous periods. Rather, as Murdock indicates in 'Reservoirs of Dogma,' a more plausible cause of violent behaviour, both during the Nineteenth Century and the late Twentieth Century has been changes in socio-economic conditions.<sup>33</sup>

## **1.2) Postmodernity, Postmodernism and Social Violence**

Changes that took place in the Seventies and subsequently under the Conservative government in the Eighties, such as the rise in the cost of housing, a reduction in eligible benefits to the poor/unemployed, and a decline in the labour manufacturing industry, had a profound effect on socio-economic conditions, leading to a rise in the number of unemployed and in the number of those living in

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Neil, 'Shots Straight to the Heart of our Sick Society,' *Sunday Times News Review*, March 17<sup>th</sup> 1996, p.5

<sup>32</sup> Since the 1900s countless surveys and research experiments with varying results have been conducted to investigate the link between dramatised violence and social violence. For a good overview of some of the research, see Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression, Its Causes, Consequences and Control* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp.199-239

<sup>33</sup> Graham Murdock, 'Reservoirs of Dogma,' Martin Barker and Julian Petley (eds.), *Ill Effects, the Media / Violence Debate*, p.167

poverty.<sup>34</sup> The growing sense of exclusion for the unemployed was furthered by adjustments to taxation benefiting the rich.<sup>35</sup> The effect of these changes to the distribution of wealth meant that by the Nineties contemporary Britain was a society marked even more than previously by economic difference and inequality, caused in part by shifts in capitalism and political reform. One way of conceptualising these shifts is to understand them as part of the wider response to the condition of postmodernity on contemporary society, both in terms of a historical condition and as a cultural, conceptual framework.

To define postmodernism is no simple undertaking. Its very nature as constantly evolving and resistant to any kind of unity or determinacy defies definition, leaving it open to a plurality of interpretations and meanings, as David Harvey indicates:

Does postmodernism, for example, represent a radical break with modernism, or is it simply a revolt within modernism against a certain form of high modernism?...Is postmodernism a style (in which case we can reasonably trace its precursors back to dada, Nietzsche, or even, as Knoker and Cook (1986) prefer, to *St Augustine's Confession* in the fourth Century) or should we view it strictly as a periodizing concept (in which case we debate whether it originated in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s)? Does it have a revolutionary potential by virtue of its opposition to all forms of meta-narratives (including Marxism, Freudianism, and all forms of Enlightenment reason) and its close attention to 'other worlds' and to 'other voices' that have for long been silenced (women, gays, blacks, colonized people with their own histories)? Or is it simply the commercialisation and the domestication of modernism, and a reduction of the latter's already tarnished aspirations to a laissez-faire, 'anything goes' market eclecticism? Does it therefore, undermine or integrate with neo-conservative politics? And do we attach its rise to some radical restructuring of capitalism, the emergence of some 'postindustrial' society,

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<sup>34</sup> In the early Eighties unemployment rose to 12 per cent, the highest level since the 1930s. Poverty increased from 9 per cent in 1979 to 24 per cent in 1995-6. See Nicholas Abercrombie, Alan Warde et al. *Contemporary British Society*. p.104

<sup>35</sup> The Conservative government reduced the higher rate of income tax from 60 per cent to 40 per cent and put a higher threshold on inheritance tax. See Dee Cook, *Poverty, Crime and Punishment* (London: CPAG, 1997), p.23

view it, even, as the 'art of an inflatory era' or as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (as Newman and Jameson have proposed)?<sup>36</sup>

Harvey further comments that the emergence of postmodernism was a response to the changing dimensions of space and time during the post war period in the West, which were 'subject to the persistent pressures of capital circulation and accumulation,' and where, during periods of overaccumulation, time and space become compressed causing disruption and confusion, which results in a foregrounding of aesthetics.<sup>37</sup> The period of great economic growth during the Fifties and Sixties, which was followed by economic collapse in 1973, can be understood in relation to Harvey's theory of overaccumulation and rise in aestheticism.

Fredric Jameson, as Harvey indicates, has also examined the relationship between overaccumulation and aesthetic movements during the post war period. He identifies the emergence of postmodernism alongside the arrival of a new kind of society, suggesting that postmodernism reinforces on a cultural level the logic of the new society, what he has called *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*:

Now I must say a proper word about the use of this concept: it is not just another word for the description of a particular style. It is also, at least in my use, a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle or multinational capitalism.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1990), p.42

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.327

<sup>38</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in Hal Foster, *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p.112-3

The theories of Harvey and Jameson provide a network of connections between economic and cultural events and the interrelation of postmodernism as a cultural conceptual framework and postmodernity as a historical condition, used to describe the period of change in the West, from the late Sixties onwards.

In addition, Linda Hutcheon draws attention to the contradictory nature of postmodernism. She speaks of the way in which postmodernism recognises itself as a construct and so encourages awareness of the construction of other social and cultural systems and practices. From the postmodernist position of greater enlightenment, a person can reject certain systems and rules while still being aware of their desirability and importance to their lives:

Postmodernism, like modernism, also retains its contradictions, but...it foregrounds them to such an extent that they become the very defining characteristics of the entire cultural phenomenon that we label that name...What it does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world – and that we create them all. This does not make them any less necessary or desirable.<sup>39</sup>

This contradictory, progressive/regressive character of postmodernism became especially prominent during the Nineties, as the explosion of products and choices available to the consumer, meant there was a constant swapping and changing of alliances and beliefs as customers exercised the right to change their minds.

In one sense, postmodernism during the Nineties became an increasingly familiar term within popular culture, particularly in relation to films, music, art and fashion. Borrowing ideas and styles from previous periods and trends and re-producing them with a contemporary twist was celebrated as 'retro' and/or

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<sup>39</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.43

postmodernist. Yet by contrast, the almost excessive fragmentation caused by postmodernism and the lack of a moral framework created a backlash in the form of a regression as people looked to fundamental religions and political organisations for the guidance and morality lacking in the postmodernist society. This can be exemplified in the way the Conservative government of the early Nineties reacted against the postmodernist emphasis on plurality and increasing social fragmentation and disorder, and instigated a back to basics campaign with regard to morals and the family unit. Further, the re-assertion of masculine values through the subculture of laddism can be understood as either a regressive backlash to the growing postmodernist emphasis on difference and the representation of marginalised groups in society such as feminism, or alternatively, as a self-conscious progressive response whereby more traditional ideas of masculinity were highlighted and critiqued. (I will return to the notion of a feminist backlash later in this chapter.)

Thus, the boom period of the Fifties followed by postmodernism, created a society led by consumption rather than production, engendering a culture where identity became to a growing extent defined by consumerism; what people chose to spend their money on. Abercrombie and Warde comment: 'It matters what you wear, what kind of carpet is on the floor, or what taste in music you have. It is clear under these circumstances, identity in modern societies is a complex phenomenon.'<sup>40</sup> But, as they further remark: 'With social identities increasingly defined in terms of the capacity for private, individualised consumption, those who are excluded from that consumption feel frustrated and alienated.'<sup>41</sup> This prompts a

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<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Alan Warde et al. *Contemporary British Society*, p.349

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.348

potentially difficult situation where the poor not only feel excluded from society, but also, influenced by the cultural emphasis on material wealth and possessions, feel entitled to more than what they could financially achieve. Such a situation could, as Hazel Croall suggests: 'Provide a motivation to commit crime.'<sup>42</sup>

Further evidence of the links between consumption and crime are suggested in a Home Office research study which examined trends in crime in England and Wales during the post war period. The study asserts that personal crime, which is defined as 'sexual offences and violence against the person (but not robbery),' increased in line with periods of increased personal consumption.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in 1980-1 when consumption fell, so did personal crime. While in 1987-8 when there was a rapid growth in personal crime there was also a fast rise in consumption. From this, the report suggests: 'When spending rises, people spend more time outside the home, and as a result there are more opportunities for personal crime.'<sup>44</sup>

For young people in Britain socio-economic changes have been particularly severe during the latter half of the Twentieth Century. The collapse of the youth labour market and changes in social security benefits led Margaret Melrose to comment that young people and especially disadvantaged young people were during this period 'frozen in a perpetual state of youth or adolescence' because they did not have the means to make the transition to adulthood.<sup>45</sup> The socio-economic

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<sup>42</sup> Hazel Croall, *Crime and Society in Britain*, p.9

<sup>43</sup> Simon Field, *Trends in Crime and their Interpretation: A Study of Recorded Crime in Post-War England and Wales, Home Office Research Study 119* (London: HMSO, 1990), p.5

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.7

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Melrose, *Fixing It? Young People, Drugs and Disadvantage* (Lyme Regis: Russell House, 2000), p.32

The 1988 Social Security Act removed the right to benefit for 16-17 yr olds. Those not in education or full time employment were required to take compulsory job training even though there were not

difficulties these young people faced meant that they were more likely to engage in alternative and in some cases illegitimate economic activities such as drug dealing, prostitution and begging, which although may have provided them with a culture and sense of belonging also increased the likelihood of their involvement in violent behaviour.

The close relationship between poverty, frustration and crime, was theorised extensively in the 1939 Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, which links thwarted expectations with frustration and violent behaviour.<sup>46</sup> The primary focus of the hypothesis is that when a person is unable to reach their goals or does not receive the awards they expect, they become frustrated and can be driven to attack others. Leonard Berkowitz explains:

The strength of the frustration-generated instigation to aggression is in direct proportion to the amount of satisfaction the thwarted individual had (1) anticipated and (2) failed to obtain. More specifically, they (Dollard et al) argued that when people are unexpectedly kept from achieving their goals, they will be more inclined to hurt someone (1) the greater was the satisfaction expected, (2) the more completely they are prevented from obtaining any satisfactions whatsoever, and (3) the more often their attempts to reach the goal are thwarted.<sup>47</sup>

But as Dollard et al and latterly Berkowitz have also commented, frustration does not always lead to aggressive behaviour: it is only one of several reactions. A person may learn ways of controlling their frustration so that they react in a non-

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enough schemes to provide opportunities for all. The Act also reduced the amount of benefit to 18-25 yr olds.

<sup>46</sup> This hypothesis was initially developed by a group of Yale social scientists led by John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, O.H. Mower and Robert Sears. Their seminal piece, *Frustration and Aggression*, was first published in 1939. See, Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression, Its Causes, Consequences and Control*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.32



aggressive manner, for example if they believe they may be punished for their actions.

I would contend that in contemporary Britain, increased consumerism and focus on material wealth to determine identity meant that many people, on all economic levels, were susceptible to having expectations greater than what they could financially achieve. Therefore, someone who was financially dependent on the state still felt they had as much right to such things as a television, fashionable clothes, a car and holidays, as someone who was financially independent of the state.

The quantitative and qualitative information considered here implies that violence as defined by this study could have increased during the Nineties, and so the proliferation of violent images in the theatre could be attributed to the increased role of violence in society, both in terms of actual violence, and dramatised violence. But the links between poverty, frustration, crime and violence are not automatic, rather they are dependent on a wide range of potential factors; the psychological condition of the perpetrator, the environment and other cultural shifts affecting an individual's behaviour and understanding of themselves in the world.

Furthermore, the focus of the study is not violence per se but specifically the use of violence by certain women, as portrayed in a collection of plays in the Nineties. Therefore, if as I have suggested, the plays were reflecting society it now needs to be established not only if there was an increase in actual cases of violent behaviour by women but also, if there were shifts in the representation of such

violence which may have impacted upon public perception of the number of and causes of acts of violence by women during the Nineties.

### **She-Monsters: Women and Violence in the Nineties**

Women are more violent, says study.<sup>48</sup>

In 1995 Eleanor Mills, of *The Observer*, wrote in response to the findings of research by the think-tank Demos and Mori, that Britain was facing an epidemic of female violence. The Demos and Mori report claimed: 'We are already hearing of growing numbers of girl gangs and criminals. Our figures suggest it could become an epidemic.'<sup>49</sup> Similarly, a 1996 article by Jo Knowsley in the *Sunday Telegraph*, led with the headline: 'Girl gangs rival boys in battle to rule the streets.'<sup>50</sup> Although in the body of the article Knowsley's headline seemed less convincing as she went on to comment: 'The number of girls and women committing violent crime remains proportionately tiny.'<sup>51</sup>

Contrary to such dramatic claims, statistics produced by the Home Office revealed that by 1999 the number of known female offenders was considerably lower than male young offenders: 'In 1999, the rate of offences of violence against the person committed by males aged between 10-17 was 415 per 100,000 in the population, compared with a rate of 112.7 for females of the same age.'<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey suggest there was a greater

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<sup>48</sup> Sophie Goodchild, *The Independent*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2000

<sup>49</sup> Demos and Mori report as quoted in *The Observer*, September 24<sup>th</sup> 1995

<sup>50</sup> Jo Knowsley, *Sunday Telegraph*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1996

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Stanko, *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* p.15

involvement of males than females in juvenile crime and Elizabeth Stanko referring to the 1998/9 Youth Lifestyle Survey comments: 'Violent crimes account for 1 in 5 male crimes compared with 1 in 10 female.'<sup>53</sup> Moving beyond juveniles to consider violent crimes committed by adults, the results of various crime surveys and statistics all agree that the main perpetrators of violent crimes have been and will most likely continue to be males.<sup>54</sup> Thus I would contend that none of these figures, even taking into account the hidden figure, point to female acts of violence on a scale of epidemic proportions.

Unfortunately, such misrepresentations of violent crimes committed by women are not uncommon. Susan Batchelor experienced a misrepresentation of research findings when her study results were published and figures were given as percentages rather than actual amounts, as she explains:

If we look at the official figures for the last eleven years (1987-1997), we can see that the number of women convicted of violent offending in Scotland has increased but only by 15 per cent (that is an additional 38 cases). The comparable figure for men is an increase of 26 per cent, or 818 cases (Scottish Executive, letter, 21 April 1999). It is worth noting that, because the number of violent crimes committed by women is so low, a very small number of cases can make a great deal of difference in terms of percentage rises.<sup>55</sup>

Laura Crites, referring to criminologists in the United States during the Seventies, has also remarked on the presentation of statistical findings as percentages rather than actual figures in order to suggest a greater increase in incidents. Crites noted how the 1974 FBI Uniform Crime Reports revealed a 450 per cent increase in arrests

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<sup>53</sup> Joanna Mattinson and Catriona Mirtlees-Black, *Attitudes to Crime and Criminal Justice: Findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey* (London: Home Office, 2000), p.13. The Youth Lifestyle Survey, Elizabeth Stanko, *Taking Stock, What Do We Know About Interpersonal Violence?* p.15

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p.42

<sup>55</sup> Susan Batchelor, 'The Myth of Girl Gangs,' *Criminal Justice Matters*, no.43, Spring 2001, p.27

of adolescent females for negligent manslaughter. In real terms this was an increase of only nine more cases, from two in 1960 to eleven throughout the whole of the United States in 1974.<sup>56</sup>

Findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey further indicate how the misrepresentation of studies and statistics can mislead public opinion. Results of the 1998 survey reveal that although most people were aware that young offenders were predominantly male, a third of those questioned thought juvenile crimes were equally committed by males and females. Also, from 1995 to 1997, nearly three quarters of those questioned in the survey thought that female juvenile crime had increased, when in actual fact it decreased slightly.<sup>57</sup> This anomaly between actual levels and perceived levels of female juvenile crime suggests that in the Nineties, the problem of supposed increases in violence by women was more to do with the representation of acts of violence by women as opposed to the women themselves, pointing to a gulf between material and representational spheres.

### **Attributing Blame: Feminism and Breaking Roles and Rules**

Many social commentators have attributed the perceived shift in the behaviour of young women from femininity towards assertive and sometimes aggressive behaviour to the development of feminism. During the Nineties newspapers carried stories with headlines referring to 'killer instincts,' and a social

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<sup>56</sup> Laura Crites, 'Women Offenders: Myth vs. Reality,' in Laura Crites (ed.), *The Female Offender* (Mass: Lexington Books, 1976), p.33

<sup>57</sup> For full details of results see, Joanna Mattinson and Catriona Mirrlees-Black, *Attitudes to Crime and Criminal Justice: Findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey*, pp.14-5

worker quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* commented: 'You've got to look at the way in which girls are now encouraged to compete with men.'<sup>58</sup>

These reactions appear to be based on the equal opportunities argument that was taken up during the Nineties as a kind of 'common-sense' explanation for female transgressive behaviour. If women demand equality they should take the good with the bad, which as Cameron points out: 'At its crassest, the thought behind it could be expressed as "if we accept women can be airline pilots, we should also accept they can be rapists."<sup>59</sup> However, such a gender-neutral approach wrongfully assumes that men and women in contemporary society are now equal and so should be treated accordingly. As Cameron further comments:

Battered husbands, male anorexics and violent female street gangs have all made their appearance under this regime of equal opportunities, and deliberately genderless terms like 'parenting', 'spousal abuse' and 'family violence' have proliferated. The result is to mystify the unequal relations which still exist between the sexes.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, to suggest that feminism is responsible for creating an increase in violent behaviour by women is not only to ignore the bulk of statistical evidence and research as previously referred to, but also indicates the failure to recognise the construction of gender and the representation of women who display violent behaviour within the patriarchal framework.

Traditionally, a patriarchy is understood as a hierarchical social system, ruled by a male elder member of a society. However, since the second wave of feminism

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<sup>58</sup> Headline by Colette Douglas-Home in the *Daily Mail*, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1996. Social Worker quoted in an article by Jo Knowsley in the *Daily Telegraph*, May 6<sup>th</sup> 1996, 'Girl Gangs Rival Boys in Battle to Rule the Streets.'

<sup>59</sup> Debbie Cameron, 'Wanted: The Female Serial Killer,' *Trouble and Strife* 33, Summer 1996, p.24

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.26

in the late Sixties, the meaning of patriarchy has been extended to include the 'institutionalised oppression of all women by men,' primarily maintained through ideological control.<sup>61</sup> Kate Millet, whose *Sexual Politics* (1970) was one of the early theoretical works to emerge from the feminist movement, gave particular importance to the notion that within a patriarchal structure the cultural is political and culture is used as an ideological tool to oppress women and reinforce their inferior social position as dependent on men. Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, (1970) is equally condemning of a patriarchy, adding that as a system of oppression it precedes race or class as it is based on 'the natural reproductive difference between the sexes.'<sup>62</sup> In her 1977 theoretical work, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray drawing upon Marxist economics, focused on the function of women as commodities within a patriarchal structure, whose purpose is to fulfil the needs of the male population.

Although the critique of patriarchal systems and values offered here by feminist theorists may vary according to the strand of feminism espoused, they have a common vision in their belief that a patriarchy is at the core of female oppression. To ensure the emancipation of women, the primary task of feminism is then to expose the ideological, cultural and socio-economic practices and structures, which promote patriarchal values and rely on biological difference to men as the basis for female oppression.

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<sup>61</sup> Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism,' Sarah Gamble (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.36

<sup>62</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* as quoted by Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism,' Sarah Gamble (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, p.37

In many accounts of female acts of violence during the Nineties a woman's gender was often emphasised more than the act of violence itself. As Karen Boyle explains: 'A woman who kills, or acts violently, is always visible as a woman.'<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, violent behaviour by women strikes at the heart of patriarchal constructions of gender. However, rather than address the construction of gender, social commentators and journalists in the Nineties appeared to rely upon old discourses and representations which maintained the patriarchal status quo and consequently women's unequal role in contemporary western society, thus adding to a wider feminist backlash.

### **Girl Power**

The proliferation of stories told about violent women is out of all proportion to their actual numbers. For instance, in Britain in 1991, 43,300 men were charged with violence against the person, compared with just 3,900 women. The excessive storytelling about women's violence – in court, in the press, and in docu-drama and fiction – can be seen as a symptom of social anxiety about women's roles and the perceived abandonment of traditional femininity.<sup>64</sup>

During the Nineties images and slogans relating to women in popular culture spread the notion of girl power, encouraging young women to believe that they were empowered, assertive and could have and do whatever they wanted. Hollywood

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<sup>63</sup> Karen Boyle, 'Deadlier Than the Male?' *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates*, (London: Sage, 2004), pp.94-8

<sup>64</sup> Alice Myers and Sarah Wight (eds.), *No Angels, Women Who Commit Violence* (London: Pandora, 1996), p.xii

films such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991) celebrated female togetherness, independence and power, while manufactured pop bands such as the Spice Girls, sang about the importance of female friendships over boyfriends and called for 'Girl Power.'

However, while these images and song lyrics encouraged young women to redefine what it means to be a woman, displaying a sense of independence and assertiveness that their mothers and grandmothers may have lacked, they were simultaneously reprimanded for aggressive and arguably more masculine behaviour, particularly by the news reporting media with headlines like: 'Gangs put boot into old ideas of femininity, the violent side of girl power,' and 'The Bitches from Hell.'<sup>65</sup>

Concurrently, the terms laddism and ladettes also emerged in popular culture to describe the behaviour of young men and women. Traditionally, the word lad is used to describe a young man or boy from a working class background, however in the Nineties the term laddism became associated with young men of all backgrounds who indulged in such activities as drinking alcohol, watching sport – football – and behaving in a loud and brash manner. It is described by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) as: 'A journalistic pigeon-hole for boisterously anti-social young men,' and 'has since been extended to include anyone under 40 behaving badly.'<sup>66</sup> Laddism may have been a celebration of behaviour usually associated with men and masculinity, but it was not exclusive to men. The

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<sup>65</sup> Rory Carroll, *The Guardian*, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1998 and Charles Beaton in the *Daily Record*, May 17<sup>th</sup> 1996

<sup>66</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, [www.oup.com/elt/gibal/products/oald/wotm/wotm\\_archive/ladette/](http://www.oup.com/elt/gibal/products/oald/wotm/wotm_archive/ladette/)



behaviour of young female role models in popular culture, such as television and radio presenters Zoë Ball and Sara Cox, encouraged women to also behave in a laddish manner, to be a ladette, described by the OALD as: 'A young woman who behaves in a confident and noisy way, and who drinks alcohol and enjoys sport or other activities that are traditionally enjoyed by men.'<sup>67</sup>

Yet although young women should be able to indulge in the same pursuits of young men, they remained restricted by hierarchical gendered social structures, which treat women's drug taking and subsequent behaviour as different to men's. Whereas drunkenness, like violence, can be considered a rite of passage for young males making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the same behaviour in young women has historically been treated with disapproval. Melrose comments:

Reclaiming the 'right to pleasure' through indulging in activities that have traditionally been regarded as 'male preserves', however, is a double edged sword for women as there is a lack of 'social benchmarks' against which they may gauge their consumption of alcohol and other licit or illicit substances. In the absence of such benchmarks, women may tend to adopt norms in relation to the consumption of alcohol and other substances (McCallum, 1998). Doing so, however, potentially has greater health and social costs for women than for men.<sup>68</sup>

The reactions of the media cited above to girl power and the ladette demonstrates how, rather than such representations of female strength and independence be celebrated, they were considered dangerous and a threat to existing social norms and so represented in a negative light, creating a backlash against feminism and women, as Boyle remarks:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Margaret Melrose, *Fixing It? Young People, Drugs and Disadvantage*, p.92

It is no accident, then, that popular and pseudo-scientific concerns about women's violence periodically surface during times of profound unease about women's place in society, times when women's demands for rights, votes or equality threaten the patriarchal order.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, while I would not deny that women did engage in violent behaviour during the Nineties, I would suggest the way in which such women were represented and 'framed' and the negative interpretations of feminism and female orientated popular subcultures, created a climate where there was *perceived* to be an increase in female acts of violence, regardless of evidence to suggest otherwise. Clearly, it does not automatically follow that being a ladette or a member of a girl gang means behaving violently, yet others in society – politicians, the police and right-wing journalists – did associate the behaviour of these Nineties anti-establishment, youth subcultures with criminal and violent behaviour, and therefore cause for widespread public fear and concern.

### **Theatre as a Reflection of Cultural Concerns: Creating a Dialogue**

What I hope this chapter has indicated is that there were many cultural and socio-economic factors that could have contributed towards both an increase in actual violent and a shift in the representation of violent behaviour by women in the Nineties.

For many women the Nineties was a confusing time, as they struggled to respond to the bombardment of images and messages telling them how they should behave and what identity they should have. Young women already trying to cope with the emotional turbulence of adolescence were especially vulnerable to the increased

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<sup>69</sup> Karen Boyle, 'Deadlier Than the Male?' *Media and Violence: Gendering the Debates*, pp.94-8

number of very persuasive and pervasive media tag words used to redefine the new woman and her world. Words and phrases such as, *ladette*, *girl power* and *girl gang*, became common currency in popular culture vocabulary, and the scripts attached to those words were acted out in playgrounds and streets across Britain by many young women, unaware of where it might lead them. And while this study and the arguments considered in relation to suggested increases in violent behaviour by women during the Nineties, has focused on the use of violence by young women, the societal shifts, excessive focus and (mis)representation of women who engaged in violent behaviour, was not exclusive to youth culture, although young women were perhaps more vulnerable to the shifts in cultural conditions. Any form of violent behaviour by women of any age was drawn into the debate surrounding increased levels of female violence - a debate, which was dominated by misinformation and misrepresentations as opposed to the real concerns and stories behind the media headlines.

By contrast, the theatre, with a long-standing reputation for confronting controversial and taboo subjects, did provide a space to venture beyond the data and media headlines, to consider not only the complexities of female violence but also to reflect upon the contradictions within popular culture as related to feminism and female identity in the Nineties. Sam Marlowe reviewing *Yard Gal* in *What's On* commented that the play:

Was a rare opportunity to see this kind of aggressive, gangland territory explored in female terms...a play which exposes the pop culture term "Girl Power" for the pallid lip-service that it is. Marie and Boo may not make ideal

role models, but at least they're real – and they make the Spice Girls look like pussies.<sup>70</sup>

The theatre has often provided a social commentary on the dominant socio-economic and cultural concerns within any given period. Since the second wave of feminism in the late Sixties to early Seventies, it has played a significant part in both reflecting and challenging women's roles in a patriarchal society and consequently has played a role in the shaping of future female identities. It is this dual role that I suggest certain dramatists who examined the role of violent women in the Nineties also attempted to fulfil.

The sense of alienation and dissatisfaction felt by Lauren in *Ashes and Sand* towards her hopeless situation highlights many of the problems that were faced by young women in the Nineties. With identity and status increasingly defined by material wealth and possessions, those who lacked the opportunities to achieve on these terms may have felt a similar sense of anger and frustration. By focusing on the shifting female identity and women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour in Nineties British culture, Upton et al were not excusing or condoning the use of violence to solve social and psychological problems, but encouraging dialogue and debate of an often maligned and misrepresented area of female identity. Through analysis of the play texts in the subsequent chapters, I hope to develop such a dialogue by attempting to dismantle the fear and mystery surrounding the representation of female acts of violence. I will begin in Chapter Two, with an examination of stereotypes and the polarisation of violent women as mad or bad.

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<sup>70</sup> Sam Marlowe, *What's On*, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1998

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## Killer Instincts

The trendy Lolita-gang motif – Furies, banshees, perhaps even macnads.<sup>1</sup>

These were the words critic David Murray used to describe the girl gang in Upton's *Ashes and Sand* when it was performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in December 1994. While Upton's characters exemplified the Nineties' trend for female youth subcultures and gangs, they also, according to Murray, called upon previous representations of women as witches and bacchantes. These latter stereotypical representations are largely based on a woman's supposed greater emotionality, mental instability, spirituality and sexuality compared to that of men. More recently with the onset of feminism, they have become inextricably linked to a patriarchal value system, which arguably understands and uses a woman's biological difference to man as an indication of her role as the weaker sex and justification for her secondary status in society.

This chapter is concerned with characterisation and representations of the causes of acts of female violence in the 1994 production of *Ashes and Sand* and the

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<sup>1</sup> David Murray, *Financial Times*, December 7<sup>th</sup> 1994. For a comprehensive catalogue of the reviews see *Theatre Record* vol xiv, issue 25-26, January 9<sup>th</sup> 1995, pp.1517-8

1998 production of *Yard Gal*. It will investigate whether in these play texts stereotypes and patriarchal gender roles were challenged and/or maintained, particularly those associated with a woman's supposed madness and/or badness. I hope to show that these plays offer a critique of patriarchal systems of representation and the stereotypes they encourage, as they draw upon resistant postmodernist aesthetic strategies in order to present a more pluralistic representation of women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour.

### **Hysteria – A Female Prerogative?**

Sexuality is seen as the root of female behavior and the problem of crime. Women are defined as sexual beings, as sexual capital in many cases, physiologically, psychologically and socially.<sup>2</sup>

Women who behave outwith acceptable codes of feminine behaviour and/or behave violently can be considered sexually deviant, in that their deviant or violent behaviour is supposedly caused by their female sexuality, because they are women. Frances Heidensohn calls the sexualising of women's behaviour 'contaminating sexuality,' from which

offences which have apparently nothing to do with sexuality are – when committed by women – transformed into expressions of female sexuality or lack of it. Thus are created the images of the kleptomaniac – the compulsive, menopausal woman shoplifter -- or the pre-menstrual violent woman and an associated range of feminine stereotypes in which deviant behaviour, sexuality and sickness are all enmeshed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dorie Klein, 'The Etiology of Female Crime: A Review of the Literature,' in Laura Crites (ed.), *The Female Offender* (Mass: Lexington Books, 1976), p.7

<sup>3</sup> Frances Heidensohn, *Women and Crime* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996), p.94

Within contemporary society this representation pervades the finite number of stereotypes and associated scripts used to represent women who behave violently: violent woman as witch (mythical), violent woman as mad (biological) and the violent woman as non-woman, all of which become entangled to create an overall image of women as mad (due to their sexuality), bad (due to their sexual deviance) or both.

These stereotypical representations of women have prevailed in western culture over time and tend to be perpetuated by the medical, legal and religious professions as well as being subsumed into popular culture through images and stories in popular entertainment and the media. They reinforce the patriarchal structure and confine society's understanding of acts of violence by women to a limited set of scripts. At root, is the assumption that biological differences between men and women cause behavioural differences, therefore there are separate, appropriate rules of behaviour for men and women. Aggression and violence are linked to the male hormone testosterone and so as conditions of masculinity, are traits considered acceptable for men, not for women. When a woman does show anger or behaves violently she is acting outside assumed gender roles and is considered unnatural and abnormal. Margaret Shaw comments: 'Our image of violence is based on that of male violence – macho, tough, aggressive; we have no way of conceptualising violence by women except in terms of its "unnaturalness."' <sup>4</sup> Therefore, when women are violent, their violence can often be understood or rather misunderstood and misrepresented as a sign of their madness and/or badness. As Sylvie Frigon

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Shaw, 'Conceptualizing Violence by Women,' R Emerson Dobash, Russell P Dobash & Lesley Noakes (eds.), *Gender and Crime* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p.122

points out: 'The images of criminal women tend to be polarized between two extremes, the 'mad' and the 'bad.'<sup>5</sup>

The marrying of women to madness is not a new concept as Shoshana Felman comments:

Is it by chance that hysteria (significantly derived, as is well known, from the Greek word for "uterus") was originally conceived as an exclusively female complaint, as the lot and prerogative of women? And is it by chance that even today, between women and madness, sociological statistics establish a privileged relation and a definite correlation?<sup>6</sup>

From this, Felman suggests our understanding of madness is primarily associated with the female, to the extent that madness in men is linked with femininity and the rejection by the male of their patriarchal gender role in society.

The notion that women are bad and/or mad because of their biological make-up became increasingly popular during the late Nineteenth to early Twentieth Centuries, when morality and the dangers of moral decline were a particular focus of Victorian society. In her book *Women Who Kill*, Ann Jones refers to several male psychologists in America who in their attempt to link insanity to a lack of morality produced a list of pre-disposed conditions and precipitating events which could cause 'moral insanity' in both men and women. The list included:

Great differences of age between parents; influence of sex; of surroundings; convulsions, or emotions of the mother during gestation; epilepsy; other nervous diseases; pregnancy, lactation; menstrual period; critical age; puberty; intemperance; venereal excess; and onanism. Among the "exciting causes"

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<sup>5</sup> Sylvie Frigon, 'A Genealogy of Women's Madness,' in R Emerson Dobash, Russell P Dobash & Lesley Noakes (eds.), *Gender and Crime*, p.29

<sup>6</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Women and Madness, The Critical Phallacy,' in Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms, an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p.7



given were “trouble and excessive grief; intemperance; excessive excitement, of whatever kind; epilepsy; disordered functions of menstruation; pregnancy; parturition; lactation; fevers; injuries to the head or spine; and overwork.”<sup>7</sup>

There appears to be a clear bias in the list to women-only conditions, prompting Jones to comment: “The only inescapable one for men is puberty, listed as a predisposing condition; but *every* phase in the life cycle of a woman is listed as *both* a predisposing condition and a precipitating cause.”<sup>8</sup>

In the UK one of the first British doctors to view a woman’s transgressive behaviour as pathological was Dr Henry Maudsley. He commented that female sexual deviance was caused by: ‘Irritation of the ovaries or uterus – a disease by which the chaste and modest woman is transformed into a raging fury of lust.’<sup>9</sup> Criminologists, Cesare Lombroso and Otto Pollak and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, were also advocates of the theory that a woman’s biological constitution was the cause of her violent behaviour. From this belief there developed a tendency to oversimplify the potential connection between biology and social action. Melissa Benn refers to the feminist criminologist Susan Edwards who comments on ‘instances from the mid-Nineteenth century where crimes from murder to shoplifting were ascribed to problems of menstruation and attendant lack of psychic ‘control.’’<sup>10</sup>

Even though the writings of Lombroso, Pollak and, to an extent Freud, have since been discredited, their assumption that a woman’s behaviour is determined by her biology still pervade contemporary representations of criminal and violent

<sup>7</sup> As quoted by Ann Jones from the international congress of 1867, *Women Who Kill* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p.160

<sup>8</sup> Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill*, p.160

<sup>9</sup> Dr Henry Maudsley, quoted in Russell P Dobash, R Emerson Dobash & S Gutteridge, *The Imprisonment of Women* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.114

<sup>10</sup> Melissa Benn, ‘Body Talk, The Sexual Politics of PMT,’ in Helen Birch (ed.), *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (London: Virago, 1993), p.155

behaviour by women particularly in the more recent form of premenstrual tension or syndrome (PMT), a development of the explanations cited by Edwards.<sup>11</sup> Newspaper headlines during the Nineties spoke of women with: 'Killer Instincts' and PMT became a popular script regularly used by those in authority, particularly the medical and legal professions, to explain violent female behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

While the PMT argument has been embraced and adopted by many women, providing a valuable understanding of women's behavioural patterns, there has developed a feminist critique of PMT, as Susan Bordo suggests: 'Is PMS merely one more deployment in the ever-advancing medicalization of the body?'<sup>13</sup> Drawing upon the links between PMT and biological determinism, those critical of PMT question the implication for female emancipation in cases of female violence where the PMT argument is used. In her article, 'The Sexual Politics of PMT,' Melissa Benn does not refute the role of PMT in a woman's life and its potential to cause violent behaviour, but she challenges the way in which: 'The invocation of PMT too frequently allows both men and women to escape from the truth of a story that simultaneously exists within them and stands before them.'<sup>14</sup> Benn suggests that the invocation of the PMT argument can lead to ignorance of other potential causes of violence in a woman's life, such as socio-economic and cultural

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<sup>11</sup> It is not known exactly what causes PMT. Diagnosis is dependent on whether the woman suffers from a variety of symptoms at the same time as possible hormonal changes in her body due to menstruation. There is a list of over 100 psychological and physical symptoms, many of which are not exclusive to PMT. There are a variety of ways to treat PMT, from changes in diet, hormonal preparations, anti-depressants, medicine and in extreme cases surgery. See, <http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/diseases/facts/pms.htm> and <http://www.pms.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> 'A rare killer instinct that is becoming an everyday danger to femininity,' Colette Douglas-Home, *Daily Mail*, November 18, 1996

<sup>13</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture and The Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993), p.36

<sup>14</sup> Melissa Benn, 'Body Talk, The Sexual Politics of PMT,' in Helen Birch (ed.), *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, p.154

conditions. This can result in the problem being located within the individual, removing any responsibility on the part of wider social structures and systems. Benn also questions the way in which the use of the PMT argument suggests hormones cause female anger: 'Just as the defence of provocation symbolizes acceptance of the cultural necessity of male anger, the defence of PMT signifies the cultural denial of the possibility of serious female anger.'<sup>15</sup> Benn further draws attention to the reliance within the legal professions and judiciary, on a medical diagnosis of PMT and the use of the phrase 'temporary insanity,' which can imply a woman was not in control of her actions, she was not herself, hence she was mad.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of her article Benn suggests:

If it is understood that women kill not from inherent biological instability but in angry reaction to cruelty or neglect or abuse, the use of PMT defence may correspondingly fade. Legal and public attention will then shift from the unstable workings of the ever-mysterious female body to the mysterious workings of the ever-unstable social world.<sup>17</sup>

While I agree with Benn that there should be more attention given to the contribution of socio-economic and cultural factors, I contend that it should not be at the expense of other possible causes such as PMT. Resisting stereotypes means not being confined to a finite number of explanations but considering *all* possible factors – in cases of both male and female violence. Only then can a more informed, less prescriptive understanding of women who display violent behaviour emerge and begin to challenge polar systems of representation.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp.162-3

<sup>16</sup> Benn appears particularly concerned with the arguments and theories of Doctor Katherine Dalton, an endocrinologist in the UK who has appeared as a key witness using PMT to plea mitigating circumstances in many cases where women have been accused and then acquitted of violence.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.171

A further stereotype is that of the *femme fatale*, the devious and manipulative women who plays on her stereotypical feminine innocence. In 'Women's Crime and Media-Coverage: Making Explanations,' Bronwyn Naylor identifies what she terms 'common-sense' representations of women that are inherently gendered and used by the press in their reporting of acts of violence by women. She offers the following interpretation of the *femme fatale*:

It is the *femme fatale*, the poisoning wife, the infanticide hiding both fact of pregnancy and the baby's body. It is also the scheming woman masking her evil under the appearance of goodness. Indeed, women may be regarded as playing on the chivalric foolishness of men, who would never suspect a woman, simply by reason of a sex.<sup>18</sup>

The figure of the *femme fatale* was popular in Film Noir of the Forties and Fifties. However, despite the way in which it empowers women, putting them in a position of control within the story, the woman as the figure of evil must be destroyed so that patriarchal order can be restored. Also, the notion of deception and *playing* a role within the category of the *femme fatale* implies a level of performativity suggesting a woman is not only in control of her actions but is also controlling the way others see her. (The notion of performativity and issues of control and transformation are further explored in relation to the body in Chapter Three.) Thus the representation of women as a *femme fatale* creates a paradoxical situation where female emancipation can be inextricably linked to the perpetuation of a female stereotype.

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<sup>18</sup> Bronwyn Naylor, 'Women's Crime and Media-Coverage: Making Explanations,' in R Emerson Dobash, Russell P Dobash & Lesley Noakes (eds.), *Gender and Crime*, p.91

The following analysis of *Ashes and Sand* and *Yard Gal* considers the dualistic presentation of women who are shown to engage in behaviour of a violent kind and the categorising of their behaviour as mad and/or bad. Within this dramaturgical context, I intend to examine the way in which the plays employ postmodernist, resistant strategies to draw upon these stereotypes in order to critique them. In this way I suggest that they contribute to a more progressive, non-restrictive representation of women who display violent behaviour.

**Seaside girls are fighters, we don't give up easily.**<sup>19</sup>

*Ashes and Sand* is set in Brighton in the Nineties and follows a gang of four working-class, teenage girls, Hayley, Anna and Jo who are white and Lauren who is black, as they attempt to raise the money to fulfil their dreams of leaving their hopeless lives and escaping to a life of sunshine and opportunities in Bali.<sup>20</sup> With little prospect of gaining steady employment – Anna is the only one of the girls who has a job working as a shoe shop assistant – or interest in education and schooling, they resort to criminal and violent behaviour to raise the cash to fund their trip. The action of the play follows the girls as they ‘work’ the pier on the look-out for

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<sup>19</sup> Judy Upton, afterword to *Ashes and Sand* in *Frontline Intelligence 3: New Plays for the Nineties*, selected and introduced by Pamela Edwardes (London: Methuen, 1995), p.261

<sup>20</sup> In the first production of *Ashes and Sand* at the Royal Court in December 1994 a black actress, Rakie Ayola was cast in the role of Lauren. In the play text Upton does not specify that Lauren is black however there are several instances where it is implied that Lauren is different from the other girls because of her body, see p.22 of the 2002 Methuen edition. When asked about the race and colour of the characters in *Ashes and Sand*, Upton replied: ‘When I discussed casting for the original production of *Ashes and Sand* I made it clear that I wanted to consider actors from all ethnic backgrounds for each role. When Samantha Morton was injured in a warm-up and could no longer play Anna, the actress who took over from her was also black. If I do feel a role (for story reasons) needs to be played specifically by a black or white actor I put it in the stage directions.’ Judy Upton, email response to the author of this study, July 2004. Upton does not specify in the stage reactions that Lauren is black but I suggest the context of Britain in the Nineties is central to this study and therefore will base my understanding of Lauren’s race on the 1994 production.

prospective 'victims' and their frequent encounters with the local police, in particular a young Detective Sergeant, Daniel. The story climaxes in an orgiastic scene of violence and revenge when the girls, believing Daniel has betrayed them, ferociously attack him in a scene reminiscent of Agave and the bacchantes attacking Pentheus in *The Bacchae*. The girls break into Daniel's flat and mount a surprise attack on him when he arrives home. He is stripped and beaten and his body is painted with make-up. The play ends with a shaken and silent Daniel being questioned by his colleague Glen and a white-coated doctor.

In the opening scene of the play, the gang attack and mug a young man on the pier in Brighton. The attack appears to be a carefully planned and precisely executed assault. Hayley first approaches the young man on her own, under the pretence of being sexually interested in him. The other girls, who have strategically positioned themselves a short distance away, keep a close watch on the action. As they see Hayley and the young man kiss, they leap into action, as the stage directions describe:

*The huddle of girls moves in and engulfs them, as their mouths meet. A furious mass of DM's and flying fists. The **Young Man** collapses groaning. **Jo** has his wallet. The girls run off. **Hayley** returns and crouches by the prostrate **Young Man**. She stands up and kicks him in the head.<sup>21</sup>*

What first appears to be a scene concerning teenage sexuality ends as a scene of teenage violence. The girls' violent behaviour resists actions traditionally encoded as feminine, such as biting, scratching and hair-pulling. Instead, they use more masculine techniques such as thumping, punching and kicking, transgressing

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<sup>21</sup> Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 2002), p.3

assumed gender roles and behaviour. However, the degree to which they plan the attack and the psychological games they play, fooling their male victim with sexual promises, suggests a more stereotypical representation such as the *femme fatale*, whose violent or deviant behaviour is linked to her sexual promiscuity. Thus, in the opening scene of the play, the girl gang simultaneously challenges assumed codes of acceptable feminine behaviour while also invoking the stereotype of the *femme fatale*.

As the play develops Upton goes on to explore a range of possible causes for the girls' violent behaviour, including socio-economic conditions and biological determinism. The fact that the gang use violence to obtain the money they need to escape, links their behaviour to the lack of employment opportunities in their immediate environment, as Lauren complains in Scene Two, when she compares her life to those portrayed in a magazine:

**Lauren** But look at those clothes, you can't find anything like that in our high street. And she can go anywhere dressed like that, all the best clubs and parties. What hope for me of a life like that? Hayley reckons it's possible, that all it takes is money and she thinks we can make that kind of money. But I can't see it, we've been talking about going away somewhere exotic for three years. When's it going to happen? I've been offered a job at last. Washing up in a restaurant – crap.

**Daniel** You have to start somewhere I suppose.

**Lauren** It's no good starting somewhere that's going nowhere. There's nothing for people like us, nothing.<sup>22</sup>

Lauren's violent behaviour can be explained in relation to the 1939 Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, which, as suggested in Chapter One, could have re-emerged

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p22-3

during the Nineties due to the conflict between socio-economic and cultural conditions, particularly for young women.

Upton's reflection of the shifts in female identities in relation to socio-economic and cultural conditions is further reinforced in comments she has made about her decision to write the play. As she explains in the introduction to the play in *Frontline Intelligence*:

I was angry in the spring of 1994 when I wrote *Ashes and Sand*. The play just poured out. I was angry for myself and my friends, dragged kicking and screaming through a hell-hole of a comprehensive school, to end up living lives that fell far short of our dreams. The background to the play includes newspaper reports about girl muggers on the Palace Pier and experiences from my own teenage years.<sup>23</sup>

However, while Upton's comments suggest that she believes deprived socio-economic conditions can cause frustration and lead to violent behaviour, she does not in turn reject the biologicistic argument. Rather, she considers the way in which women's biological difference to men is used within contemporary society as a popular script to explain women's violent behaviour, as is shown with Hayley in Scene One:

**Hayley** Let's go out. Let's spill some blood.

**Anna** Time of the month?

**Hayley** PMT. I feel angry. If I don't hurt someone I don't know what I might do.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Judy Upton, the afterword to *Ashes and Sand* in *Frontline Intelligence 3: New Plays for the Nineties*, selected and introduced by Pamela Edwardes, p.261

<sup>24</sup> Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays: 1*, p.13



On one level, the invocation of PMT by Hayley as causing her need to be violent is being presented as a possible determinant to be taken seriously. But on another level, it also demonstrates the way in which PMT has become a popular script for explaining and excusing women who behave violently, as Benn comments:

PMT has become something of an obsession in our culture: you can hardly open up a women's magazine or a tabloid newspaper without reading of some trouble connected with it...it has become part of a bundle of media tag words that supposedly describe the new woman and her world.<sup>25</sup>

Hayley is buying into this popular argument, thus her behaviour can be understood as a result of cultural influences - what society is telling her makes her feel angry and aggressive. These multiple interpretations of the cause of Hayley's violent behaviour, as both biologicistic and cultural, suggest a less prescriptive approach to the representation of those women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour.

Upton's ambiguous position with regard to characterisation and the causes of violence is most clear at the end of the play in the final act of violence by the girls. Prior to the attack, Hayley is sexually rejected by Daniel and this makes her angry. Fager for revenge, she tells the other girls that Daniel will not give them an alibi regarding their whereabouts at the time a young man was attacked on the pier, even though it later transpires that Daniel does go to the police and say the girls were with him. Thus, a scorned Hayley instills in the girls the same sense of anger she feels, providing them with motivation for their vicious assault. Unlike any of their previous attacks, the girls' assault on Daniel is highly stylised, more ritualistic humiliation than a carefully planned mugging. After breaking into his flat, they find

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<sup>25</sup> Melissa Benn, 'Body Talk, The Sexual Politics of PMT,' in Helen Birch (ed.), *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, p.153

his make-up box and set about dehumanising themselves, painting their faces with exaggerated red lipstick and black eye make-up. When Daniel enters, the girls pounce, kicking and beating him, in what appears to be a frenzied attack of unbridled wilfulness and passion:

*Hayley brings Daniel's make-up over to where the other three girls have him pinioned on the floor. The girls smear Daniel's body with handfuls of lipstick, eye shadow, mascara and blusher, sometimes shrieking, screaming obscenities or making pig noises, sometimes murmuring softly and caressing him as he struggles. Daniel is sprawled on his stomach with the girls sitting on him. They stripe his back and arse with the cosmetics with long sweeping strokes. He looks like a patchwork quilt.<sup>26</sup>*

The wild, and carnal behaviour of the girl gang is reminiscent of the Theban women led by Agave, in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. While under the spell of Dionysus, the women attack Pentheus, Agave's son, who has dressed in women's clothes in order to spy on them. As the Messenger describes their behaviour:

Agave was foaming at the mouth; her rolling eyes were wild; she was not in her right mind, but possessed by Bacchus, and she paid no heed to him. (Pentheus.) She grasped his left arm between wrist and elbow, set her foot against his ribs, and tore his arm off by the shoulder. It was no strength of hers that did it, but the god filled her, and made it easy. On the other side Ino was at him, tearing at his flesh; and now Autonoe joined them, and the whole maniacal horde.<sup>27</sup>

For some critics the closeness between Upton's girl gang and Euripides' characters was problematic in that it contributed to a stereotypical representation of the female characters. Sarah Hemming (*Independent*) described Hayley as:

<sup>26</sup>Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays: 1*, p.64

<sup>27</sup> Euripides, *The Bacchae And Other Plays*, (London: Penguin, 1973), p.232

'Demonic,' and David Murray (*Financial Times*) used the words 'feral' and 'furies' to describe the girl gang, while Aleks Sierz comments:

With its muggings, fights, Daniel's account of being shot and stabbed on duty, its images of a dartboard covered with a pin-up of a woman ('the bull's-eye is her cunt') or of a decapitated car-crash victim, the first production of *Ashes and Sand* suggested that aggression is a law of nature. Rushing around in a frenzy of desire and wilfulness, Upton's characters never pause long enough to reflect on what they are doing.... The violence of the play is never explained, except in the most general way: the culture of unemployment has created an enraged youth. But if aggression is a law of nature, the implication is that nothing can be done to change it. And, without the hope of change, the temptation is simply to glamorize it, as Upton does when she writes: "Seaside girls are fighters -- we don't give up easily."<sup>28</sup>

Although I would agree that Upton does draw some parallels with *The Bacchae*, there are also differences, for instance there is no Dionysus figure in *Ashes and Sand*, the girls choose to be violent. Moreover, Upton's stylised and exaggerated portrayal of the girls suggests a postmodernist resistant approach to performance and representation which uses mimicry and masquerade, popular in contemporary feminist performance because it offers possibilities for the disruption of patriarchal truth.

Thus, when the girls make themselves up 'dramatically' with 'scarlet slashes for lips and dark eye sockets,' they construct an image that mimics traditional feminine roles and the stereotype of the *femme fatale*.<sup>29</sup> By portraying the girls in this way, Upton is echoing Luce Irigaray's modern concept of mimicry which emphasises the excessive and suggests women must 'play with mimesis' and 'assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of

<sup>28</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p.216

<sup>29</sup> Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays:1*, p.63

subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the carnivalesque style of the attack on Daniel, both in their animalistic behaviour, the marking of Daniel's body and the way in which they are seen constructing these images of themselves and Daniel, continues the parodic theme, drawing upon a strand of masquerade theory relating to the work of Mary Russo, as Marvin Carlson describes:

A slightly different perspective on this same performance strategy is offered by Mary Russo, who draws upon Bakhtin to postulate a carnivalesque performing body, consciously 'making a spectacle of itself' in order to call attention to the spectacle as process and construction.<sup>31</sup>

By drawing upon resistant performance strategies such as mimicry and masquerade theory, Upton is able to occupy and reveal the construction of traditional feminine roles and stereotypes of women who display violent behaviour like the *femme fatale*, in order to resist and expose them, and thus challenge the patriarchal order.

However, this is not to suggest, Hemming, Murray and Sierz misunderstood the 1994 performance of *Ashes and Sand*. Rather, their responses expose the problem with postmodern political performance strategies, which as Carlson explains: 'Always run the danger that Derrida cited in any deconstruction operation... to turn established structures back on themselves' and 'especially for a

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<sup>30</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse,' in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans Catherine Porter with Caroline Burke (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.76

<sup>31</sup> Masquerade theory was initially developed in relation to performance analysis in film but has since played an important contribution to live performance. For further discussion see Marvin Carlson, *Performance, A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.175-7

conventional audience, simply reinscribe or reinforce those structures.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, I would contend, in response to Sierz, that the first production of *Ashes and Sand* did offer an explanation of the violence, but it was not an explanation that was straightforward and finite.

As the title suggests, *Ashes and Sand* is not a play that begins with a fixed agenda nor does it ever achieve one. And while there is a danger with occupying such an exposed position in relation to the representation of women who display violent behaviour, I would suggest it is such openness that gives it a critical voice. Unlike other dramatists before her, Upton does not represent such women to condemn them or condone them, she merely attempts to dramatise the act of violence when perpetuated by women from her experiences and as a critique of other (literary and contemporary media) representations.

### **We come to tell you a story that is FI' REAL<sup>33</sup>**

*Yard Gal* is the story of two friends, working-class teenage girls, Marie (white) and Boo (black.) The play was first staged in 1998 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the New Ambassadors Theatre followed by a tour of women's prisons.<sup>34</sup> The story is told through flashback as Marie and Boo take the audience on a journey, recreating the highs and lows of their previous lives as yard gals.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.176

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.6

<sup>34</sup> In 1998 the Royal Court Theatre underwent extensive renovations and so moved to temporary homes in the West End. The main house was at the Duke of York's Theatre and the Theatre Upstairs, The New Ambassadors.

<sup>35</sup> A yard gal is a name given to a female who socialises with yardies and in Britain a 'yardie' is the name colloquially used to describe a Jamaican man who is involved in drugs and violence. However as Geoff Small explains: 'The name was originally given to someone who comes from Jamaica or "Yard" - as in backyard.' Geoff Small, 'Yardies Who Built Britain,' *The Guardian* August 6<sup>th</sup> 2002

As yard gals the two girls spent most of their time on the streets in and around Hackney or in an empty flat in a multi-storey tower block on a local housing estate. Family for Marie and Boo was one another and the other girls who made up their posse, Threse, Deanne, Sabrina and Deniz. The yard gal lifestyles consisted of a daily struggle for survival in an environment where prostitution, theft, drug dealing and violence were commonplace. Recalling their experiences, Marie and Boo tell of their frequent violent encounters with a rival gang, one of which culminated in a pregnant Marie glassing the gang's leader, Wendy. Concerned for Marie's future, Boo covers for her friend and is convicted of the assault and sent to prison. The attack and their subsequent separation marks the end of their time as yard gals and in the final act of the play, the two girls, now apart and alone, try to come to terms with the future. Marie is a single mum living alone in a council flat and Boo is in prison contemplating how she will cope after her release. The play ends with the two girls turning to the audience and having told their story, asking, in an apparent plea to authority: 'Can we go now? Can we go?'<sup>36</sup>

With *Yard Gal*, Prichard acknowledges a range of causes for the girls' violent behaviour, representing them as complex and changing characters. The approach seems to be grounded in the dramatist's first hand experience of women in prison convicted of violent behaviour and Clean Break's own educational agenda. Thus, at times, the result is a blurring of fiction and reality, which is compounded by the narrative style of the performance. Charles Spencer commented on the 1998 production that 'you forget you are watching actors at all,' Sam Marlowe described Marie and Boo as 'real,' and Alistair Macaulay remarked that Prichard 'reminds you

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<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal*, p.55

that they really are lives.’<sup>37</sup> However, whereas Upton’s ambiguous stance towards the causes of transgressive female behaviour was actively maintained throughout, I would argue that in *Yard Gal*, the primary cause of the girls’ violence is presented as socio-economic and cultural conditions. In this way, Prichard’s text challenges stereotypical representations of women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour.

On first impression, Marie and Boo are characterised as a tough duo, confident and not afraid to stand up for themselves and what they believe in. This is exemplified in Boo’s address to the audience in the opening scene:

**Boo** Everybody be chatting about the violence and the guns and the drugs on the east sides, saying we should get out, but uh uh. No way. I don’t leave my roots at all. That’s what I was born and brought up with and that’s what I stay with. I’m a rude gal. I’m a HACKNEY GAL! And wherever I go everybody knows I’m there. And nobody touch me nobody talk to me and nobody come near me ‘cos they cross me they know my posse cut them up one time, y’arrright! YARD GAL WE A RUN TING SAFE.<sup>38</sup>

Boo’s speech implies that her violent behaviour is a direct response to the violence within her immediate environment. It is violence that she knows and is familiar with and therefore she sees it as an intrinsic part of her life as a yard gal and her fight for survival. As a yard gal within a gang or posse she has an identity and a sense of belonging that she lacked as a black, working-class teen runaway. Membership of the gang also provides her with a form of protection as well as requiring her to protect others. With no mention of a family, the gang take on the role of a surrogate family. Thus, Prichard is suggesting that it is Boo’s deprived

<sup>37</sup> For a collection of all the reviews, see *Theatre Record*, vol xviii, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1998, pp.603-5

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal*, p.6

socio-economic and cultural environment, which has led to her violent behaviour, and her role as a perpetrator of violence seems inextricably linked to her victim status.

As the play develops, Prichard implies that there could be a more psychological cause for Boo's violence as links are drawn between her violent behaviour and drug abuse. On the one hand, Boo's frequent use of drugs, mainly downers, uppers and cannabis, could be due to her social and cultural environment, particularly related to those conditions set out by Margaret Melrose in relation to the groups of young people most likely to be involved in drug taking.<sup>39</sup> However, there are also references in the play to Boo being 'nutty,' pointing to a link between Boo's violent behaviour and her mental state. In Act One Marie and Boo describe a fight they had with Wendy's posse at Trenz, their local nightclub. Marie, recalling Boo's behaviour at the time, remarks that Boo is: 'Nutty in fights.'<sup>40</sup> While Marie's comment seems initially light-hearted it takes on a more serious connotation in Act Two when Boo, now in prison, is writing a letter to Marie, describing her daily routine inside and her medical diagnosis:

**Boo** In here it's fucking rules everywhere. I change me sheets every day and go for medicine twice a day. I get so many pills man. Everyone else is gone and I'm still sitting by the trolley trying to down them all. In here I get tablets for being a paranoid schizophrenic. You always knew I's a nutter didn't ya?<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Melrose identifies those groups of young people most likely to be involved in drug taking. She lists: young people who have offended, have been excluded from or are not attending school, are being looked after by the local authority care system, have parents who abuse drugs, have learning difficulties, have been sexually abused and or exploited through prostitution and have a history of family problems. *Fixing It? Young People, Drugs and Disadvantage*, (Dorset: Russell House, 2000), p.1

<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal*, p.28

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.50



The diagnosis by the doctors of paranoid schizophrenia could imply Boo's violent behaviour may not only be a condition of her environment.<sup>42</sup> However, because Prichard highlights the strong contribution of social and environmental factors as contributing towards Boo's violent behaviour elsewhere in the play, I contend that by suggesting Boo is suffering from a mental illness, Prichard is offering a critique of those authorities who tend to locate the problem within the individual rather than with society and their eagerness to link a woman's violent behaviour to a mental condition regardless of other significant factors.

In *Yard Gal*, Marie and Boo also conjure up the stereotypical image of the *femme fatale* when they perform an act of revenge on a local policeman with whom they have an 'arrangement.' Having been arrested, the girls are forced to spend the night in a cell at the local police station and so try to attract the attention of their 'friend.' However he ignores their pleas for help and so the next time they are hanging out with him in his patrol car, they change the rules of the arrangement in order to gain their revenge:

**Boo** Next time we's in his car we got him back though.

**Marie** Yeah man. I give him a long blow job then I bit him.<sup>43</sup>

Lulling the policeman into a false sense of security with sexual favours and playing on gender stereotypes, Marie and Boo exact their revenge. The sexual nature of

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<sup>42</sup> Paranoid schizophrenia is often referred to as a disease of the mind and can be caused by a range of factors, including genetics, abnormalities of the brain, environmental influences during pregnancy and socially disturbed inter-personal relationships. It is treatable but not curable. Information about paranoid schizophrenia from: [www.psychiatry24x7.com/bgdisplay.jhtml?itemname=nonprofbackschiz010&s=2](http://www.psychiatry24x7.com/bgdisplay.jhtml?itemname=nonprofbackschiz010&s=2) or [www.psychonet-uk.com/dsm\\_iv/schizophrenia\\_disorder/](http://www.psychonet-uk.com/dsm_iv/schizophrenia_disorder/)

<sup>43</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal*, p.16

their attack has further implications of castration and symbolising the removal of the centre of male power and authority that operates as a restraining force within their lives.

The use of the *femme fatale* is then problematised through the dramaturgical strategies Prichard employs. Rather than simply show the violence, as was the trend in the performance of violence during the Nineties, Prichard uses narration so that the characters offer a verbal commentary alongside the physical action. Therefore when Marie and Boo recount their assault on the policeman not only do they show the audience what happened but they also describe it and say what they were thinking:

**Marie** He was making me nearly faint where he had his hands pumping my head so's I couldn't stop. I felt like I was gonna be there for the rest of my life. So I took his prick between my teeth and bit him, hard as I could without biting it off. His head nearly hit the fucking roof of the car.<sup>44</sup>

This enables the audience to understand why Marie and Boo behave violently and how it makes them feel, contributing to a more pluralistic portrayal of the young women. (The invocation of the *femme fatale* is discussed further in Chapter Three, in relation to the body and postmodern resistant strategies.)

Throughout the play there is a strong sense that Prichard is encouraging the audience to understand the lives of Marie and Boo by reinforcing their perspective. This is achieved through the use of multiple role-playing, the two actors as Marie and Boo play all the parts. Thus, the audience are being told the story and seeing the action through the eyes of Marie and Boo, their version of events. This

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.16

manipulation of audience perspective is exemplified in Act Two when Marie recounts her attack on rival gang leader Wendy:

**Marie** I remember being a few feet from the group. I remember Wendy turning round and looking right into my eyes. I think she step back and say 'No don't' but I was out of it I can't remember. I put the glass in her neck. I turned it and see her flesh go white. I heard her scream but then I realise the scream had come from her mate. Blood was coming from her neck like a waterfall. Everyone was backing away from her. She was lumbering around holding her neck like there was a scorpion on it. Then she fell to the ground.<sup>45</sup>

By underscoring Marie's perspective of the attack as opposed to the perspective of her rival Wendy, the audience are encouraged to empathise with Marie despite her being the perpetrator of the violence.

Prichard's employment of multiple role-playing and the presentation of simultaneous action and commentary works as a postmodernist resistant strategy. The multi-perspective experience relates to Jencks' notion of double-coding and would have appealed to both the West End and the prison audience.<sup>46</sup> For the West End audience, the use of described and narrated violence had a dual role of making the characters both familiar and strange. The narrative style and multiple role-playing may have encouraged the audience to adopt Marie and Boo's perspective, but their use of language, a mixture of East End London slang and Jamaican patois may also have distanced them. For example, in Act One all of the girls are forced to spend the night in police custody after getting involved in a fight at Trenz. Posse member Deniz insists on speaking in patois to the police officer to evade his

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.47

<sup>46</sup> Marvin Carlson attributes the concept of double-coding to the architect, Charles Jencks who suggested that postmodern architecture appeals to a double audience of experts and the public alike with its playful combination of multiple forms. Marvin Carlson, *Performance, A Critical Introduction*, p.130

questions and as a display of aggression and challenge to male authority. Here, Prichard is using dialect to foreground the gap between the girls and the police officer who represents white, middle-class, male authority:

**Marie** (*as Deniz: she begins speaking in unintelligible patois*) 'Yeah das how dey run ting in a ghetto we jus deal wi'ting up front know what me a say then poliss 'cm come an make enquiry an write it abn papah half hour dis half hour dat you know what me a say you want me say yes fit dis or yes fit dat cyan arks me in plain English I nah say a word. Wha? I'm speakin' English wish language be dis. Yeah man y'ave to check it out 'im bring a bag a gun and dem fire'pon yout' and yout' and yout' an ya poliss frien' come for dem gun an' I tell 'cm na run. Man nah stop kill man seen, man nah stop rob man seen. A' wha'gwan in de ghetto me bruddah?'<sup>47</sup>

Had there been an actor playing the part of the police officer on the stage, the West End audiences may have been inclined to identify with the figure of authority, who like them would arguably not have spoken in or been familiar with a Jamaican, patois dialect.

Alternatively, the dialect of Deniz/Marie was perhaps more familiar to the prison audiences. For them, the emphasis on storytelling encouraged identification with Marie and Boo and could have been understood as a reflection of their lives in prison, physically and metaphorically. Not only does everyone in prison have a story to tell or hide regarding her crime and life outside, but also, limited physically and socially by their isolated environment, verbal communication can take on a greater importance.

At the end of the play Marie and Boo have changed. They are no longer members of the girl gang which was once such a pivotal part of their lives. The

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<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal*, p.29

sense of movement and development of their lives works against stereotypes in that it suggests a woman's violent behaviour is changeable. Mike Brake commenting on the notion of change in relation to gangs and youth subcultures, suggests the gang can represent a period of rebellion in young people's lives but it is ultimately transitory, marking the passage from adolescence to adulthood.<sup>48</sup> Although Brake refers to young male gang members, his comments seem equally applicable to the representation of Marie and Boo in *Yard Gal*.

With *Yard Gal* Prichard recognises stereotypes and her characters occupy shifting positions, being both familiar and strange, but the play is never ambiguous when it comes to the causes of Marie and Boo's violent behaviour. It is firmly rooted within its context, which Prichard makes clear from the start with Boo's opening speech about Hackney and the 'yardie' gang culture. When Marie and Boo leave the gang neither continues to behave violently, thus implying that it was a product of their environment and their roles as yard girls within a girl gang. In this way, it can be argued that *Yard Gal* adopts a resistant dramaturgical position from which stereotypical representations can be recognised and challenged.

### **Transgressive and Progressive**

In both plays, the representation of women who display violent behaviour amounts to an understanding of the causes of female acts of violence in response to the ebb and flow of wider representations of such women in contemporary society. It is a response which is not exclusory or conditional, but in a very postmodernist

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<sup>48</sup> Mike Brake. *The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures. Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.27

way, is inclusive of all women who are shown to behave in a violent manner, the causes of their behaviour, their histories and their stories. Both Upton and Prichard not only recognise the range of causes and manifestations, but also reference current debates and feminist critiques relating to women and violence. Hayley, Jo, Anna Lauren, Marie and Boo are portrayed as perpetrators and victims, driven by culture and nature and occupying positions of Self and Other.

Thus, there may have been traces of 'maenads' or 'furies' on the stage in Nineties Britain, but equally there were angry women, women in desperate situations due to socio-economic and cultural conditions, women who were pushed to the extreme, women who chose to fight in order to survive and women who changed and progressed. In this sense, these plays represent a move away from the over-simplification and dualistic representation of female violence perpetuated by patriarchal understandings of men and women's roles in society towards an understanding that embraces complexity and multiple identities.

To progress the investigation, the next chapter continues to examine girl gangs in contemporary British society but also includes the actions of other women who do not operate within a gang such as Catc in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. Moving on from the causes of violent behaviour displayed by women, Chapter Three develops further the impact of cultural forces upon female identity in relation to the female body and the desire for control and transformation.

# 3

## The Female Transgressor: Transgressive Control of Self and Other

A woman lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

In *Blasted*, Cate has a stutter, is prone to fainting fits and is raped. In *Ashes and Sand*, Hayley self-harms and there is the implication Lauren starves herself. In *Yard Gal*, Marie is physically abused by her father and Boo abuses her body through drug abuse. In each of these plays, the female body is presented as a compromised body, symbolic of women's inferior physical and psychological role in society compared to men. But, reflecting shifts in female identity during the Nineties, the plays also portray an alternative conception of the female body as physically powerful and capable of inflicting physical violence, signifying both female inner strength and emancipation. In the course of *Blasted*, Cate fights back against Jan, her abuser and her stutter and fainting fits disappear. For Hayley, Lauren and the other members of the girl gang, behaving violently gives them an identity, a sense of power and a short-term financial fix. And in *Yard Gal*, Marie and Boo learn that the

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,' in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.150

only way to survive on the streets of Hackney is to belong to a gang and use violence to protect themselves and one another.

Through analysis of the female body in *Ashes and Sand*, *Blasted* and *Yard Gal*, this chapter extends the investigation initiated in Chapter Two with regard to stereotypes and characterisation, to the female body. It will consider the female body as it exists within and is shaped by the environment, relating to issues of control and transformation.

Fundamental to the interrogation is the desire for physical transformation in order for women to reclaim their bodies and take control of their lives, escaping the restraints of patriarchy to achieve a position of greater subjectivity and authority in society. Some critics have viewed violent behaviour by women not only as a woman's attempt to protect herself and fight back but also as an assertion of her reclaimed body and her new-found physical power and position of control. However, female-led violence is often inextricably linked to a woman's victim status, which suggests that the links between violence, power and control are not as automatic as this position implies. Moreover, Susan Bordo warns – and I shall return to her position later – we can never be sure how much a woman is really in control of her body and how much she is controlled by cultural pressures, telling her to diet, to exercise, be attractive, be assertive, be violent.

Thus, in *Blasted*, does Cate take control of her body when she attacks Ian or when she has sex with a soldier in exchange for food and water? Does Lauren's desire to transform her body so that she is fit and strong demonstrate an effort to control the shape and capabilities of her body? And are the often 'controlled' acts of



violence by the women represented in these plays, a sign of women's off-stage reclamation and control of their bodies and their lives, or a further reinforcement of women as rooted within their bodies and their 'inherent' lack of control? Are these characters really gaining control of their bodies and their destinies through their transgressive behaviour and desire for transformation or are they, in responding to cultural forces, being duped?

Drawing upon postmodernism and the notion of postmodern bodies, as well as phenomenological accounts of the body, particularly Elizabeth Grosz and Toril Moi, the chapter will aspire to maintain the non-restrictive, pluralistic position occupied in Chapter Two with regard to the representation of women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour. By acknowledging the complex characters of these women and drawing attention to their bodies as fluid, changeable constructs, this chapter will understand female bodies as *produced* bodies as Elizabeth Grosz describes:

The body or bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social construction of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies, Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.x

### **Anatomy is Destiny**

As I established in Chapter Two, the female body is traditionally in Western Culture represented as irrational, lacking in control, animalistic even, due to its biology and predisposition to hormonal changes and impulses. Such an understanding has been used to maintain women in a position of weakness and inferiority within the patriarchal framework. Grosz comments:

Female sexuality and women's powers of reproduction are the defining (cultural) characteristics of women, and, at the same time, these very functions render women vulnerable, in need of protection or special treatment, as variously described by patriarchy. The male/female opposition has been closely allied with the mind/body opposition...women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities.<sup>3</sup>

The representation of the female body as weak, prone to sickness or irrational outbursts, has, on the whole restricted women and created a gulf between themselves and their bodies. During the highly moralistic Victorian era, middle-class women were required to assume a level of decorum and restraint both mentally and physically, in order to prevent unruly outbursts. They were expected to cover up their bodies with layers of clothing, thus the female body remained hidden from view, its concealment generating mystery and fear and further perpetuating patriarchal systems of representation.

By contrast, working-class women who could not afford layers of clothes and who were more accustomed to physical labour, were depicted as base, coarse, more sexually promiscuous and more receptive to their 'naturally' wayward

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp.13-14

tendencies. The supposed lack of control and femininity displayed by these women fuelled speculation that they were sexual deviants or 'not' women, thus the female body was again treated as an object of fear and mystery.

For non-white, non-European women, their objectification in Western society has been further pronounced, with their bodies carrying 'a triple burden of negative bodily associations.'<sup>4</sup> Not only are the bodies of these women – as for all women – interpreted as signs of weak character and lack of control, but their skin colour and shape of their bodies are interpreted as a sign of their primal, animalistic and sexual tendencies as well as carrying with it the legacy of slavery. Thus, non-white women may feel an even greater sense of detachment from their bodies which are treated as: 'Mere matter, thing-hood' to be dominated and owned as someone's – the white, European male's - property.<sup>5</sup> From this representation there has developed an attitude towards non-white women and their bodies as more exotic but also more worthless and dispensable than white women.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, a primary concern for all feminists has been the deconstruction of patriarchal perceptions of the female body as an object of fear, mystery and male sexual desire, and the development of a critique of woman as the female Other.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993), p.11

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.11

<sup>6</sup> In the context of this study, I am using the words exotic and exoticisation to describe a voyeuristic image, which highlights the differences of that image from the dominant, white, male European culture.

### Otherness and Contemporary Exotica

The concept of Otherness, was first developed to describe the way colonising cultures, those of the dominant, European white male, understood and represented colonised people.<sup>7</sup> However, Simone de Beauvoir referred to the cultural construction of woman as man's Other in *The Second Sex* (1949), suggesting that because self is defined in opposition to something and men have occupied the category of self for themselves, women have been denied the right to their own subjectivity and thus have become Other. Twenty years later, French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous examined the construction of the female Other through language and culture using the work of French psychoanalytical theorist, Jacques Lacan.<sup>8</sup>

In order to create a space for the emergence of the female subject, the project for the French feminists was to release the female from the position of objectified female Other and bring about her re-birth into a new order. As Sue Thornham explains: 'To establish a female identity, language and writing which would subvert and/or deconstruct the phallogentricity of the symbolic order.'<sup>9</sup> Not all feminists share the same intentions as Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, but most feminists would

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<sup>7</sup> Frantz Fanon explores the representation of otherness in colonial relations. He discusses the way in which images of non-dominant peoples reflected the dominant, colonising powers, effecting the way those people saw themselves. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin: White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968)

<sup>8</sup> According to Lacan, subjectivity is formed in the child over three stages: the precultural, the mirror and the symbolic stage. It is through the development of these stages that the child gains its own subjectivity. Firstly, the child begins to recognise itself in relation to the world, which takes the form of dichotomous pairings such as self and other, and then through language it begins to understand its culture and learn the social structures in the world. The pairings formed during this development, self/other, male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, are fundamental to a patriarchal social structure, and at such an early stage in a child's development, form the bedrock to his/her understanding of themselves and their relationships with others in Western culture. Therefore, those who occupy the position of Other are required to adopt a secondary, submissive role in society.

<sup>9</sup> Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism,' in Sarah Gamble (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.41

agree on the need to challenge patriarchal systems of representation and identify a female voice outwith the position of objectified Other.

The notion of the female Other becomes a site of particular importance with the representation of women who display violent behaviour, as some gender stereotypes such as the *femme fatale*, can work to further cement the female in the position of Other. Even though these women may adopt more 'masculine' physical characteristics and attributes such as strength, power and aggression, they can still be positioned as man's object within a patriarchal framework due to the marketing of such images as exotic and sexually desiring.

Bordo has remarked that the exoticisation of marginalised groups in society, is caused by the way in which consumer capitalism 'drops in' on those groups when responding to the continuous demands for new images, identities and fashions:

Consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire, and it frequently drops into marginalized neighbourhoods in order to find them. But such elements will either be explicitly *framed* as exotica or, within the overall system of meaning, they will not be permitted to overwhelm the representation and establish a truly alternative or "subversive" model of beauty or success.<sup>10</sup>

In Britain in the Nineties, the increased media attention towards ladettes, girl gangs and women who engage in violent behaviour, could be understood as examples of such novelty production. Cartoon images of girls carrying baseball bats studded with nails and wearing only shorts and a bra (*The Guardian*, 22/07/98) or pictures of conventionally attractive young women wearing a football strip (*Loaded* magazine front cover, issue 5, September 1994 and front cover, issue 27, July 1996)

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, p.25

or football scarves in place of underwear (*Loaded* front cover, issue 65, September 1999), emphasised the sexual desirability of women and framed them as exotica while also undermining the positive achievements of the feminist movement. Also, these exoticised images of women can be understood as further evidence of a feminist backlash in Nineties Britain as suggested earlier in Chapter One.

In her book, *Women in Contemporary Britain* Jane Pilcher puts forward the following description of magazines like *Loaded*:

Their content centres around the concerns and interests of 'New Laddism', a form of masculinity where pre-feminist traditional 'macho' interests of 'booze' (especially beer), 'babes/birds' (sexually attractive women), 'bad language' and sport (especially football) are resurrected and exaggerated in a self-conscious, ironic and (allegedly) humorous way. Hence, *Loaded* is subtitled as a magazine for 'men who should know better.'<sup>11</sup>

The content of *Loaded* as Pilcher lists, highlights the magazine's role to re-assert traditional masculine values and interests, particularly at a time when feminism was destabilising the social and political inequality of women and many traditional notions of masculinity. The supposed ironic sexism in *Loaded* appears only to reinscribe anti-feminist discourse. The magazine editors might profess to target an active, resistive reader with the subtitle, 'for men who should know better,' but in the context of a postmodern society I would question the sincerity of such a claim.

The way in which magazines such as *Loaded* 'drop in' on and then manipulate female identities, reinforces the female in the position of objectified Other. Thus women and the feminist movement as a whole are kept in a secondary

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Pilcher, *Women in Contemporary Britain, An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.127

place in society, never posing any real threat to patriarchal systems of representation.

However, I contend the notion of the objectified female Other can be destabilised in relation to issues of control and transformation where the female is complicit in the construction of her image, an area I will examine later in relation to postmodern bodies in the form of 'pop' icon Madonna.

### **Relocating from Nature to Culture: Discipline and Control in Contemporary Cultural Practices**

While second-wave feminists were challenging patriarchal assumptions of the female body, ordinary women, encouraged by diverse and sometimes antithetical forces like the growing consumer market, began to explore the malleability and physical potential of their bodies through exercise such as aerobics and weightlifting, diet and also increasingly plastic surgery. The female body was becoming detached from its 'natural' roots and the subject of much moulding, changing and transforming. Images began to emerge in popular culture, often connected to a supposed physique-enhancing brand or product, of women sweating or women with muscles appearing desirable and in control. For many women, such new-found physical freedom gave them a sense of control over their bodies as well as an escape from previous discourses, which forbade their involvement in 'masculine' pursuits. However, the marketing and control of images pertaining to the transformed female body by the commercial industries can be understood as nothing more than a re-positioning of the parameters of desirability. As Susan

Bordo points out, the female body was still being controlled and owned by an-other outside force (commercial sector) determining what is and is not considered desirable and acceptable.<sup>12</sup>

In her reflection on increased consumerism and commercialisation and influenced by Foucauldian theory about docile and disciplined bodies, Bordo argues that during the Seventies and Eighties the female body relocated from nature to culture, but that ownership still remained beyond the female subject:

Within a Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus, the heady experience of feeling powerful, or 'in control', far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of one's actual social position, is always suspect as itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different. Within such a framework, too, one can acknowledge that women are not always passive 'victims' of sexism, but that we may contribute to the perpetuation of female subordination, for example, by participating in industries and cultural practices which represent women as sexual enticements and rewards for men.<sup>13</sup>

Bordo terms this process self-normalisation, where assumed characteristics of masculine and feminine behaviour are reproduced through cultural practices. Those women who took up various forms of exercise to change the shape and capabilities of their bodies may have gained increased muscle visibility and felt physically stronger but they were still buying into an image which advertisements told them would bring them more confidence, love and success. Feminism may have

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<sup>12</sup> While women were re-shaping their bodies and taking part in more physical activities, men's bodies became increasingly more feminised and objectified. From male-strip groups such as The Chippendales, to the 'Diet Coke break' commercials, where office women of varying shapes and sizes arranged to meet by the diet coke dispenser to gaze at the toned bodies of the (blue collar) workmen outside. For more on the depiction of men's bodies as sexual objects, subordinate to the gaze of the voyeur, whether heterosexual female or homosexual male, see Susan Bordo, *The Male Body, A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, 1999)

<sup>13</sup> Susan Bordo, 'Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body' in Jane Price and Margaret Shildrick (eds.), *Feminist Theory and The Body, A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 253-4



emancipated the female body from the problems of biologicistic thought, but patriarchal systems of representation which thrived within the growing consumer society, continued to deny women ownership of their bodies.

Although the on-going feminist, Foucauldian-inspired deconstruction of the female body is useful in that it exposes those structures which restrain and regulate the representation of female bodies and their destinies, I question its ultimate removal of power and control from the female subject. While the reasons behind women's desires to change the shape of their bodies may be suspect, the results of these changes such as increased strength and fitness can have a positive effect in terms of stimulating confidence, which in turn affects the attitude of others towards the stronger female body, as Bordo comments:

While it is true that we may experience the illusion of 'power' while actually performing as 'docile bodies' (for example, my analysis of the situation of the anorectic), it is also true that our very 'docility' can have consequences that are personally liberating and/or culturally transforming. So for example (to construct some illustrations not found in Foucault), the woman who goes on a rigorous weight-training programme in order to achieve a currently stylish look may discover that her new muscles also enable her to assert herself more forcefully.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, to suggest that women who exercise frequently, play football, weight lift, diet or learn self-defence are merely duping themselves, is locating them in a passive role and denying that they have or are capable of having any control over their bodies and their destinies. Thus, even though the work of Bordo exemplifies that a feminist critique of the structures, cultural and biological, which shape and control

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p.254

the female body has developed, it is debateable whether alongside it there has also emerged a conception that relates to the actual, material body.

### **Postmodern Bodies: Performativity, Play and Positions of Self**

No longer an obstacle to knowledge (for knowledge in the Cartesian sense is an impossibility, and the body is incapable of being transcended in pursuit of it), the body is seen instead as the vehicle of the human making and remaking of the world, constantly shifting location, capable of revealing endlessly new points of view....The postmodern body is the body of the mythological Trickster, the shape-shifter.<sup>15</sup>

In the popular music industry Madonna is renowned for continually reinventing herself. Each time she releases a new record she changes her image and sometimes gender to fit the mood of the song, transforming from 1950s Marilyn Monroe look-a-like for 'Material Girl' (1984), to androgyne for 'Vogue' (1990) and exaggerated sex symbol for her Blonde Ambition Tour (1992). In many ways her innumerable transformations position her as the embodiment of a postmodernist aesthetic, the focal point of which is her body. Taking an ambiguous approach towards her image and identity, she never allows herself to be type-cast or fixed. Rather, she adopts a playful attitude to stereotypes, occupying them in order to liberate them from fixed meanings and symbols, to the extent that her image and identity becomes purely performative. For her debut single 'Like a Virgin' (1983), she adopted a trashy,

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, pp.227-8

whore-like image, flouting her rebellious sexuality, yet as the creator of her image remained firmly in control. She may have looked sexually promiscuous but that did not mean she was.

As a postmodern model of resistance, Madonna's physical representation may be liberating to those who are understanding of and complicit in its use, but the ambivalence surrounding the reception of resistant performance can be dangerous, as Derrida has warned: 'By repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts...by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house...one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating...that which one allegedly deconstructs.'<sup>16</sup> Thus, young women influenced by Madonna may enjoy the sense of physical freedom that comes when copying her image, but others may misread the signs and misinterpret the irony and performativity of the 'Like a Virgin' image for sexual promiscuity and availability.

Similarly, Nineties pop group the Spice Girls can also be understood as offering a representation of postmodern female bodies. Although they were each given a fixed image – Posh, Sporty, Baby, Scary and Ginger – as a group their contrasting identities indicated a postmodern nod towards plurality, an inclusive gesture perhaps to girls of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds. According to the Spice Girls, all girls could have what they wanted whatever their image, united under the banner of 'Girl Power.' By wearing revealing mini-dresses, short skirts, high heels and figure-hugging body-suits (with the exception of Sporty Spice who was represented as the tomboy of the group in tracksuit and trainers), it seemed girl power was achievable

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man,' *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p.135

only if a girl was prepared to show a bit of flesh and present herself as sexually alluring and available.

However, posing as postmodern bodies and operating as models of resistance, Madonna and the Spice Girls were, through their performances conforming to current gender stereotypes. I propose the notion of performance and playfulness underlying these postmodern bodies undermines any form of critique and sense of control a woman may have over her body. Therefore, the performative bodies of Madonna and the Spice Girls were not necessarily representative of their real identities or opinions, rather the construction of a fantasy, manufactured to bring commercial success. Behind of which, lies an old dualism as Bordo suggests:

The notion that one can play a porno house by night and regain one's androgynous innocence by day does not seem to me to be a refusal of essentialist categories about gender, but rather a new inscription of mind/body dualism. What the body does is immaterial, so long as the imagination is free.<sup>17</sup>

Thus in the Nineties, there may have been traces of postmodern female bodies as a playful, performative concept or fantasy manipulated by the capitalist drives of the entertainment industries, but in relation to the real, lived body, they were unrealisable, distant from a material, lived body concept.

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, p.275

## Phenomenology and Female Bodies

### 1.1) The Lived Body

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty has commented that: 'To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world. Our body is not primarily *in* space: it is of it.'<sup>18</sup> To further develop an understanding of the female body, some academics have turned to the subject of phenomenology, the concern with the lived body and its relationship with and perception of the world. Toril Moi, highly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, has suggested, that when theorising subjectivity and identity, instead of conceiving of the body as gendered, it is more useful to theorise it as a *lived body*. Thus, rather than understand behaviour as either masculine or feminine, a person's behaviour should be considered apart from their gender:

Instead of speaking of the body in terms of sex and gender, I have found it useful to speak in terms of bodies and subjectivity. What Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir show is that the relationship between body and subjectivity is neither necessary nor arbitrary, but contingent. For these thinkers the body is fundamentally ambiguous, neither simply subject to the natural laws of cause and effect that science might uncover, nor simply an effect of consciousness (or of power, ideology, or regulatory discourses, for that matter)...The human body is neither sex nor gender, neither nature nor culture. To say that my subjectivity stands in a contingent relationship to my body is to acknowledge that my body will significantly influence both what society – others – make of me, and the kind of choices I will make in response to the Other's image of me, but it is also to acknowledge that no specific form of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body.<sup>19</sup>

Moi's theory of the lived body identity offers a way of understanding the body in the world which challenges any notion of a predetermined, fixed body identity and

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<sup>18</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1962), p.148

<sup>19</sup> Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.114

could be a useful concept in relation to non-stereotypical understandings of female acts of violence. For example, the behaviour of a woman whose anger spills over into physical violence such as punching, hitting and kicking, could be read not simply in terms of masculine and feminine, male or female behaviour. Instead it could become the subject of a phenomenological account of violence, whereby the actions of the body are not necessarily controlled by subjectivity but are the contingent result of a combination of forces. Thus, the woman's physical behaviour could be viewed as separate from her gender and so she would no longer be represented in terms of breaking *roles*. Although such a concept is potentially transforming it is perhaps a radical proposition within a patriarchal framework where action and codes of gendered behaviour are inextricably linked. Moi herself admits that her critique of the sex-gender distinction is not without controversy, but suggests it can help to release the body from constraints and encourage alternative approaches to the understanding of the female body.

### **1.2) The *Produced* Body**

Elizabeth Grosz is also influenced by phenomenology and her theory of the produced body contrasts with Moi's lived body concept. Grosz suggests that the body is not separate from any of the forces which may shape it but that it is a product of these forces. Therefore a woman's behaviour is not caused only by her biology but is a product of a range of forces, historical, cultural and social, which continually affects how her body is produced:

I will deny that there is the “real” material body on the one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the other. It is my claim throughout this book that these representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the female body is not entirely pre-determined by biology nor is it a blank canvas or androgyne, but carries the inscriptions of other, past corporeal and cerebral histories and will attract further re-inscriptions and re-writing depending on its future encounters.

It is Grosz’s produced bodies, carrying with them the traces of history as well as potential for the future, which I suggest offers the most suitable method of understanding the material, female body capable of violent behaviour, as captured in certain Nineties play texts. However, Moi’s lived body identity is not completely redundant, but could in some cases prove useful for those women wishing to escape the unbearable weight of histories which restrict and control their bodies. Therefore, in *Ashes and Sand*, Hayley’s tendency to self-harm and her outbursts of physical violence are part of her battle to escape her environment and point to the *produced* nature of her body, while Lauren’s constant exercising reveals her desire to transform her body in order to survive within a violent environment. In *Yard Gal*, Marie’s body and her destiny is transformed through pregnancy and motherhood whereas Boo, carrying with her the history of the non-white, female body seems caught up in a cycle of abuse, unable to take control of her abused body. In *Blasted*, Cate’s body is continually shaped and *produced* by her social context and her survival within that environment becomes symbolic of her (re)gained ownership of her body.

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies, Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, p.x

### **Bodies and Spaces: Territorial Battles and Fighting for Control**

In *Ashes and Sand*, Upton's characters inhabit an environment which continually restricts and breaks the human body, both male and female. From the violent attack in the opening scene to images of bloodied faces, headless corpses, self-mutilation, foot fetishes, impotency, hand dances and bodies tattooed with make-up, the body is represented as confined by and in battle with its environment. Within this landscape the female body represents Grosz's produced body.

With their fighting, stalking and vigorous exercising, the girl gang in *Ashes and Sand* appear to physically dominate and 'own' the stage space, particularly when it represents the pier, their territory and the site of their violent assaults on unsuspecting lone male victims. They are an assertive and formidable force, in control of their bodies and the spaces they inhabit. However, they are also desperate to escape the hopelessness of their lives and feel restrained by their social environment and the lack of opportunities it provides. In the 1994 production, the girls' entrapment was symbolised through the mirrored set, which inhibited and prevented such an escape, both physically and psychologically as they were literally unable to escape. Therefore, the female body occupied a dual position within its environment, of flight and imprisonment. In *The Guardian* Claire Armitstead commented: 'Mirrors create a sense of life lived in a semi-fictional world of imagined power and actual impotence that harks back to Brighton Rock.'<sup>21</sup> And in *The Independent*, Sarah Hemming referred to the way the set design created an

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<sup>21</sup>For reviews see *Theatre Record*, vol xiv, issue 25-26, January 9<sup>th</sup> 1995, pp.1517-8  
 Claire Armitstead, *The Guardian*, December 8<sup>th</sup> 1994



'alienating world.'<sup>22</sup> Thus, the use of mirrors not only problematised the girls' control of the space but also suggesting a confused and fragmented world with echoes of *Brighton Rock* (1947), as Armitstead described, the set acknowledged the play's historical and cultural context as well as offering a reflection of the shifts within youth subcultures and current Nineties debates and moral panics regarding girl gangs.

The reflective but fragmentary configuration of the set also worked to distort the physical representation of the girls and so questioned the process of objectification. For example, the erotic connotations of watching a group of young girls fighting with a man, as in Act One, Scene One and Act Three Scene One, may have been amplified in the small studio space, but were then frustrated by the mirrors, which broke up and distorted the erotic connotations of the image. The mirrors could also be read as offering multiple perspectives of the performance space and the characters, encouraging the audience to consider the causes of the girls' behaviour as multi-faceted and constantly evolving, produced by both predetermined and cultural forces. Further, the use of mirrors worked to force the audience to reflect upon their own position as voyeurs of women who engage in violent behaviour.

Similarly in *Yard Gal*, the physical representation of Marie and Boo can be understood in relation to Grosz's notion of the produced and producing body as well as relating to postmodernist strategies and postmodern bodies. While Marie and Boo appear concurrently in control of but then victims of their environment, the use of narration and multiple role-playing as the two characters dominate the stage

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Hemming, *The Independent*, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1994

space, dictating the course of events, suggests the girls control the action and consequently the construction of their identities and the positions they occupy, as they lead the audience on a journey through the dark streets and night clubs of Hackney and the yardie gang culture:

**Boo** (*aggressively*) This is a story about me and Marie and the posse that we used to move with. It's about chatting shit getting fucked, getting high and doing our crimes and the shit that be going down in the yard innit.

**Marie** Right.

**Boo** We's from Hackney. People talk a lot of shit about Hackney when they ain't never been there, and they talk a lot of shit about yards when they ain't never met none. So me and Marie we come to tell you a story that is FI' REAL. Innit Marie.<sup>23</sup>

However, the Hackney that they claim to know and love undermines their show of physical strength and courage and despite their controlling position, their bodies become the focus of constant force and abuse. The female body is both a symbol of power, as the girls attempt to exert their control over others through violence, but also a symbol of weakness and fragility as they themselves become the victims of violence.

Sarah Kane's debut play, *Blasted*, opened on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1995, at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. The play was lambasted for its violent content and lack of structure, sparking a media furore on a scale that had not been seen in the theatre since Howard Brenton's *The Romans In Britain* in 1981. The play begins with the meeting of two people, in a Leeds hotel room. Ian a middle-aged journalist originally from Wales but now living in Leeds, and Cate a lower-middle class

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<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Prichard *Yard Gal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.6

twenty-one year old from the South of England, and goes on to examine the impact of a mortar bomb blast in the room, which sends the lives of the two characters into chaos. What begins as a familiar scene of sexual frustration and abuse turns into an onslaught of violence and destruction, which is played out graphically on stage. As the characters sink deeper into the hellish landscape, helped by the arrival of a soldier, they gradually attempt to come to terms with the chaotic events surrounding them and their relationship with one another.

From the outset, Cate occupies the position of the outsider. Ian has invited her to his hotel room and his command of the space is shown by the way in which he struts around the room with only a towel wrapped around him, ordering room service and complaining he has: 'Shat in better places than this.'<sup>24</sup> By contrast, although Cate initially appears excited and impressed with the plush hotel room, demonstrated in the way she bounces on the bed, she is also alienated within the environment shown through the manner in which she situates herself spatially and through the nature of her motility. She has a tendency to suck her thumb, an action associated with babies and small children and which can be regarded in Freudian terms as penis envy, demonstrating her lack as a woman and position as Other in society. She also suffers from fainting fits and a stutter when under stress, which appear to have been brought on by the return of her father, both of which work to further indicate her low (female) status and physically compromised body:

*(He starts to kiss her again.)*

**Cate** I t- t- t- t- t- t- told you. I really like you but I c- c- c- c- can't do this.

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<sup>24</sup> Sarah Kane, *Blasted* in *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p.3

**Ian** (*Kissing her.*) Shhh.

(*He starts to undo her trousers.*)

**Cate** *panics.*

*She starts to tremble and make inarticulate crying sounds.*

**Ian** *stops, frightened of bringing another 'fit' on.*<sup>25</sup>

Although in this instance, the possibility of Cate having a fit stops Ian's sexual advances - in a sense her body saves her - it is only a temporary pause. Ian goes on to suggest it is unfair of Cate to leave him 'hanging,' and so takes her hand and uses it to masturbate himself until he orgasms.<sup>26</sup> With her disabled body, Cate is vulnerable to sexual attack and lacking in power and control she is unable to stop Ian from using her hand.

In the first half of *Blasted*, Ian rapes Cate during the night and the next morning she appears angry and anxious to take revenge on him. At first she attacks his jacket, ripping the arm out of the seams. She then directly attacks Ian, hitting and slapping him until he wrestles her on to the bed. Fighting with him furiously, she eventually manages to take his gun:

*She takes the gun from his holster and points it at his groin.  
He backs off rapidly.*

**Ian** Easy, easy, that's a loaded gun.

**Cate** I d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d-

**Ian** Cate, come on.

**Catie** d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.15

**Ian** You don't want an accident. Think about your mum. And your brother. What would they think?

**Cate** I d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d- d-

**Cate** *trembles and starts gasping for air. She faints.*<sup>27</sup>

Despite the anger Cate feels, her disabled body fails her. She is unable to express herself through her body and so trapped within it takes on the role of the stereotypical weak female, physically incapable and psychologically disturbed. When Cate regains her consciousness she is still angry and upset by Ian's treatment of her but rather than try to overpower him physically, she decides to capitalise on Ian's increasing fear. (He believes a secret service/spy organisation he has worked for are now out to get him.) She comforts him by seducing him, which then allows her to manoeuvre him into a more vulnerable position, ready for her attack:

**Ian** Done the jobs they asked. Because I loved this land.

**Cate** *(Sucks his nipples.)*

**Ian** Stood at stations, listened to conversations and given the nod.

**Cate** *(Undoes his trousers.)*

**Ian** Driving jobs. Picking people up, disposing of bodies, the lot.

**Cate** *(Begins to perform oral sex on Ian.)*

**Ian** Said you were dangerous....I am a Killer.

*On the word 'killer' he comes.*

*As soon as Cate hears the word she bites his pants as hard as she can.*

*Ian's cry of pleasure turns into screams of pain.*

*He tries to pull away but Cate holds on with her teeth.*

*He hits her and she lets go.*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.26

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp.30-1

By playing the part of the female sex object and exploiting Ian's sexual expectations, Cate takes control of the situation and her movements and successfully overcomes Ian to exact her revenge. Complicit in the construction of her image, Cate's violent attack on Ian appears as an act and so her body takes on the form of postmodern bodies; a performing body, which enables her to transcend her physical disabilities. Her performance may only be temporary, but it allows her to exert power over Ian, her abuser and experience her body as a powerful force.

Shortly before the mortar bomb blasts the hotel room, Cate leaves to go to the bathroom, and remains absent throughout Ian's ordeal with the soldier. She later returns, soaking wet and carrying a baby. The addition of the baby, which she explains was given to her by a woman, has connotations of motherhood and the female body as a birthing body. But while Cate does try and care for the baby it soon dies.

From the point of her return Cate appears more self-assured and both her fits and stutter have disappeared. Her changed body can be related to Moi's lived body identity, in that Cate's body seems less gendered, she is not physically disabled and she appears confident both spatially and in the nature of her motility. Cate's stronger physical sense of herself is most apparent during her exchanges with Ian. In Scene Four, Ian, having been raped, blinded and abused by the soldier is physically trapped within his environment and so turns to Cate for help and reassurance:

**Ian** Will you touch me?

**Cate** No.

**Ian** So I know you are here.

**Cate** You can hear me.

**Ian** Won't hurt you, I promise.

**Cate** (*Goes to him slowly and touched the top of his head.*)

**Ian** Help me.

**Cate** (*Strokes his hair.*)<sup>29</sup>

This exchange mirrors the earlier incident when Ian forced Cate to masturbate him. Both encounters, involve a physical interaction between the two characters, instigated by Ian. But whereas the first encounter was controlled by Ian and was a sexual gesture, the second is controlled by Cate and is non-sexual. The transferral of power and control from Ian to Cate, is reflected in the physical composition of the image - Ian, blinded and sexually abused has lost his independence and is confined to a low status, on the ground, whereas Cate has control of her actions and freedom of movement. Not only does Cate appear to be in control of her relationship with Ian, but also the absence of her disabling stutter and fainting fits suggests the external forces, which had previously confined her to the role of objectified female Other, no longer affect her.

Cate's changed sense of her body in the world is further highlighted in the final scene of the play. Feeling hungry, Cate decides to go in search of food. Ian warns her not to because it is dangerous, but she seems unaffected by his warnings, even implying that if she has to, she is prepared to have sex with a soldier in exchange for food. She leaves and then soon re-enters, the stage directions state: '*Cate enters*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.53

*carrying some bread, a large sausage and a bottle of gin. There is blood seeping from between her legs.*<sup>30</sup> The blood suggests that Cate has had sex with a soldier to obtain the food. Faced with a life or death situation Cate has turned to her body as a commodity and currency to provide her and Ian with the food they crave. She has willingly (it seems) assumed the role of a sexual object in order to survive. While this gesture previously suggested that Cate was complicit in the use of her body, in this instance it also reveals that Cate's identity and the representation of her body are still very much produced by the environment; she has to have sex with the soldier because the soldiers are in charge so she must do as they say. Therefore, contrary to Moi's lived body identity, Cate's body is still a gendered body. It is the structures around her such as the authority of the soldiers, which glue her body to a feminine gender and confine her body to a fixed role. Cate's developed sense of confidence within her body is undermined by the action she is forced to take and therefore her body remains confined and controlled by external – often-patriarchal – forces operating within her environment.

### **Desires of Escape and Transformation**

For women, the fight to gain ownership of their bodies is rarely straightforward as the legacies of previous representations and present cultural pressures continue to shape future bodies. While they may attempt to gain control over their bodies and their destinies through dieting, physical exercise, plastic surgery, motherhood or transgressive behaviour, in a patriarchal society those actions are often understood

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.60



as further confirmation of the unreliability, uncontrollability and mystery of the female body.

In *Ashes and Sand*, Hayley remarks when looking in the mirror: ‘I look awful. I look like an old tart. I’m going to be sixteen soon – fuckin’ Jesus, that’s old. By the time I’m twenty, I’ll need a facelift.’<sup>31</sup> Hayley’s casual reference to plastic surgery suggests how young women in the Nineties, influenced by postmodernist notions of change and transformation thought that they could easily alter their appearance and their bodies and ultimately their identities, if and when they wanted. Her attitude implies that young women no longer saw themselves and their bodies as ‘rooted in immanence’ or ‘physically handicapped by patriarchy’ as Young comments, rather their bodies have become physically mobilised by the consumerist emphasis on change and the high profile of performative postmodern bodies within the music industry. But while the move away from a fixed body identity is essentially a positive shift for feminists keen to distance themselves from purely biologicistic understandings of the female body, there remains a question of control and motive; why does Hayley want to have plastic surgery and by doing so would she really be in control of her body?

Hayley’s lack of control over her life and her desire to effect change through transformation of her body is not only evident in the way she uses her body to inflict pain on others but also to inflict pain on herself through the act of self-mutilation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 2002), p.14

<sup>32</sup> Self-mutilation, self-harm or self-inflicted violence as it is also known is used by a person to serve a function. What the function is can vary but it may be a form of self-punishment, a distraction from emotional pain, a way of controlling painful thoughts or memories or an expression of feelings for which there are no words, a condition known as alexithymia. Sufferers say they are often feeling trapped and upset and self-harm allows them to feel more in control. Some also say that they are feeling detached and removed from their bodies and through self-harm begin to feel more alive and

**Scene Two.***Front stage right.***Hayley** *sits cutting at her arm with a blade.* **Anna** *comes in.* **Anna** *screams.***Hayley** Shut up!**Anna** Stop that then.**Hayley** Gone off blood?**Anna** You're sick. No, don't do it anymore, I'll...**Anna** *screams.* **Hayley** *tosses the blade aside.*<sup>33</sup>

Upton does not indicate exactly what causes Hayley to self-harm, but as an act, it reinforces the notion that she not only feels trapped by her environment as previously discussed but also within her body. Moreover, her desire to self-harm suggests she feels detached from her body, thus through violent abuse – both towards herself and to others - she may feel, just for a moment, more connected to her body, more alive and more in control of her body and her destiny.

Lauren is also keen to transform her body, through exercise. When Daniel asks her if she still goes to the gym, she replies:

**Lauren** Three nights a week. The whole gang do. You could meet us down there sometime. Feel my muscles.*He feels her upper arms.*It's a jungle out there. Survival of the fittest and all that.<sup>34</sup>


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connected to their bodies. For further information see, [www.rcpsyche.ac.co.uk/info/nhgu/newmhgu30.htm](http://www.rcpsyche.ac.co.uk/info/nhgu/newmhgu30.htm) An article in *The Guardian* on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003, titled 'Girls Who Cut,' examined the supposed increase in self-harm amongst young women.

<sup>33</sup> Judy Upton, *Ashes and Sand, Plays: 1*, p.45<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p.11

Lauren's need to develop muscles is motivated by a desire to protect herself in what she sees as a tough world; 'a jungle,' where physical fitness and ability count for everything. But although developing her muscles will give her extra psychological and physical power, which may then affect the way others treat her, there is still the possibility that she is being misled by popular culture trends, which insist muscles are desirable. Thus, does Lauren see the creation of a stronger, fitter body as the key to personal satisfaction and achievement or is she a docile body, mirroring the behaviour and transformation of popular culture icons and postmodern bodies such as Madonna?

It is possible that the degree to which Lauren may be responding to cultural pressures to change her body was strengthened in the 1994 production by the casting of a black actress in the role.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when Lauren talks of wanting a disguise or the other girls refer to her fat thighs in Act One Scene Two, her desire to transform her body becomes both a gender and a race issue. As an ethnic minority, Lauren would perhaps feel more aware of the differences in the shape of her body compared to the more desirable and culturally acceptable bodies of white, European women. Moreover, her implied eating disorder and willingness to have sex with Daniel so she can have a baby, are not only further attempts to transform and control her body, but also demonstrate a disregard for her body and the legacy it invokes.

The history of the black female body as 'mere matter' or 'thing-hood' is also evident in *Yard Gal*. While Marie is in hospital recovering from a stab wound she received following a fight with Wendy's gang, Boo becomes ostracised by the rest

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<sup>35</sup> See my comments on p.46 with regard to Lauren and her racial identity.

of the yard girls. Alone and feeling desperate, she sells her body for money so that she can buy drugs to unburden herself temporarily of her futile existence:

**Boo** I was doing stupid shit like grafting, pulling punters, then spending all my money getting off my head and lying in the roads on me own. I swear to God I used to lie in the road and cars had to drive around me until someone drag me out the way. I weren't doing uppers anymore like when I was with my mates. I was doing all the downers I could get hold of – valium, brown booze, everything just to keep my head still.<sup>36</sup>

Although Boo does not demonstrate the same desire to change her body through exercise or diet as Lauren in *Ashes and Sand*, her drug addiction and general abuse of her body exposes a similar sense of self-loathing towards her body as a black female body.

While this chapter has thus far drawn attention to bodies in the play texts in relation to Grosz's theory of produced bodies, Lauren and Boo's desire to escape their bodies and their situations through physical transformation seems to call upon Moi's lived body identity. Moi's emphasis on developing an understanding of the body apart from gender and/or subjectivity relates to their desire to distance themselves from their environment and their previous histories. Thus, while Boo's body is clearly a product of her environment if she were able to detach herself from her surroundings; the drugs and prostitution, she might be able to begin to transform her body and gain control of her life and destiny.

As the play progresses and the lives of Marie and Boo begin to develop in different directions, their bodies remain at the centre of their attempt to control their destinies. For Boo, her imprisonment means that she remains physically restricted

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<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal*, p.43

by her environment and the decision by the prison authorities to give her medication for paranoid schizophrenia further reduces her control and ownership of her body. Conversely, Marie does achieve a sense of escape at the end of the play through motherhood, although initially she is anxious about the changes it will cause to her body and her lifestyle:

**Marie** When I was in hospital they tell me I was pregnant. I was fucking gutted. I kept looking at myself in the mirror thinking I couldn't be pregnant 'cos I didn't look no different. I felt so weird, Like the baby was a alien thing inside me. I wanted to cut it out.<sup>37</sup>

As Marie's pregnancy develops, it brings about a radical transformation in her life. She manages to secure a permanent home for her and the baby, stops taking drugs and begins to look for a job. The way in which Marie takes possession of herself through pregnancy can be related to Julia Kristeva's description of the transformation of the pregnant body whereby the splitting of the subject leads to a sense of completeness:

Pregnancy seems to be experienced as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and co-existence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech. This fundamental challenge to identity is then accompanied by a fantasy of totality – narcissistic completeness...The arrival of the child on the other hand, leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child she would only rarely encounter, love for another...the slow, difficult, and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself.<sup>38</sup>

While there has developed a feminist critique of and scepticism of such romanticisation of the maternal, the arrival of Little Bukola (Boo is short for

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p.42

<sup>38</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms, An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p.456

Bukola) does give Marie a new focus in her life and the notion of ‘forgetting oneself’ is evident in that she tries to move on from her previous life full of drug taking, violence and prostitution.<sup>39</sup> As a mother, Marie has become engaged with her body and it has become a source of strength both for herself and for her daughter. However, the presence of Boo on the stage throughout, suggests Marie’s life as a yard gal will never completely be forgotten and the naming of her daughter as Little Bukola is a further reminder of her friend and the journey her life – and her body – has taken.

The play texts explored in this chapter use postmodernist resistant strategies to problematise gendered representations of the transgressive female body. By focusing on the way in which the play texts place the female body in the position of Self and Other, by showing her to be complicit in the construction of her objectified body and revealing her desires for escape and transformation, the study draws attention to the female body as resisting either/or dichotomies, offering instead a more progressive understanding of the often, maligned and mysterious representation of the female body. Cate, Hayley, Lauren, Marie and Boo do not live their bodies as things, rooted in immanence and detached from the world as Young describes, but by exploring the physical capabilities of their bodies, by breaking patriarchal rules and gender roles, these women begin to understand and to feel their bodies and get closer to the control and ownership that has often eluded female bodies and their place within the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Susan Bordo provides a good overview and critique of the reconstruction of developmental theory, placing the pre-oedipal mother at the centre as opposed to the phallic father, Susan Bordo, ‘Feminism, Postmodernism, Gender Skepticism,’ *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, pp.215-43

So far, this study has concentrated on women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour in relation to characterisation, focusing upon causes of violence and the use of the body. Central to the investigation has been analysing the behaviour of these women in relation to predetermined and cultural forces and how the plays destabilise and expose patriarchal systems of representation.

Thus, having established the role of violence as it directly relates to the characters and their lives there is now a further point of investigation to pursue; the framework the characters are positioned in, how their stories are told. Are these characters further restricted by the 'patriarchal' desire to make sense of and order their violent lives or do they respond to a more postmodernist, fragmentary temporality? Do the dramatists locate the characters within a traditional narrative structure or outside it? It is this investigation that I take up in the subsequent and final chapter, as I broaden my analysis to include *Ghost From a Perfect Place* by Philip Ridley and *Butterfly Kiss*, by Phyllis Nagy.

# 4

## Narrative Structures and Strategies of Resistance

**Ian** This isn't a story anyone wants to hear.<sup>1</sup>

Gender is treated as central when a woman is violent. Deviance from (or at times conformity to) gender roles for women is itself seen as causing the violence, and provides the base from which the story is presented.<sup>2</sup>

Ian's comment, in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is in response to the soldier's attempts to persuade Ian, a journalist, to report on and tell the story of the war that is taking place around them. *Blasted* is a story littered with graphically drawn acts of violence, from rape to buggery and cannibalism. It is a representation of violence far removed from the more sensational, simplified and 'acceptable' depictions of violence written by second-rate newspaper reporters like Ian, which aim to titillate and thrill the reader. Furthermore, the violence in *Blasted* is framed within a fragmented and ambiguous narrative structure, which works to confuse and distance

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Kane, *Blasted* in *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p.18

<sup>2</sup> Bronwyn Naylor, 'Women's Crime and Media-coverage: Making Explanations,' in R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P Dobash & Lesley Noakes (eds.), *Gender and Crime* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p.93



the audience from a more familiar cause and effect narrative structure. Thus, *Blasted* can indeed be described as a story no one wants to hear.

During the Nineties, Kane was not the only dramatist to foreground the act of storytelling against a chaotic and violent backdrop. Phyllis Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss* examines the desire to tell stories in an attempt to make sense of oneself in the world and to help explain why a daughter murders her mother. Nagy resists the compulsion to narrativise or enable her audience to make sense of the events, rather, through a blurring of the boundaries between past and present, fantasy and reality she foregrounds the present thwarting any movement towards a sense of closure. In Philip Ridley's *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, all of the characters seem to exist within their own fantasy world or 'perfect place.' They tell stories not to make sense of their lives but to escape from their past, romanticising their own life stories and experiences, because the truth is too painful. Like Kane and Nagy, Ridley highlights the act of storytelling and violence by blurring the boundaries between past and present, real and imagined worlds within the story.

In the Nineties, these dramatists were not only focusing on characters who were trying to tell their stories and/or make sense of themselves within a chaotic and shifting world. The dramatists themselves were experimenting with narrative structures, suggesting a more fragmentary structure, which questioned the traditional narrative desire for coherence and causality, was more compatible with telling the stories of women who display violent behaviour.

It is the combination or *collision* of gender, violence and narrative structure that is explored in this chapter, drawing links between fragmentary, postmodernist

narrative structures and non-restrictive representations of women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour. In their attempt to structure the narrative to fit the subject, I suggest Nineties dramatists Kane, Nagy and Ridley were drawing upon subversive dramaturgical strategies to challenge audience/reader expectations, pursue alternative responses to the chaos and violence in contemporary society and develop a critical approach to the representation of women who display violent behaviour.

There may not be a 'happy ending,' or even an ending, in the classical realist sense of a move towards closure and the return of the familiar, for Cate in *Blasted*, Lily in *Butterfly Kiss* or Rio in *Ghost From a Perfect Place*. But there is a suggestion of change and for some, arguably a progression towards a greater understanding of themselves, resulting in a renewed perception of the stories of women who behave violently.

### **Narrativity and Models of Storytelling**

A story can be described as a 'piece of narrative,' 'an account given of an incident or series of events,' or 'the main facts or plot of novel, or epic or play.'<sup>3</sup> In critical theory the story refers to the overall events and action while the plot is the way in which these events are ordered in the play. Therefore, *Butterfly Kiss* is a story about a girl who kills her mother, *Blasted* is a story about a bomb that goes off in a hotel room changing the lives of the people in the hotel room and *Ghost From a*

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<sup>3</sup> Definitions taken from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, seventh edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1983), p.1050

*Perfect Place* is a story about a violent gangster who returns to his hometown after many years away.

Stories are often seen as the way in which we make sense of the world and the events around us. We tell our story to others, where we are from, what we do, so that they can understand us and make sense of us, in relation to their own stories.

Wallis and Shepherd explain:

We thrive on stories; we love to hear them. And telling stories is a deeply human activity. Each of us has a notion of the story of our own life, which helps us make sense of who we are; it is part of our identity. We make sense of the world by making or learning stories about the world, ordering our experiences into causes and effects. The practices of science and medicine depend on stories, as does the commentary on the arts. ... some plays script a concern for our need for and delight in telling stories, of setting out a narrative, of making the disorderly confusions of real life settle down into an acceptable or pleasurable pattern.<sup>4</sup>

Not only do Wallis and Shepherd draw attention to the importance and universality of stories to human life, but they also refer to the 'setting out of a narrative' within a play as a way of organising the disorder of real life. In this sense, telling stories to make sense of the world is synonymous with organising and structuring the disorder of the world, a way of making the chaos of real life 'acceptable' and 'pleasurable.'

The organisation of the story is most commonly associated with the arrangement of it into a structure, comprising of a beginning, middle and end and driven by a cause and effect linearity, where one event leads onto another and another until reaching a climax and conclusion. This structure is based upon Aristotle's poetics and his desire to create a cathartic experience for the spectator. Although developed specifically in relation to Greek tragedy, Aristotle's poetics

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<sup>4</sup> Mick Wallis and Simon Shepherd, *Studying Plays* (London: Arnold, 2002), p.90

have become the template from which many other narrative structures are created, particularly the notion of the three unities of space, time and action, a Renaissance development, which have commonly but misleadingly been associated with Aristotle.

Scribe's 1836 formula of the well-made play was primarily a construct to ensure the audience were entertained but can also be understood as a development of Aristotle's work. Scribe focused on five phases of action: 'Exposition – development and complication – crisis – dénouement – resolution.'<sup>5</sup> His formula is arguably the most familiar and popular of narrative structures not least because of its prolific use in popular films and television dramas.

Catherine Belsey has described the more illusionistic, literary form of the Nineteenth Century, which is equally dominant today, as classical realism. Similar to the formulas of Aristotle and Scribe, classical realism privileges a hierarchy of discourses and moves towards an ending and/or closure, often with the reinstatement of the previous prevailing order. Central to the classical realist text is the audience/reader's psychological identification with the protagonist, as they follow the character on their journey, sharing in the dangers and excitement they face and ultimately enjoying the return of the familiar that comes with a resolution at the end. Belsey describes:

Harmony has been re-established through the redistribution of the signifiers into a new system of differences which closes off the threat to subjectivity, and it remains only to make this harmonious and coherent world intelligible to the reader, closing off in the process the sense of danger to the reader's subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.79

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 75-6

Belsey argues that within this structure contradictions to the subject are undeveloped in favour of a reinstatement of the familiar order, therefore, suppression is frequently used to maintain the status quo.

### **Unmaking Sense or Making Nonsense: Postmodernism and the Medieval Annals and Chronicles**

A postmodernist performance eschews illusion and a linear narrative structure in favour of a more resistant, political approach. It may not necessarily be coherent or make sense, rather, consisting of layers, it is a collage of signifiers, lights, acting, props, sound and plot, juxtaposed to resist unification and create tension, probing the audience to question the signifiers and consequently the play as a whole. The lack of a coherent narrative creates a temporal discontinuity, suggesting a loss of history where the present can become of primary focus. Fredric Jameson relates this dislocation to the experience of the schizophrenic:

Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence...The schizophrenic is thus given over to an undifferentiated vision of the present, a by no means pleasant experience.<sup>7</sup>

Cate and Ian in *Blasted*, the Ross family in *Butterfly Kiss* and Torchie, Rio and Travis in *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, are all characters who appear disconnected from the world around them and trapped in 'an undifferentiated vision of the

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<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' Hal Foster, *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p.119-20

present,' which the dramatists highlight through a less than coherent narrative structure and sense of temporal discontinuity.

The pluralistic character of postmodernism also allows for the concurrent existence of many different forms of narrative structure. Moreover, the inclusion of, or at least allusion to, the classical narrative structure is arguably necessary in order to subvert it. In his analysis of the use of narrative in the work of Karen Finlay and The Wooster Group, Nick Kaye comments:

Their work can be usefully set against treatments of narrative defined through self-conscious appropriations of conventional theatre forms and figures. Here, narrative is treated as a figure with certain formal consequences, and one whose effect is to be questioned through its displacement in an address to its place and effect in an active negotiation over identity and meaning.<sup>8</sup>

The 'self-conscious appropriations' and displacement of narrative Kaye describes can also be applied to the work of Kane, Nagy and Ridley. With their respective works, *Blasted*, *Butterfly Kiss* and *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, the dramatists use and then depart from Aristotelian and classical realist narrative structures. They use postmodernist resistant dramaturgical strategies to subvert the more 'traditional' narrative models and create shifting, alternative narrative perspectives, from which can emerge a critical voice.

*Blasted* references a variety of influences and styles, from Shakespeare to naturalism and the work of Brecht and Beckett, and has a fragmentary narrative structure echoing the chaotic content of the story; the violent events in the hotel

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<sup>8</sup> Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994), p.132

room.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, *Butterfly Kiss* adopts a postmodernist approach to narrative structure and can be interpreted as a subversion of the traditional whodunit. Scenes run simultaneously and do not follow a chronological order. The characters on stage appear to occupy different positions from one another in time and there is no closure to the events. While the audience soon learn who committed the crime, Nagy never explains why Lily murders her mother.

Ridley's *Ghost From a Perfect Place* not only takes a subversive approach to popular culture icons (the girl gang are dressed to look like Madonna on her 1992 *Blonde Ambition* tour) and literary traditions (Ridley himself has commented that *Ghost From a Perfect Place* 'uses elements of melodrama in a postmodernist way,') but the act of storytelling is foregrounded as a form of escapism.<sup>10</sup> As his characters recount their stories, Ridley emphasises the cyclical motion of the cause and effect linear structure. Only when Rio makes an imaginative leap and becomes her mother does he disrupt this structure and suggest an alternative narrative perspective.

In *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Hayden White examines the value attached to narrativity in the representation of reality and the impulse to narrativise in order to create meaning. White identifies that the need to make real events desirable by imposing upon them an historical narrative is essentially a Lacanian formula – not unlike Belsey's interpretation of classical realism – which only allows for an understanding of history as a formally

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<sup>9</sup> In an interview with Nils Tabert, Sarah Kane commented that there are three sections within *Blasted*: 'The first one was very influenced by Ibsen, the second one by Brecht, and the third one by Beckett.' 'Gespräch mit Sarah Kane,' in Nils Tabert (ed.), *Playspotting: Die Londoner Theaterszene der 90er* (Reinbeck, 1998), pp.8-21, in Graham Saunders, 'Love Me or Kill Me' *Sarah Kane and The Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.54

<sup>10</sup> Philip Ridley in a 1999 interview with Aleks Sierz, referring to the Victorian plot line of a daughter discovering her long lost father. As quoted by Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.45

coherent historical narrative or as it has been recorded, opposed to as the events actually happened. Seeking alternative models of historical representation, White explores the medieval annals and chronicles, historical discourses which lack many of the 'traditional' narrative signifiers:

Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicles suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude?<sup>11</sup>

White's questioning of the presentation of the world as a narrative consisting of a coherent sequence of events acts as an interesting point of investigation to the representation of female characters on the British stage in the Nineties who are shown to engage in violent behaviour.

The lack of order and a moral framework within the annals and chronicles appears compatible with a violent subject matter, in that both appear to be mirroring the unpredictable and chaotic character of violence. The absence of coherence and connections between events in the annals also relates to the effect on contemporary society of the condition of postmodernity, which impacted upon and led to changes within female identity. On a further level, a more subversive, fragmentary, postmodernist narrative structure and White's suggestion of sequences with 'beginnings that only terminate and never conclude,' coincides with certain feminist critiques of Aristotelian and classical realist narrative structures and approaches to playwriting. Jeanie Forte claims that the classical realist model is a: 'Reinscription

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<sup>11</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.24



of the dominant order,' and is considered: 'Not useful for feminists interested in the subversion of a patriarchal social structure.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Feminist Reflections: Resolving Violence or Violent Resolutions**

Before examining the narrative structure of the Nineties plays, I first wish to refer to an article by John Countryman and Charlotte Headrick which explores gender, dramaturgy and Aristotelian form in the Northern Irish Troubles plays written by women during the Eighties and Nineties. Countryman and Headrick's analysis draws upon several areas concerning the relationship between violence and narrative structure, which relates to the theatrical representation of women who display violent behaviour in this study. However, as I will go on to suggest, the Nineties plays depart from the Eighties and Nineties Troubles plays in their treatment of gender and structure through their use of postmodernist resistant strategies.

Countryman and Headrick suggest that the Aristotelian model has been internalised to such an extent within Irish Drama that it fails to offer a resolution to the Troubles, exacerbating the violence and 'provoking a dramaturgical merry-go-round that perpetuates the political.'<sup>13</sup> They further remark:

Aristotelian form is no longer an enabling or ennobling design for political action in the context of today's Ireland, however, because it now suggests that there is not nor will there ever be any sort of permanent resolution to the problem, only an endless chain of incidents whose "end" is merely the beginning of a new round of violence....In general playwrights in Ireland (Brian Friel, John Boyd and others) have applied a linear approach to a

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<sup>12</sup> Jeanie Forte, 'Realism, Narrative and the Feminist Playwright – A Problem of Reception,' *Modern Drama* 32, vol xxxii, number 1, March 1989, p.116

<sup>13</sup> John Countryman and Charlotte Headrick, 'The "End" of Violence in Northern Ireland. Gender, Dramaturgy, and the Limits of the Aristotelian Form,' *Theatre Symposium, A Journal of the South Eastern Conference*, No. 7, 1999, p.64

circular phenomenon, when an episodic or Brechtian approach would have been more appropriate.<sup>14</sup>

They go on to comment that female dramatists such as Christina Reid, Marie Jones and Anne Devlin, who combine a desire to reflect their violent environment with a feminist politic, offer alternative resolutions to the problem of violence in Northern Ireland by not insisting upon closure and by tending towards a more Brechtian approach, 'rejecting classic Aristotelian models' and opting 'for a looser structure, for monologues, for open-ended plays.'<sup>15</sup> Countryman and Headrick suggest such approaches allow for a more critical analysis of the violence, while the lack of closure can be directly related to women's experience of the never-ending circle of violence in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the female dramatists' resistance towards closure associated with classical realist and Aristotelian structures, is equally indicative of the cultural context and the impact of postmodernism causing the collapse of old religious and literary narratives in Irish culture, thus creating a space for new languages and systems of representation.

### **From Women's Time to A-Time**

In their analysis, Countryman and Headrick make a connection between gender and narrative structure. They suggest that by and large it is female dramatists in the North who have chosen an alternative structure to the Aristotelian model, precisely because they are females, writing about female experiences. Thus coinciding with Forte's belief that:

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.65

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.71

A refusal to perpetuate the conventions of realism/narrative (classical realism according to Belsey) would presumably not only thwart the illusion of “real” life, but also would function to threaten the patriarchal ideology imbedded in the “story.”<sup>16</sup>

To illustrate the way in which a refusal to use theatrical conventions associated with the classical realist and Aristotelian models can be understood as a threat to patriarchal ideology, Countryman and Headrick refer to an article by Anthony Roche. Roche considers the relevance of Julia Kristeva’s essay ‘Women’s Time’ to the work of female dramatists in the Eighties and Nineties writing about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In the article, Kristeva identifies two types of temporality, cyclical and monumental, which although found in many civilisations and experiences are traditionally linked to female subjectivity:

There are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of a nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable jouissance. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word “temporality” hardly fits.<sup>17</sup>

Because of these links, Kristeva suggests that female subjectivity becomes problematic in relation to certain other conceptions of time namely: ‘Time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression,

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<sup>16</sup> Jeanie Fortc, ‘Realism, Narrative and the Feminist Playwright: A Problem of Reception,’ *Modern Drama* 32, p.117

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time,’ in Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms, An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p.445

and arrival – in other words (his time of history).<sup>18</sup> Thus, by identifying a difference between historical, linear time and female subjectivity, Kristeva is setting up the possibility of a feminist alternative, what she later describes in societal terms as a-topia. Roche, Countryman and Headrick argue that the works of Devlin, Reid and Jones, tend towards women's time in their rhythms and structures and in their collective portrayal of a group of women as opposed to a single Aristotelian protagonist.

The notion of a narrative structure based on women's time could also be applied to the work of Nineties dramatists representing violent women. The blurred and shifting timescales of Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss* have been compared to a musical composition.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Nagy herself has remarked on her non-linear approach to structure and how women naturally tend to think more laterally than men.<sup>20</sup> This suggests a narrative structure that is not governed by historical time but which responds to the rhythmic ebb and flow of emotion, invariably encoded as feminine.

With *Blasted* it is possible to draw a gender distinction between the first and second half of the play. In the first half, Ian is the more dominant character and the narrative tends towards the classical realist structure. However, the mortar bomb blast disrupts the linear narrative and the soldier displaces Ian as the figure of authority. This coincides with Cate's comment to Ian: 'You're a nightmare,' as she

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.446

<sup>19</sup> Nagy studied music theory and composition in New York and has spoken of how she could not write anything without referring to the main points of musical composition: 'The build of a scene or the build of a moral revelation is achieved through the accumulation of detail, which stops and is picked up, and then is recapitulated in a similar way to music.' Phyllis Nagy as quoted by Aleks Sierz in *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today*, p.49. Nagy also refers to the influence of musical composition in an interview with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge *Rage and Reason, Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p.22

<sup>20</sup> See interview with Phyllis Nagy, Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason, Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, p.20

disappears into the bathroom and again when she returns. While Cate is absent the narrative structure crumbles into a nightmarish, unpredictable catalogue of actions, described by Kane as the collapse of the play into one of Cate's fits.<sup>21</sup> The shift in the structure from linear cause and effect to an irrational and incoherent anti-structure, could be interpreted as a shift from a masculine logic to a feminine, illogical narrative.

While I acknowledge women's time may be one way of understanding narrative structure in relation to gender, I find it problematic as such a distinction immediately posits women's time in opposition to a supposed men's time, reinforcing a dualistic understanding of men and women, which can ultimately lead to stereotypes. Kristeva appears to be aware of the dangerous implications of this dualism when she comments: 'The fact that certain currents of modern feminism recognise themselves here (with cyclical and monumental temporality) does not render them fundamentally incompatible with "masculine" values.'<sup>22</sup> And going on to warn: 'Does not feminism become a kind of inverted sexism when this logic is followed to its conclusion?'<sup>23</sup> Therefore, while Countryman and Headrick focus on the same interrelation of gender, violence and narrative structure as this chapter, ultimately their stress upon gender and differences between men and women, both in terms of distinguishing between the concerns of male and female dramatists and the nature of certain narrative structures, only reinforces gender binaries which this study is working against. Dramatists who were responding to the shifting female

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<sup>21</sup> Sarah Kane interviewed by Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason, Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, p.130

<sup>22</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms, An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, p.446

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.453

identity in the Nineties and the prevalence of popular scripts which encouraged women to embrace both masculine and feminine characteristics, may have ‘played’ with the idea of women’s time, but within the overall postmodernist framework and approach to the subject, women’s time was just one of many alternative approaches to gender and narrative.

In the following discussion of narrative structures and the representation of women who engage in violent behaviour in *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, *Butterfly Kiss* and *Blasted*, attention will be drawn to what I propose is a postmodernist, subversive approach to narrative structures. The dramatists may demonstrate an awareness of feminist interpretations of the patriarchal nature of Aristotelian and classical realist narrative structures as discussed by Belsey and Forte, or refer to the notion of women’s time, but challenging the more ‘traditional’ structures on feminist grounds is not their sole agenda. Equally, they may also draw upon other forms of historical representation such as the medieval annals and chronicles, but not to the exclusion of others. Thus, the core of my discussion is how these plays take a pluralistic approach towards narrative structure, employing dramaturgical devices which work towards producing a critical exposition of those women who display violent behaviour and their stories.

### **A Monster from the Past meets a Monster from the Present<sup>24</sup>**

*Ghost From a Perfect Place* was Ridley’s third stage play. His previous two, *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992), both covered varying degrees of the grotesque on stage, from vomiting, insect eating,

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<sup>24</sup> Advertising slogan for *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, 1994 production, Hampstead Theatre.

penis scraping, paedophilia and physical violence. Thus, when *Ghost From a Perfect Place* was premiered in 1994, Ridley had already gained a reputation for writing shocking and provocative plays. With a lengthy torture scene and descriptions of human-eating rats, teen-rape and rooms full of blood, *Ghost From a Perfect Place* was equally as offensive and controversial as his previous works.

Originally staged at the Hampstead Theatre in April 1994 and directed by Matthew Lloyd, *Ghost From a Perfect Place* follows the return of Travis Flood, an elderly, ex-East End gangster to his Bethnal Green roots, ostensibly to promote the sale of his autobiography, *The Man with the White Lily*. During his visit, Travis meets a prostitute, twenty-five year old Rio Sparks, whose identity reveals the awful truth buried in his past.

In terms of narrative structure, *Ghost From a Perfect Place* is presented as a flashback, which appears to conform to the formula of the well-made play. To begin, the exposition is set up; Travis returns from apparent exile in America to promote his book. After familiarising himself with his old manor, he comes across Rio in a graveyard and arranges to meet her later that day. When he appears at her house as they arranged she is not there and so waiting for her to return he chats with her grandmother, Torchie Sparks and Torchie and Travis share memories of the 'heydays,' in the East End. Rio returns home accompanied by her gang of Cheerleaders, Miss Sulphur aged eighteen and Miss Kerosene aged twelve and Torchie leaves so Rio can get on with business. However, events become complicated and a crisis ensues. Rather than have sex with her, Travis asks Rio to tell him about herself. Rio initially refuses and beats Travis up, tying him to the

chair and gagging him. Eventually, Rio does start to talk, beginning with the death of her mother, Donna, (Torchie's daughter) during childbirth, which has since become the driving force in her life:

**Rio** My mum is a saint. All her suffering was not in vain. She is the Saint of all the Damaged girls Living in the Ruins. Oh, yes. Yes. She's there for me. My life...It means something. Saint Donna! Saint Donna!<sup>25</sup>

Travis belittles Rio's story, commenting that it is: 'Fantasies. Dreams. Lies. That's all your life is. Nothing but...hallucinations,' and so Rio and The Cheerleaders continue to torture Travis.<sup>26</sup> He, in turn, chides Rio by claiming that when he was a gangster he did much worse acts of violence, although he refuses to say what exactly. Eventually, Travis gives in and the moment of dénouement comes when it emerges Travis raped Donna when she was fourteen years old, Travis is Rio's father. Confronted with the long ago result of his violent action, Travis admits the truth behind his fantasies and leaves, after remarking: 'I now know who I am.'<sup>27</sup> Torchie returns to the house but is unaware of what has taken place between Travis and Rio.

Despite the pretence of a traditional linear narrative, I suggest Ridley destabilises and questions the compatibility of a linear narrative structure to the stories of women who behave in a violent manner. He adopts a postmodern, ironic approach both towards Travis as a symbol of romanticised male gangland violence of the Fifties and also to the more traditional literary narrative traditions, such as

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<sup>25</sup> Philip Ridley, *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, *Philip Ridley, Plays: 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.279

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.282

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.290



melodrama, the gothic, the mythical and the biblical. In this way, rather than understand the play as divided into two acts, I prefer to conceive of it as three stories: each an interpretation of the same event, Travis's rape of Donna, but each possessing a different rhythm in response to who is telling the story. Within this narrative framework, it is Rio, a woman who behaves violently, who represents a move away from traditional narrative models when she intercepts Travis's story and denies him the patriarchal re-affirmation he seeks.

The first story presented is Torchie's as she tells Travis the tragic events surrounding the fire in the house, Donna's death, Rio's birth and the hospitalisation of Mr Sparks. As she recounts the events she reveals a strong sense of nostalgia for the past, demonstrated by the way she speaks of the past in the present tense and adopts a rhythm of storytelling, which prompts Travis to participate in the narration:

**Torchie** It's the right thing to do, don't you think Mr Flood? Tell me it's the right thing to do?

**Travis** Yes, it's right.

**Torchie** Wrong,<sup>28</sup>

And then again:

**Torchie** And everything will work out alright in the end! Right, Mr Flood?

**Travis** Right!

**Torchie** Wrong!<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.237

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.239

The style and rhythm of Torchie's narration, reinforces the causal structure of more traditional narrative models; the notion of what happened next and of one event leading to another and so forth. By highlighting this technique with a character strongly associated with death and the past, Ridley is linking Torchie to traditional narrative models.

By contrast, Rio adopts a narrative style and tone that subverts and mocks traditional literary models. In response to Travis and the style of his book, she mocks: 'Chapter One...Once, long ago, I was born in a -.'<sup>30</sup> She then races through the story of her own life, labelling each phase as a chapter, and although there is a causal narrative structure as one event leads onto another and another, her speech becomes increasingly more fragmented:

*Pause*

Chapter...what? Don't matter. Bcd. Moonlight. Noise. Rat! Where? Find it.

*Looks round the room.*

In here! No! Still hear it. Where?<sup>31</sup>

Rio's tale culminates with the story of the formation of the Cheerleaders, at which point the narrative transforms into a ritualistic, choral recounting of the commandments of Saint Donna and an adaptation of the Lord's Prayer to Saint Donna in the Queendom:

**Rio** Deliver us from men and encourage our sins as we forgive – come on, girls – no one that sins against us. For thine is – girls! Come on! Don't let

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.273

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.277

me down! – the Queendom, the make-up and the pony-tail. For ever and ever.  
Amen.<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult to ignore the binary opposition Ridley sets up here between male and female violence. The Cheerleaders represent a (post)modern, men-hating, women-only sect to rival Travis's misogynist patriarchal rule of the past. However, rather criticise Ridley for anti-feminism, I propose he is more concerned with empowering Rio and the Cheerleaders through an assault on the fundamentalism of patriarchy, with the bastardisation of the Lord's Prayer. Ridley through Rio has taken the most renowned Christian prayer and transformed it from a patriarchal plea for forgiveness to a reactionary decree of retribution in order to express the repressed needs and desires of the three young women.

It is, however, with the final story initially told by Travis that Ridley challenges the more traditional narrative structure. Unable to stand the torture any longer, Travis gives into Rio's demands and begins to talk about his violent past. Although the structure of the narrative, like Torchie's and Rio's follows a linear pattern, Rio makes an imaginative leap and takes on the role of Donna to intercept Travis's story and impart her interpretation of the rape. In this way, Travis is denied ownership of the story and with that the re-affirmation of identity he has been seeking from the beginning:

**Rio** It hurts.

**Travis** Shut up! Do you want me to hurt your mum and dad?

**Rio** No.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.282

**Travis** Then do as you're told. And you mustn't tell anyone. You hear? Not your mum. Not your dad. No one.

**Rio** You're making me bleed.

**Travis** I'm kissing your lips.

**Rio** I'm crying.

*Pause.*

Afterwards I run out of the car. I'm hysterical –

**Travis.** No, no. You're very calm.<sup>33</sup>

Rio's involvement in the story acts as a disruptive device to the traditional linear structure and its patriarchal underpinnings. The notion of denying the male the re-assertion of his self through the female in the narrative is discussed by Shoshana Felman in her article 'Women and Madness the Critical Phallacy,' and her analysis of the Balzac text *Adieu*, a short story first published in 1830.

Balzac's story, which is also divided into three parts, examines a woman's madness within the context of the Napoleonic Wars. It primarily follows the journey of two men, Philippe De Sucey, a former colonel and his friend d'Albion, a magistrate. In the first part the two men wander into a mysterious domain and come upon two women, one of whom has lost all sense of reason and says only the word 'adieu.' When Philippe hears the word he realises that the woman is his former mistress Countess Stephanie de Vandières, whom he was separated from during the Napoleonic Wars. The second part is a flashback of the separation where it emerges that Stephanie's last word to Philippe before losing her reason was 'adieu.' Alone, she is hauled along by the army, treated as a cast-off and left to live like an animal,

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.289

until she is found by her uncle, a Doctor. The third part explores Philippe's attempts to restore Stephanie's reason so that she will at last recognise and remember him. Following a reconstruction of their separation, organised by Philippe, Stephanie finally does recognise Philippe but at that moment she dies. Felman argues that in this final section, Philippe needs Stephanie to re-enact the events of their separation, to restore her reason and to bring back *his* Stephanie, thus reaffirming his own identity, her femininity and the law of the father:

In Philippe's eyes, Stephanie is viewed above all as an object, whose role is to insure, by an interplay of reflections, his own self-sufficiency as a "subject," to serve as a mediator in his own specular relationship with himself. What Philippe pursues in the woman is not a face, but a mirror, which, reflecting his image, will thereby *acknowledge* his narcissistic *self-image*.<sup>34</sup>

By the same token, Travis wants to re-create his past to re-affirm his identity as the respected 'businessman' he thought he was: 'Crowds used to part to let me through. People brought me presents to keep me in a good mood. I'm Travis Flood!'<sup>35</sup> And while Torchie's memories provide Travis with the 'reflection' he desires, Rio's intervention into his story does not. By offering Donna's interpretation, Rio usurps Travis's position, forcing him to come to terms with who he really is. Thus, the re-telling of the rape does not provide Travis with a reflection of his self-image but forces him to reassess his own position and acknowledge the presence of Donna, Rio and the female subject.

In terms of the narrative structure the intervention of Rio as the violent woman ultimately prevents the story from reaching a resolution. Travis may now

<sup>34</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Women and Madness, The Critical Phallacy,' in Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Hemdl (eds.), *Feminisms, An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, p.16

<sup>35</sup> Philip Ridley, *Ghost From a Perfect Place, Philip Ridley: Plays 1*, p.268

know who he is, but it is not clear where he is going. Similarly, Rio now knows who her father is, but there is no indication of what will happen next. Thus, despite the emphasis on causality throughout the play, eventually the 'traditional' structure is broken. The dramaturgical merry-go-round Countryman and Headrick refer to is halted by a woman who engages in violent behaviour. What is the 'end' for Travis is potentially a new beginning for Rio.

### **Not a Whodunit but a Whydunit<sup>36</sup>**

Phyllis Nagy's play *Butterfly Kiss* was first performed at the Almeida Theatre, London in April 1994. It is the story of a young woman who murders her mother and is told through a blurring between real and imagined events, shifting timescales and with a resistance to coherence and resolution. The result, is a play which uses a non-traditional narrative framework as a basis from which to address the story of a woman who behaves violently.

*Butterfly Kiss* is the story of female matricide. Lower-middle-class, twenty five year old, lesbian, New Yorker Lily Ross has supposedly killed her alcoholic mother, Jenny, a premise that is set up at the beginning of the play. Like *Ghost from a Perfect Place* the play is structured as a flashback of the events leading up to the murder, but in a non-linear form. Although there is the suggestion that the story is building towards a climax, which will culminate in the re-enactment of the murder and Lily's confession, such a satisfactory ending is never fully realised. Rather, Nagy explores the reasons why a young woman would commit matricide but is

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<sup>36</sup> Aleks Sierz, describing *Butterfly Kiss*, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today*, p.50

reluctant to provide any clear answers, prompting Sierz to comment: 'The play is not a whodunit but a whydunit.'<sup>37</sup> And Nagy herself has stated: 'There is always an answer, but you have to be willing to engage with the play and come up with an answer yourself.'<sup>38</sup>

The 1994 production of *Butterfly Kiss* at the Almeida directed by Steven Pimlott, received mixed reviews, with many critics struggling to get to grips with Nagy's less conventional use of narrative structure. Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* described the play as a 'desperate disappointment,' where the events are 'jumbled up' and 'the characters remain infuriatingly enigmatic.'<sup>39</sup> Malcolm Rutherford in the *Financial Times* commented: 'This is one of those irritating plays that dot backwards and forwards in time. But even if you try to put the events in chronological order, the motives are still unclear.'<sup>40</sup> And Neil Smith in *What's On* remarked: 'The difficulty lies in her (Nagy) refusal to affirm the precise nature of her protagonist's actions, so that by the end of the play we still have no idea why a bright, attractive twenty-something like Lily Ross would shoot her parents in cold blood.'<sup>41</sup> However, I would contend that it is specifically Nagy's 'refusal to affirm the precise nature of her protagonist's actions' and the way the play 'dots backwards and forwards in time,' creating a distance from traditional narrative structures, which allows for an alternative and non-stereotypical portrayal of those women who display violent behaviour.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.50

<sup>38</sup> Phyllis Nagy as quoted by Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today*, p.50

<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive catalogue of the reviews see *Theatre Record*, vol xiv, Issue 8, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1994 pp.445-9

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

The play has a multi-layered narrative structure which foregoes the traditional linear cause and effect model for a seemingly postmodernist, haphazard schema where the boundaries between past and present, fantasy and reality are blurred and characters move fluidly and without logical explanation backwards and forwards in time. Scenes run simultaneously and do not follow a chronological order and the characters on stage occupy differing temporal states. In this way it seems that Nagy is subverting the classic whodunit formula. All of the components are there, victim, murderer, detective (lawyer) and an interfering and at times equally suspect supporting cast, but Nagy has changed the order of the events and resists any logical explanation.

Nagy's resistance towards a coherent and chronological narrative structure is further evident at the end of Act One. Initially, a conversation takes place between Lily and Martha, Lily's photographer girlfriend, while Martha is visiting Lily in prison. However, Sally, Lily's grandma, and Jenny enter, with Jenny wearing her wedding dress as if it is the day of her wedding to Sloan, Lily's father. Sloan then enters with his friend Teddy, whom Lily seduced when she was fourteen years old. Both men are dressed in tuxedos, as if anticipating Jenny and Sloan's wedding. The marriage ceremony takes place, conducted by Lily's lawyer, Jackson, with Sloan's mistress Christine, the Countess Van Dyne, also in attendance:

**Sloan** Jennifer, darling. I'm sorry to be late. But it could not have been avoided.

**Christine** *Bon! Bon!* I love weddings.

**Sally** We could have gone, Jenny. Now it's too fucking late.



**Lily** Too late.

**Martha** What's too late?<sup>42</sup>

By juxtaposing events and characters who would have remained separated within a classical realist narrative structure – Lily, Martha, Jackson and Christine could not have been at Sloan and Jenny's wedding – Nagy has created a postmodernist collage effect where previously unconnected events collide to suggest alternative meanings and relationships. Is the wedding really the wedding between Lily's parents or Lily's fantasy of their wedding? Has Lily included herself in the wedding to try and stop the marriage? To stop her from killing her mother? Or to explain why she killed her mother? Is Lily trying to erase her past? And at the end of the scene when Lily confesses to Martha that her mother asked her to kill her, the audience is left wondering whether Lily is telling the truth or what she wished had happened.

The blurring between fantasy and reality created by the fragmentary narrative structure is further emphasised through the characterisation of Lily. In the play text, after her notes on characters and setting, Nagy has a further section titled, *The Time* and asserts:

**The Time** is the present, the past, the imagined past and the imagined future. Although Lily's age ranges substantially during the course of the play, no attempt should be made to 'play' the younger ages.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, although there are shifts in time, the concentration on the present through Lily would have made the shifts difficult to discern in performance, as Tom Morris, writing in *Time Out* described: 'Lily is paralysed in a series of irreconcilable

<sup>42</sup> Phyllis Nagy, *Butterfly Kiss, Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1998), p.81

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p.50

scenarios.<sup>44</sup> The representation of Lily as frozen in time and alienated temporally from the other characters, conjures up Jameson's notion of the schizophrenic, where the breakdown of temporal continuity creates a more vivid, sensory experience, but where language and meaning give way and there is no sense of history. Thus, the play becomes a gathering of signifiers as opposed to a linear sequence of events.

The emphasis on the present through Lily and the lack of temporal continuity can also imply Nagy is drawing upon feminist interpretations of the classical realist narrative structure, particularly as the events unfold as they emerge from Lily's memory. This is similar to Kristeva's suggestion that female subjectivity is problematic with certain concepts of linear and historical time, particularly in light of Nagy's comment referred to earlier regarding women and lateral thinking.

Nagy challenges the patriarchal overtones of the classical realist narrative structure through Lily's refusal to explain why she murdered her mother. On several occasions throughout the play, both Martha and Jackson ask Lily what happened and why she did it and each time Lily evades their questions:

**Jackson** Whatcha doing there, Lily?

**Lily** I'm talking to the voices in my head.

**Jackson** All right. Perhaps you can convince those voices to have a chat with me.

**Lily** Sorry, counsellor. They're shy. They don't like strangers.

**Jackson** Let's take it from the beginning.

**Lily** I've been through the beginning, Let's get on to the end.

**Jackson** Start with Teddy Hayes.

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<sup>44</sup> Tom Morris, *Time Out*, April 20<sup>th</sup> 1994

**Lily** What are my chances of springing this place?

**Jackson** None. Now. What about Teddy Hayes?

**Lily** Listen. Martha's going to Europe. I'd like to go with her. So see what you can do for me.

**Jackson** I'd like to win this case.

**Lily** I'd like you to win this case.

**Jackson** Good. Do you understand that if you keep your secrets to yourself, I don't win. You don't go bye-bye with Martha and nobody gets a picture postcard of Paris By Night.

**Lily** Munich.<sup>45</sup>

In this exchange, Nagy, through Jackson, confronts the use of and desire for traditional narrative structures to make sense of events. And while it can be argued that Jackson as Lily's lawyer has a responsibility to make sense of what has happened, to uncover the truth, it is the truth as understood within a patriarchal system of representation. Jackson wants the truth as he knows it, but Lily's interpretation of the truth may be quite different. Moreover, the desire for truth is encoded as an essentially male desire, especially in relation to the notion of the madwoman, where the male (Jackson's) need for the madwoman (Lily) to make sense through a re-enactment of events, leads to a re-affirmation of male identity and subsequently female invisibility.<sup>46</sup> However, while Lily's invisibility and possible madness is alluded to throughout the play it is never fully confirmed or refuted. In Act One, Martha, frustrated by Lily's lack of coherent communication says she is no

<sup>45</sup> Phyllis Nagy, *Butterfly Kiss, Plays: 1*, pp.65-6

<sup>46</sup> For more details refer to Felman's article, 'Women and Madness, The Critical Phallacy,' in Robyn R Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms, An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp.6-19

longer sure whether she thinks Lily is sane or not and in Act Two her Grandmother Sally describes her as a 'big nothing.'<sup>47</sup> Also, the photo of Lily in her father's wallet is obscured by one of his mistress, which Lily steals to expose her own photo. Thus, the uncertainty surrounding Lily's sane/insane mental condition and her constant rebuff of Jackson's attempts to make sense of her actions, can be interpreted as Nagy's decision to avoid a representation of Lily, which supports the symbolic order, further reinforcing a feminist, subversive interpretation of traditional, patriarchal narrative structures.

At the end of the play, Nagy finally satisfies the desires of the classical realist reader and uncovers the truth. It appears that while brushing her mother's hair, Lily surreptitiously swaps the brush for a gun which her father gave her and shoots her mother in the head:

**Jenny** I'm ready, baby. Hold me. It's dark. Are you singing with me, Lily? Are you ready?

**Lily** I'm ready, Mama. And I'm singing at the top of my lungs. Hold tight, Mama.

*Lily presses the gun against her mother's head,*

**Jenny** I was always so interested in a family with a past. With some history.

**Lily** There's nothing ahead of you but the future, Mama. The future.

*Blackout, as Lily pulls the trigger.*<sup>48</sup>

Although the dramatisation of the murder satisfies the traditional narrative desire to know what happened, *Butterfly Kiss* is a play that ends with many questions

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<sup>47</sup> Phyllis Nagy, *Butterfly Kiss, Plays: 1*, p.89

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, pp.101-2

unanswered. What happens to Lily? Did she really kill her mother or was it a fantasy? Why would she kill her mother? Because her father wanted her to – implied when he gave her the gun? Or because her mother asked her? There is no resolution to Lily's story, no 'happily ever after' or a sense of returning to normality.

It is the absolute lack of determinacy and direction in the narrative structure and the subversion of a classic narrative formula, the whodunit, which prompts a description of *Butterfly Kiss* not just as a whydunit as Sierz suggests, but a whatdunit? Whendunit? Howdunit? Hedunit? Shedunit? And although it is possible to deduce a feminist agenda and an alternative feminine temporality from the narrative structure, it is equally plausible to understand the narrative structure as shaped by musical rhythms, or even by chance, none of which are necessarily gender specific. There is no dominant narrative style with *Butterfly Kiss*, rather with references to both traditional and alternative narrative models Nagy creates a multi-layered, postmodernist structure. In this way, the story of Lily a woman who displays violent behaviour appears complex and unpredictable, far removed from simplistic and stereotypical representations.

### **Fighting The Demand for Closure and Moral Meaning**

When *Blasted* opened in January 1995 it was not well received by the press. Michael Billington complained the play had no sense of external reality, Jack Tinker in the *Daily Mail* described how it had 'driven him into the arms of Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells,' and others commented that Kane was not a good writer and she

had a lot to learn.<sup>49</sup> But it was not just the graphic violence that offended many of the critics. *Killer Joe* (1994) by American male actor Tracy Letts, ran simultaneously at the Bush and also included scenes of graphic violence, but as Graham Saunders comments: '*Killer Joe* won widespread praise. The reasons seemed simple – Letts had obeyed the rules of plot and character progression whereas Kane has foolishly rejected them.'<sup>50</sup>

With *Blasted*, Kane does not foreground the story of a woman who engages in violent behaviour in the same way other Nineties dramatists have; Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss*, Prichard's *Yard Gal* and Upton's *Ashes and Sand*, where female acts of violence are the central concern of the play. Kane's focus is all violence and the link between inter-personal (Cate and Ian, Ian and the Soldier) and collective (the Bosnian Civil War) acts of violence in contemporary society. And while it is possible to draw certain feminist conclusions from Cate's actions there is no indication that Kane is pursuing a feminist agenda. Thus, Cate's attempted castration of Ian when she bites his penis, symbolising an assault on patriarchy or her stutter, symbolising her inability as a woman to express herself in a phallogocentric context, are counterbalanced and problematised by the inclusion of other acts of violence, namely, the rape and blinding of Ian by the Soldier and Cate prostituting herself to obtain food and drink. Kane shows an awareness of the concerns surrounding the representation of Cate as a woman who behaves violently but does not locate her within a gender debate, implying that her visibility and validity is enabled only by the sacrifice of the male. For Kane there appears to be no

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<sup>49</sup> For a comprehensive catalogue of the reviews, see *Theatre Record*, vol xv, issue 1-2, February 13<sup>01</sup> 1995, pp.38-43

<sup>50</sup> Graham Saunders, '*Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and The Theatre of Extremes*, p.11

question surrounding Cate's motive or acceptance of her behaviour. Her interrogation is of violence per se and its effect on contemporary society in relation to morality and social structures.

Initially, *Blasted* appears to follow traditional narrative models adopting a coherent linear structure. The audience know who the characters are; where they are; a hotel room in Leeds, what is happening; Ian has asked Cate, whom he has had sexual relations with previously, to meet him at the hotel, and when it is happening; evening, late Twentieth Century. However, in Scene Two, the morning after Ian and Cate have spent the night together in the hotel room, Cate goes to the bathroom and does not reappear again until Scene Four. During her absence, a mortar bomb blasts the hotel room, a soldier enters, looks for Cate but unable to find her rapes and tortures Ian at gunpoint then kills himself. Cate returns carrying a baby and although she attempts to care for it, the baby dies and she buries it beneath the floorboards. She then leaves in search of food. Alone, Ian eats the baby, climbs into the hole where the baby is 'buried' and then tries but seemingly fails to kill himself. Cate returns with bread, meat, gin and blood seeping from between her legs. She sits besides Ian's head and they share the food and drink. It rains, the play ends.

Kane disrupts the focus of the play and all unities of time, space and action are displaced. The obvious point of departure is Scene Three, where the stage directions state:

*The hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb.*

*There is a large hole in one of the walls, and everything is covered in dust which is still falling.*<sup>51</sup>

For Kane, the inclusion of the mortar bomb blast was not just a visual image of the collapse of the structure of the play, but also a device to link what were initially, two, unconnected plays: the first a story about a couple in a Leeds hotel room and the second, the struggle for survival during the civil war in Bosnia. The mortar bomb blast enabled her to emphasise the relationship between these two events and locations, as she describes: ‘One is the seed the other is the tree.’<sup>52</sup> Kane has also commented that she wanted to literally blow the play up to create the same sense of chaos people experience during a war, where the violence can be unpredictable and without warning.

By removing the familiar narrative structure and disrupting the three unities, the audience struggle to ascertain where the characters are, what is happening, when it is happening and why. Playwright David Greig refers to a conversation he had with Kane while she was writing the play, in which she said: ‘OK, what I have to do is keep the same place but alter the time and action.’<sup>53</sup> This comment suggests that the hotel room in Leeds, the place, remains the same throughout the play. Yet, while Kane creates a sense of continuity of place with certain props – the bed, the newspaper, a bottle of gin and the flowers – and a continuity of time with the use of seasonal change, from summer rain, to autumn rain to heavy winter rain, the explosion of the bomb and the entrance of the soldier transforms both time and space. Leeds morphs into Bosnia or perhaps a disintegrating Leeds of the future,

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays*, p.39

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Kane as quoted by Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre, British Drama Today*, p.101

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.107



where chaotic and escalating violence dominates all human existence. The action is disrupted, as it shifts from a focus on Ian and Cate's relationship to the violent actions of the soldier and the fallout of the war. The passing of time seems incompatible with the action on stage, the soldier's torture of Ian lasts from summer until autumn. Further, Cate's unexplained disappearance and then later re-emergence, gives an overall lack of coherence and linear temporality in the second half of the play. As a result, events on stage are dislocated from any sense of history with the present becoming the primary focus of the action.

The emphasis on the present is most obvious in Scene Five when Ian, alone tries to commit suicide. His apparent breakdown, which culminates in a suicide attempt, is portrayed in a series of tableaux, which show him performing a variety of graphic sexual and violent acts, including masturbation, defecation and cannibalism. The intensity of the images, the absence of language and Ian's resurrection – he speaks after he dies -- foregrounds the present and echoes Jameson's theory of the schizophrenic where language and meaning collapse resulting in a more sensory experience.

While it is possible to conceive of the split narrative structure between the first and second half as masculine and feminine respectively, as previously discussed, such an interpretation perpetuates gender binaries. Therefore to avoid setting up an either/or dichotomy, I prefer to understand the narrative structure of *Blasted* in relation to alternative conceptions of historical discourse such as the medieval annals.

A comparison of the account of a medieval annalist with the narrative structure and subject of *Blasted*, reveals several areas of compatibility. The annalist appears to record events in list form and although there is a calendar locating events chronologically, there is no link between the events, as this example used by Hayden White, of the period 709-34 in Volume 1 of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Annals of Saint Gall*, reveals:

- 709. Hard winter. Duke Gottfried died.
- 710. Hard Year and deficient in crops.
- 711.
- 712. Flood everywhere.
- 713.
- 714. Pippin, mayor of the palace, died.
- 715. 716. 717.
- 718. Charles devastated the Saxon with great destruction.<sup>54</sup>

The way in which the annalist has only recorded extreme forces of disorder; floods, wars and death, with gaps for other seemingly less important events, reminds White of a remark made by Hegel:

Periods of human happiness and security are blank pages in history. But the presence of these blank years in the annalist's account permits us to perceive, by way of contrast, the extent to which narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly the events depicted in the second half of *Blasted* are also of an extreme nature; birth, death and survival, occurring without cause or history and drawing attention to what is absent as well as what is present:

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<sup>54</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form, Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* pp.6-7

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p.11

**Cate** (*Rocks the baby and looks down at it.*)

Oh no.

**Ian** What.

**Cate** It's dead.

**Ian** Lucky bastard.

**Cate** (*Bursts out laughing, unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably. She laughs and laughs and laughs and laughs and laughs.*)

*Blackout.*

*The sound of heavy winter rain.*<sup>56</sup>

To whom does the baby belong? Why does it die? Why is Cate laughing? By removing a sense of causality the spectator, as White suggests in relation to Hegel, becomes aware of their own desire to narrativise, to fill in the silences and the gaps, to create 'meaning in the place of fantasies of emptiness.' This minimalist approach to language and meaning is a common feature of Kane's work. The presence of absence and the breakdown of language and meaning became progressively more apparent, culminating in her final play *4.48 Psychosis*.

The cause and effect narrative structure is further problematised within the form of the medieval annals by the lack of conclusion. There is no ending, as there is no beginning or middle, rather the annal ends in the same way as a blank calendar, the numbers merely stop. Likewise, *Blasted* ends – the audience and actors cannot remain in the theatre indefinitely – but there is no conclusion to the events portrayed on stage. And although there is the hint of a redemptive process with Ian's 'Thank

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<sup>56</sup> Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane Complete Plays*, p.57

you' to Cate, there is no suggestion of what will happen next, no resolution to the extreme situation. White comments:

The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning...it is this moralism that alone permits the work to end, or rather to conclude, in a way different from the way the annals and the chronicle forms do.<sup>57</sup>

Applying White's suggestion to *Blasted*, implies Kane's work is not moralistic, contrasting with those commentators who have interpreted her ambivalent attitude towards graphic portrayals of violence as extremely moralistic. John Peter in the *Sunday Times* wrote: 'Kane's vision is born of unleavened, almost puritanical moral outrage,' and others have commented on Kane's moral integrity particularly in relation to the Bosnian civil war.<sup>58</sup> Kane on the other hand, seemed reluctant to inhabit such a moral stance and in a radio interview shortly after the 1995 production of *Blasted* at the Royal Court, described the play as amoral:

A lot of the people who have defended me over *Blasted* have said that it's a deeply moral play...I don't think *Blasted* is a moral play – I think it's amoral, and I think that it is one of the reasons people get terribly upset because there isn't a very defined moral framework within which to place yourself and assess your morality and therefore distance yourself from the material.<sup>59</sup>

The lack of a moral framework in *Blasted* referred to by Kane can be directly linked to the absence of a coherent and causal narrative structure. By refusing to contain the action on stage and provide explanations, Kane, like Nagy is refusing to pass judgment she neither condemns nor condones the behaviour of her characters. And

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp.21-3

<sup>58</sup> John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1995.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Kane, *Start the Week*, BBC Radio 4, as quoted by Graham Saunders in, *Love Me or Kill Me, Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, p.27

while such a lack of morality and 'sense' can lead to chaos, violence and destruction, it can also unmask the hidden, the misrepresented and the marginalised such as women who engage in violent behaviour, providing new perspectives and understandings of those people and their stories.

### **The 'End' of the Story?**

The dramatists discussed here are not attempting to tell stories to organise the chaos of the world or make sense of it, as Wallis and Shepherd have suggested: 'We make sense of the world by making or learning stories about the world, ordering our experiences into causes and effects.'<sup>60</sup> Rather, their work seems to function as a reflection of the postmodern world as it undergoes changes, shifts and fluctuations. They appear to show events as White suggests, as they emerge regardless of the constraints of acceptable narrative structures and moral frameworks, and responding to a variety of forces and influences, cultural, natural, logical and illogical. Thus, by adopting a more fragmentary, postmodernist approach to the narrative they are able to break down restrictive structures and expose alternative perspectives. None of the plays offer a definitive representation of women who engage in violent behaviour or follow a strict narrative structure, but perhaps more appropriately, leave questions unanswered, stories unresolved and lives unfinished...

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<sup>60</sup> Mick Wallis and Simon Shepherd, *Studying Plays*, p.90

**Marie** Can we go now?

**Boo** Can we go?<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the introductory section it was suggested that this study was borne out of a commitment to dismantle the misrepresentation of young female offenders as women who break *roles* in contemporary society; the Other project. Thus, the study has focused on how certain play texts problematised stereotypical gendered representations through the use of postmodernist resistant aesthetic strategies.

In Chapter One the socio-economic and cultural context was considered, to determine changes which may have impacted upon an increase in both actual levels and the representation of female violence. While identities during this period became increasingly defined in terms of material wealth and consumption, opportunities for young people to become financially independent decreased, creating a conflict between cultural aspirations and economic reality. At the same time there was a surge of stories in the media which suggested there was a rise in female subcultures, particularly the girl gang, which coincided with the emergence of other gender shifts in popular culture, such as laddism/ladettes and girl power. However, although the combined impact of these cultural and socio-economic movements, could, for some women, have led to aggressive and violent behaviour, the study pointed to the way in which representations of women who display violent

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Prichard, *Yard Gal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.55

behaviour particularly in the media tended to exaggerate reality and reaffirm the patriarchal construction of gender thus forming part of a backlash against feminism and women during this period.

Chapter Two focused upon the analysis of the causes of female acts of violence within the girl gang, as portrayed in *Ashes and Sand* and *Yard Gal*. The emphasis within the play texts on cultural conditions was suggested as a move away from stereotypical gender roles and predetermined biological notions of female transgression, and towards a more pluralistic understanding of women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour.

However, rather than understand the play texts as simply rejecting stereotypes and their associated scripts, attention was drawn to the way in which they evoked such representations in order to subvert them, employing a form of postmodernist resistance, whereby greater awareness comes from occupying and foregrounding the position of that which is being subverted; challenging from within. Thus, in *Ashes and Sand*, it was suggested that this position was presented in Upton's portrayal of the girls when they attack Daniel. And in *Yard Gal*, Prichard similarly invoked and challenged stereotypical representations of the *femme fatale* and the violent woman as mad.

The focus within both plays on cultural conditions as a cause of violent female behaviour and postmodernist dramaturgical strategies in terms of representation, shifted the attention of the girls' behaviour away from simplified depictions of female violence, because they were women, and towards plurality. In this way, the chapter concluded that the plays presented women who behave

violently as perpetrators and victims, occupying positions of Self and Other and shaped by predetermined biological and cultural forces.

The emphasis on plurality was continued and reinforced in Chapter Three where the focus became female bodies. While it was proposed that the act of violence could be presented as an assertion of control and a physical act of reclamation, the impact of predetermined biological and cultural forces on the body was highlighted within the play texts, as continually destabilising female desires for control and transformation.

Exploring the many ways in which women in society have attempted to take control of their bodies; dieting, exercise, motherhood, plastic surgery and self-abuse, the chapter considered notions of control and transformation in relation to postmodern bodies and the concept of Otherness. Pop icon Madonna was referred to as the embodiment of postmodern bodies. Not only because of the way she endlessly transforms her body, but also in the way that she controls her image by actively occupying the position of Other, defiantly returning and subverting the male gaze. The performativity and playfulness of postmodern bodies was then related to the image of the *femme fatale* and, as was shown with Cate in *Blasted*, could help to secure power and control for a female subject.

To further develop an understanding of the bodies of women who display violent behaviour the chapter examined the characters in the play texts in relation to phenomenological accounts of the body. Toril Moi's lived body identity, while problematic in that it can appear to rely on a conception of the body apart from the structures (patriarchal) which shape it, could have potential for those – Hayley in



*Ashes and Sand* and Boo in *Yard Gal* – who demonstrate a desire to escape from their bodies and the identities and histories attached to them.

However, it was suggested that Elizabeth Grosz's concept of *produced* bodies was a more effective way of understanding the real, material body as it exists in the world. Thus, at the end of *Blasted*, Cate's transformed body might be stronger, but it is still shown to be lacking in control and *produced* by the environment.

Having established in Chapters Two and Three that the play texts offer a representation of women who behave violently as a product of both predetermined and unpredictable forces, Chapter Four broadened the focus to consider the dramaturgical framework in relation to social structures and the interrelation of gender, violence and narrative structures.

The desire to narrativise; to make sense and impose narrative meaning onto a set of events, was suggested to be incompatible with a non-restrictive representation, while more alternative narrative structures, opened up the opportunity for presenting different perspectives and ways of understanding. Therefore, in *Ghost From a Perfect Place*, Rio's intervention into Travis's story not only challenges the Aristotelian desire for closure, but places the female in the position of subject. Similarly, in Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss*, the classic whodunit formula with its emphasis on who and why, is subverted with the use of postmodernist strategies. The blurring of fantasy and reality, shifting time scales and lack of explanation, create a fragmented temporality and linearity. This offers a reflection of the complexity of

Lily's story, but also has a distancing effect which encourages a more critical treatment of such a taboo and provocative subject as female matricide.

In the final section of the chapter, *Blasted* was examined and the narrative structure was compared to that of the medieval annals and chronicles. While many critics and members of the public expressed horror and disgust at the dramatisation of such graphic acts of violence in Kane's *Blasted*, others theorised that her ambivalence towards violence was actually a form of moral outrage and that the play was highly moralistic. Referring to Kane's own comments that the play is amoral, the chapter made parallels between the demand for closure and the demand for moral meaning, concluding that the lack of a moral framework and closure in *Blasted* – like the medieval annals – provides an alternative way of understanding and representing historical events and stories.

The study has attempted to point to the ways in which the dramatists considered here use postmodernist, resistant aesthetic strategies, to show that despite the all too familiar emotional responses of fear and fascination surrounding the representation of women who display violent behaviour, a critical position can be developed. And by occupying that position, stereotypical gender roles can be dismantled, opening up an important and much needed dialogue on the representation of women who are shown to engage in violent behaviour.

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