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“Murder, She Wrote”: The Genesis of Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*

Linda Ben-Zvi

In the preface to her book *Women Who Kill*, Ann Jones explains that her massive study of women murderers began with a quip. After working through a reading list which included *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Bell Jar*, a student asked her: “Isn’t there anything a woman can do but kill herself?” Jones responded, “She can always kill somebody else.”¹

Women killing somebody else, especially when that somebody is male, has fascinated criminologists, lawyers, psychologists, and writers. Fascinated and frightened them. Fear is the subtext of Jones’s book: “the fears of men who, even as they shape society, are desperately afraid of women, and so have fashioned a world in which women come and go only in certain rooms; and . . . the fears of those women who, finding the rooms too narrow and the door still locked, lie in wait or set the place afire.”² Or kill.

Women who kill evoke fear because they challenge societal constructs of femininity—passivity, restraint, and nurture; thus the rush to isolate and label the female offender, to cauterize the act. Her behavior *must* be aberrant, or crazed, if it is to be explicable. And explicable it must be; her crime cannot be seen as societally-driven if the cultural stereotypes are to remain unchallenged.³

Theatre loves a good murder story: violence, passion, and purpose. The stuff of tragedy is the stuff of the whodunit; *Oedipus* is, among other things, the Ur-detective story. Therefore, it is not surprising that contemporary dramatists should turn to murder—to murder by women—as sources for plays. And, following the thesis of Jones’s book, it is also not surprising that the most powerful of the dramas, those that are more than exempla, docudramas, or hysterogenic flights, should be written

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¹ Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), xv.

² *Ibid.*, xvi.

³ At the turn of the century, the father of modern criminology, Cesare Lombroso, offered a checklist of physical qualities that would identify women who might kill: they “approximate more to males . . . than to normal women, especially in the superciliary arches in the seam of sutures, in the lower jaw-bones, and in peculiarities of the occipital region” (Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 6).

by women who share with Jones an awareness that often the murderer, like the feminist, in her own way “tests society’s established boundaries.”⁴

Three plays of this century, based on murder cases and written by American women are Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*, Wendy Kesselman’s *My Sister in This House*, and Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*. All do more than rework a tale of murder; they reveal in the telling the lineaments of the society that spawned the crime. *Machinal*, written in 1928 and successfully revived in New York in 1990, is loosely based on one of the most sensational murder cases of the 1920s: Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray’s killing of Snyder’s husband. Diverting attention from that other case of 1927—Sacco and Vanzetti—articles blazed, “If Ruth Snyder is a woman then, by God! you must find some other name for my mother, wife or sister.”⁵ Treadwell turns this tabloid hysteria on its head. Her Ruth is neither aberrant nor insane; she is ordinary, unexceptional, exactly someone’s mother, wife, or sister, worn down by the societal machine of the title.

More disturbing because less easily domesticated is the equally famous 1933 murder case, from Le Mans, France, in which two maids, the sisters Christine and Lea Papin, bludgeoned, stabbed, and mutilated the bodies of their employer and her daughter: Mme. and Mlle. Lancelin. The crime was directed against women; however, the two plays that have sprung from the murder—Jean Genet’s *The Maids* and Kesselman’s *My Sister in This House*—focus on repressed sexuality and its relation to power, victimization, and enforced gender roles, Kesselman’s version moving beyond the acts of horror to implicate “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.”⁶

While Treadwell and Kesselman reconstitute celebrated murder cases and alter the historicity to shape their readings of female experience, Glaspell’s *Trifles* takes its leave from a previously unknown source; therefore, it has been impossible until now to determine what contextual material Glaspell employs and how she reworks it in order to create her one-act masterpiece and its fictional offshoot, “A Jury of her Peers.”⁷

In *The Road to the Temple*, her biography of her husband George Cram Cook, Glaspell offers a brief comment on the genesis of the play, and on the conditions under which it was written. In the summer of 1916, she, Cook, and other transplanted Greenwich Village writers, artists, and political activists were summering in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and, for the second season, were amusing themselves by staging their own plays on a fishing wharf, converted at night to a makeshift theatre. At the end of July, Glaspell had brought Eugene O’Neill to the group, and they had staged his play, *Bound East for Cardiff*. Now they needed a play for their third bill. As Glaspell tells the story, Cook urged her to supply one:

⁴ Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶ As qtd. in Lynda Hart, “They Don’t Even Look Like Maids Anymore: Wendy Kesselman’s *My Sister in This House*,” in *Making a Spectacle*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 145.

⁷ Unless otherwise specified, when I mention *Trifles*, I am also assuming “A Jury of her Peers.”

I protested. I did not know how to write a play. I had never “studied it.”

“Nonsense,” said Jig. “You’ve got a stage, haven’t you?”

So I went out on the wharf, sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked a long time at that bare little stage. After a time the stage became a kitchen—a kitchen there all by itself. . . . Then the door at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in—two or three men, I wasn’t sure which, but sure enough about the two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter that kitchen.⁸

Whenever she became stuck at a certain point in the writing, Glaspell would walk across the narrow street that separated the wharf from her home, and sit once more in the theatre until she could visualize the scene; after structuring it on paper she would test it in the actual space where it would be played. And so *Trifles* was written under conditions many playwrights would envy.⁹

As for its genesis, she claimed it was based on an actual murder case: “When I was a newspaper reporter out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town.” In numerous interviews throughout her life, she offered variations on this memory; but she never provided the name of the murderer or the details of the trial.¹⁰

In the process of completing research for a biography of Susan Glaspell, I discovered the historical source upon which *Trifles* and “Jury” are based: the murder of a sixty-year-old farmer named John Hossack on December 2, 1900, in Indianola, Iowa. Glaspell covered the case and the subsequent trial when she was a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*, a position she began full-time the day after she graduated from Drake University in June 1900, a twenty-four-year-old woman with a Ph.B. in philosophy and several years of newspaper work in Davenport and Des Moines behind her.¹¹ Although her general beat was the Iowa statehouse, and she would later say that the experiences there provided her with sufficient material to quit her

⁸ Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple* (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1927), 255–56. Glaspell’s comments in *The Road to the Temple* are often misleading. The book is hagiography, and just as she constructed other scenes to make them more dramatic—and to dramatize the role of Cook—she may be doing so here. That she should want to portray his role in her shift to drama as that of a mentor encouraging his tutor is, however, revealing. It may be attributed to Cook’s recent death in Greece, her return alone to Provincetown, and her immediate love affair with Norman Matson. See Kathleen Carroll, “Centering Women Onstage: Susan Glaspell’s Dialogic Strategy of Resistance,” Diss. University of Maryland, 1990; and Ann Larabee, “Death in Delphi: Susan Glaspell and the Companionate Marriage,” *Mid-Western Review* (1987): 93–106 for other explanations. Glaspell offers variations on this scene in notes for the book. In one version, she writes, “I began writing plays because my hisband [sic] George Cram Cook made me [crossed out and replaced with “forced me to”]. “I have announced a play of yours for the next bill,” he told me, soon after we started the Provincetown Players. I didn’t want my marriage to break up so I wrote “*Trifles* . . .” (Notes from Berg Collection, New York Public Library).

⁹ Judith Barlow, in an unpublished essay entitled “Susan’s Sisters: The ‘Other’ Women Writers of the Provincetown Players,” suggests that Glaspell may have also been influenced by her friend Neith Boyce’s play *White Nights*, a work produced by the group the year before, that has as its theme a troubled marriage and a wife who wishes independence. See Barlow, *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (unpublished). *White Nights*, first published in 1928, is reprinted in Rachel France, ed., *A Century of Plays by American Women* (New York: Richards Rosen, 1979).

¹⁰ Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, 256.

¹¹ Glaspell first started writing for newspapers after she graduated from high school in Davenport, Iowa, in 1894. She covered local news and social events for the *Trident*, the *Davenport Morning Republican*, and the *Weekly Observer*, which listed her as Society editor, under the name Susie Glaspell.

job a year later and turn to fiction, it was the Hossack murder case that was the central story of her brief journalistic career.

Although not as sensational as the Snyder or as horrific as the Papin case, the Hossack killing also focuses on a woman accused of murder. The investigation and subsequent trial offer one more example of what Jones so graphically details in her book: the process by which juridical attitudes toward, and prosecution of, women are shaped by societal concepts of female behavior, the same concepts that may have motivated the act of murder. However, the position of the author in relation to the material differs among the plays. While Treadwell probably attended the Snyder trial, she was not an active participant in the situations she recasts. Glaspell was. And while Kesselman could make a thorough, dispassionate investigation of the commentary and reactions that surrounded the history of the Papin case, Glaspell was actually a primary contributor to the shaping of public opinion about the woman being tried. The news accounts Glaspell filed, therefore, offer more than an important contextual basis for approaching the fictional texts. They also provide important biographical information about the author and her own personal and artistic evolution, and document the cultural shifts which took place between 1900 when the murder took place and 1916 when Glaspell wrote her play.

II

The case at first glance seemed simple. Some time after midnight on December 2, 1900, John Hossack, a well-to-do farmer, was struck twice on the head with an axe, while he slept in bed. Margaret Hossack, his wife of thirty-three years—who was sleeping beside him—reported that a strange sound, “like two pieces of wood striking,” wakened her; she jumped out of bed, went into the adjoining sitting room, saw a light shining on a wall, and heard the door to the front porch slowly closing. Only then did she hear her husband’s groans. Assembling the five of her nine children who still lived at home, she lit a lamp, reentered the bedroom, and discovered Hossack bleeding profusely, the walls and bedsheets spattered, brain matter oozing from a five inch gash, his head crushed. One of his sons claimed that the mortally injured man was still able to speak. When he said to his father, “Well, pa, you are badly hurt,” Hossack replied, “No, I’m not hurt, but I’m not feeling well.”¹²

It was assumed that prowlers must have committed the crime; but when a search of the farmhouse failed to reveal any missing items, a coroner’s inquest was called. Its findings were inconclusive. However, after discovering the presumed murder weapon smeared with blood under the family corn crib, and listening to reports and innuendos from neighbors, who hinted at a history of marital and family trouble, the Sheriff arrested Mrs. Hossack, “as a matter of precaution” (5 December) while the funeral was still in progress or, as Glaspell would more vividly report, “just as the sexton was throwing the last clods on the grave of her murdered husband” (14 January).

¹² Susan Glaspell, “The Hossack Case,” *Des Moines Daily News*, 4 December 1900. Glaspell reported the story from 2 December 1900 to 13 April 1901; references to Glaspell’s *Des Moines Daily News* stories will appear in the text.

There was really nothing unique about such a murder in the Iowa of 1900 which if no more violent than it is today was certainly no less so. Sandwiched between ubiquitous advertisements for "Female Nerve Cures" and romantic accounts of the courtships of Vanderbilts and Rockefellers are a whole range of lurid tales that would keep a contemporary tabloid busy—and happy: reports of a woman being set on fire, a farm hand murdering another man with a neck yoke, a young man attempting to kill his parents, and a garden-variety assortment of rural knifings, insanity, and violence.¹³ What makes the Hossack case stand out are the extended length of the coverage and the vivid style of the reporter. Her paper seems to have charged Glaspell with two tasks: rousing the readership and insuring that the story stay on the first page. She accomplishes both.

Employing the techniques of Gonzo journalism sixty years before Hunter Thompson, Glaspell filed twenty-six stories on the Hossack case, from the fifteen-line item on page three, dated December 3, 1900 that summarily described the event of the murder, to the page one, full-column story on 11 April 1901 that reported the jury's decision at the trial. Most are indistinguishable from her own unsigned "Newsgirl" features running in the paper at the time. They make ready use of hyperbole, invention, and supposition, all filtered through one of Glaspell's common devices in her column: a lively, often opinionated persona. Whether labeled "your correspondent," "a representative from the *News*," or "a member of the press," she is a constructed presence who invites the reader to share some privileged information, intriguing rumor, and running assessment of the case and of the guilt or innocence of the accused.

In her first extended coverage of the crime, under the headline, "Coroner's Jury Returns its Verdict this Morning—Mrs. Hossack Thought to be Crazy," Glaspell announces the imminent arrest of the woman, a fact "secretly revealed to your correspondent." She also provides the first of many rumors that become increasingly prominent in her coverage, although never attributed to specific sources: "Friends of Mrs. Hossack are beginning to suggest that she is insane, and that she has been in this condition for a year and a half, under the constant surveillance of members of the family," and "the members of the Hossack family were not on pleasant relations with each other," information which comes as "a complete surprise, as Hossack was not supposed to have an enemy in the world." She concludes by citing the most damaging evidence used against the accused woman throughout her trial: Mrs. Hossack's claim that she lay asleep beside her husband and was not awakened while the murder was taking place (5 December).

Glaspell continues to mix fact, rumor, and commentary, with a superfluity of rousing language and imagery, opening her next report with the reminder that Mrs. Hossack has been arrested for the death of her husband, "on charge of having beaten out his brains with an axe," that the accused woman has employed the legal services of Mr. Henderson and State Senator Berry, that when arrested she showed no emotion and absolutely declined to make any statement concerning her guilt or innocence, and that while her family supported her "the public sentiment is overwhelming

¹³ Glaspell may have covered the story about murder by a neck yoke, or at least read of it, because she appropriates the method for use in *Trifles*.

against her." How she gleaned this information or arrived at these conclusions, Glaspell does not say. She does, however, provide her first description of the accused woman: "Though past 50 years of age, she is tall and powerful and looks like she would be dangerous if aroused to a point of hatred." She again repeats the rumors of domestic tensions, and quotes a neighbor, named Haines—a witness at the inquest—who implies that Mrs. Hossack had years before asked him to get her husband "out of the way" (6 December).

"Public sentiment is still very much against the prisoner," the 8 December news story begins, reiterating the claim that Mrs. Hossack wanted "to get rid of her husband" and adding that she was willing to pay liberally for the services of anyone undertaking the task—a story "the public generally accepts" and will, therefore, "sympathize with the county attorney in his efforts to convict the woman." In an added development, Glaspell reports that Mrs. Hossack had left home a year before but had been persuaded to return "with the idea of securing a division of the property, but this division had never been made." Although the sheriff had refused all requests to see photographs of the murdered man, Glaspell announces, "a representative of the *News* was accorded this privilege though it must be confessed there is little satisfaction in it" (8 December).

Waiving a preliminary hearing, Mrs. Hossack's attorneys decided to take the case directly to the grand jury which bound her over for trial in April. In the interim the defendant requested and was given bail. The story Glaspell filed immediately prior to the release contains a new element. The reporter, who only days before had described Mrs. Hossack as cold, calm, and menacing, now described her as "worn and emaciated" as she was led from her cell, with "red and swollen eyelids indicating that she had been weeping" (11 December). Since Mrs. Hossack was immediately released after this date and remained in her home until the trial, it is likely that what caused Glaspell to alter her description was her own visit to the Hossack farm, the event she uses as the basis for *Trifles*. From this point on in her reporting, Glaspell's references to the accused woman become more benign, the "powerful" murderer becoming with each story older, frailer, and more maternal.¹⁴

Glaspell was probably at the farmhouse gathering material for the front page, double-column feature that appeared on 12 December, the most extensive coverage of the pre-trial events. It began with the headline, "Mrs Hossack may yet be proven innocent," followed by the subheadings, "Tide of sentiment turns slightly in her favor—Notified today that she will soon be released—First photographs bearing on the tragedy." The photographs turn out to be three simple pencil drawings: Mrs. Hossack, sitting in a rocking chair, her head bent down, her eyes closed (Plate I); her dead husband with the two gashes to his head (Plate II); and the axe, complete with four dots of blood. Captions indicate that the first is "sketched from life," the second "from flashlight photograph of the dead man" that "others tried to obtain

¹⁴ It is possible that Glaspell was actually accompanied to the Hossack house by the Sheriff and the County Attorney, who made several trips there during this period to gain evidence. One of the points cited by the Supreme Court of Iowa in its opinion on the trial was the possible impropriety of having the same County Attorney who would conduct the trial gather the evidence. There is no indication, however, that the Sheriff's wife also traveled to the Hossack farm, although the possibility exists that she did.



Plate I: MRS. HOSSACK. Sketched from life by G. A. Proctor as Mrs. Hossack sat at the preliminary trial. She kept her eyes almost continuously on the floor.

access to . . . but failed." In more detail, Glaspell describes her revisionary image of Mrs. Hossack: "the aged prisoner . . . looked up into the officer's face, smiled and remarked that she would be glad to get home again with her children but did not manifest any great degree of joy at the news." Bail, the reader is told, will not be excessive because the accused "is an aged woman and one who would not try in any manner to escape."

As much as she may have altered her own perceptions of Mrs. Hossack and may have tried to influence her readers, Glaspell still had the job of keeping them interested in the case. Borrowing devices from popular detective fiction of the time,¹⁵ she dangles tantalizing questions: the test on the murder weapon may now be known, but the readers will have to wait until the trial to learn the results; the same for the blood stains on Mrs. Hossack's clothing. Glaspell does hint that the results substantiate the claim that the blood on the axe comes from slaughtered fowl, and continues, "if that is true one of the strongest links in the chain of circumstantial evidence is broken.

¹⁵ See Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 111–16.



Plate II: THE MURDERED MAN. A from flashlight photograph of the dead man, now in possession of the county. The sharp edge of the instrument laid the skull open.

If the blood is human, it will look bad for the accused." If still not intrigued, the reader is given a gruesome detail—a "substance resembling brains" has also been found on the axe—and a rumor that the defense will enter a plea of insanity if their efforts on behalf of their client fail. She must be crazy or innocent "the best people of Indianola" surmise, since visits to the home in the past few months did not indicate problems, but only a wife attentive to her husband's needs, seeing "that he lacked for nothing." Of Mrs. Hossack's character, these unnamed sources reveal, "She is said to be a woman who is quick tempered, high strung, like all Scotch women, but of a deeply religious turn of mind" (12 December).

In the months before the trial, Glaspell filed only three small articles about the case, each one using the opportunity of a new piece of news to summarize the details of the murder, the grisly events becoming more grisly with the retelling. On 23 March she reports that new evidence has emerged "and that in all probability it would result in Mrs. Hossack's acquittal at an early date." She does not say what the evidence is but she offers an important turn in the case. Mr. Haines, the primary source of information about trouble in the Hossack home and the party to whom, it is believed, Mrs. Hossack turned to get rid of her husband, "had gone insane brooding over the tragedy, and was yesterday sentenced to the insane asylum."

Although there had been talk of moving the venue of the trial because of the strong feelings against Margaret Hossack and the fear that an impartial jury could not be found (14 January), the trial finally began in the Polk County Courthouse on 1 April 1901 and was held every day except Sundays for the next ten days. Glaspell had apparently been successful in stirring public interest because she reports that on the first day over 1,200 people attended, far more than the tiny rural court could accommodate and that on the day the jury returned its verdict more than 2,000 were present. Noting the composition of the observers, she says that the "conspicuous feature so far is the large attendance of women in court. Over half of the spectators present today belong to the gentler sex. The bright array of Easter hats lent a novelty to the scene, giving it much the appearance of some social function" (2 April).¹⁶

The seventy-eight witnesses, fifty-three for the prosecution and twenty-five for the defense, focused on seven specific questions during the trial: (1) Would it have been possible, as his son testified, for John Hossack, who had sustained two traumatic blows—one made with the axe head, the second with the blunt handle—to talk and call for his wife and children; (2) Was the blood found on the axe and the hairs later discovered nearby human, or were they, as claimed by the family, the residue of the turkey killed two days earlier for Thanksgiving; (3) How had the axe, which the youngest son said he placed inside the corn crib after killing the turkey, come to be found under it, in its usual place; (4) Had the axe and Mrs. Hossack's night clothes been washed to remove incriminating stains of blood; (5) Was the dog, who always barked when strangers appeared, drugged on the night of the crime, as family members testified; (6) Had earlier domestic troubles in the Hossack house been resolved and all dissension ceased for over a year before the murder, as the family stated; and (7) Would it have been possible for an intruder or intruders to enter the house through the bedroom window, stand at the foot of the bed and reach up to strike the fatal blows without rousing the woman who slept by her husband's side? An eighth question—what prompted Mrs. Hossack to leave home and wish her husband "out of the way"—only entered the testimony twice. One neighbor, the wife of Mr. Haines, stated that she and her husband had come to aid Mrs. Hossack, who thought her husband would kill the family (3 April). Another neighbor testified that he had to act as protector when Mrs. Hossack returned to her home "in case her husband again maltreated her as she had reason for believing" (2 April).

Glaspell's reports do not suggest that the prosecution or the defense pursued the possibility of violence in the home, and she does not broach the subject herself. Instead her stories of the trial tend to be summaries of testimony by experts and lay people who describe the structure of the brain, the disposition of the body in the bed, and the configuration of the blood spots on the walls. She does pause to describe the shock caused when the Hossack bed was brought into the courtroom complete with bloodstained bedding, and when two vials of hairs were displayed: one found near the axe, the other obtained by exhuming John Hossack.

¹⁶ The Hossack case was not unique in the number of women in attendance. Jones offers examples of irate ministers commenting on the large number of women who attended celebrated murder trials around the same period. In one case, a minister comments that, "It is a strange thing that women, under no compulsion whatever, are found in large numbers in every notorious trial everywhere, and the dirtier the trial the more women usually will be found in attendance" (*Women Who Kill*, 139). He does not conjecture about this phenomenon.

Interspersed between these accounts are her descriptions of the accused and of those attending the trial. During day one, for example, Glaspell describes Mrs. Hossack's reaction to the recital of counts against her: "Her eyes frequently filled with tears and her frame shook with emotion" (2 April). On the next day, when the murder scene was again invoked, she notes that Mrs. Hossack, who occupied a seat by the Sheriff's wife, surrounded by three of the Hossack daughters and all but one of the sons, broke down and wept bitterly: "Grief was not confined to her alone, it spread until the weeping group embraced the family and the sympathetic wife of Sheriff Hodson who frequently applied her handkerchief to her eyes" (3 April).

Since there were no witnesses to the crime, the prosecution's case was based entirely on circumstantial evidence, and Glaspell often stops in her narration of the testimony to weigh the success of the unsubstantiated arguments, and to prod her readers to keep following the case. After one lengthy argument about how well Mrs. Hossack was able to wield an axe, Glaspell comments: "It must be admitted, however, that the prosecution has not thus far furnished any direct evidence and it is extremely doubtful if the chain of circumstantial evidence thus far offered will be sufficient to eliminate all doubt of the defendant's guilt from the minds of the jurors . . . on the other hand it is claimed by the prosecution attorney that the best evidence is yet to come" (4 April). When Mrs. Hossack took the stand in her own defense and repeated the story she had held since the inquest, describing how she and her husband had spent a typical evening together the night of the crime—"He sat in the kitchen reading . . . later played with his whip . . . [while] I was patching and darning"—Glaspell observes, "When she left the stand, there seemed to be the impression on the audience that she had told the truth" (8 April). Earlier questions of Mrs. Hossack's sanity apparently were dispelled by her composed appearance in court.

Like the novelist she would soon become, Glaspell saves her most impassioned descriptions for the climax of the trial: the summations by the lawyers. Of State Senator Berry, the defense counsel, she writes:

It is said to be the master effort of his life . . . at times the jury without exception was moved to tears. Strong men who had not shed a tear in years sat in their seats mopping their eyes and compressing their lips in a vain effort to suppress the emotion caused by the Senator's eloquent pleas.

[9 April]

This lachrymose display, she says, even extended to the prosecution attorneys who were "seen to turn their heads fearful lest the anguish of the family would unman them and the jury would have an impression which they could not afterward remove." The spectators were also moved. When the court was adjourned at noon, she writes, "fully two thousand people went out in the sunshine, their faces stained by the tears which had coursed down their cheeks."

Aside from tears, Berry's chief strategy was to charge that Mr. Haines, "the insane man," was the real murderer. When he had been asked by the Hossack children to come to the house on the night of the murder, he had refused, saying that there were tramps about. It was he who had first implicated Mrs. Hossack by suggesting that she had wanted her husband dead and had sought his aid. And it was Mrs. Haines who had provided some of the most damning evidence about dissension in the Hossack home.

As successful as Berry may have been in concluding for the defense, Glaspell warns her readers that "it is certain that when attorney McNeal closes the argument for the prosecution the effect of Senator Berry's eloquence will have been lost and the verdict, if any at all is reached, can hardly be acquittal" (9 April). Why, she does not say.

On the last day of the trial, County Attorney Clammer and Mr. McNeal summarized for the prosecution; and, as Glaspell predicted, McNeal was able to rouse the audience with his indictment—"She did it, gentlemen, and I ask you to return her in kind . . . she has forfeited her right to live and she should be as John Hossack, who lies rotting beneath the ground." He too had his own bombshell: Margaret Hossack had been pregnant and given birth to a child before their marriage. This, McNeal claimed, was the dark secret often referred to in the trial, the story Hossack said he would take to his grave, and the reason for the unhappiness in the Hossack home. Just how a pregnancy thirty-three years earlier could have been the sole cause of trouble in the marriage and how it proved Mrs. Hossack's guilt in the murder of her husband was not clear; but, as Glaspell reports, it provided the jury with the impression that she was a woman who could not be trusted. It was with this revelation that the trial ended (10 April).

The case went to the jury on 10 April, the judge presenting the following charge:

when evidence consists of a chain of well authenticated circumstances, it is often more convincing and satisfactory and gives a stronger ground of assurance of the defendant's guilt than the direct testimony of witnesses unconfirmed by circumstances.

[11 April]

In less than twenty-four hours the jury returned its verdict. Margaret Hossack was found guilty as charged and was sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. Glaspell reported the outcome, but made no comment on the finding.

It was the last story she filed in the case; it was also the last story she filed as a reporter for the *Des Moines Daily News*. Immediately after the trial, she resigned and returned home to Davenport to begin writing fiction, and by the summer of 1901 she had moved to Chicago and enrolled in the graduate English program at the University of Chicago. Therefore, she may never have learned the final disposition of the Hossack case, for the story was not yet over. In April 1901 lawyers Henderson and Berry lost an appeal with a lower court, but in April 1902 the Supreme Court of the State of Iowa agreed to hear the case. Citing several instances where the trial judge had ruled incorrectly on the evidence, the higher court overturned the original conviction and requested a new trial.¹⁷ A second trial took place in Madison County, in February 1903. This time the jury, after twenty-seven hours of deliberation, was

¹⁷ See *State vs. Hossack*, Supreme Court of Iowa, 9 April 1902, *Northwestern Reporter*: 1077-81. There were seven procedural points upon which the Supreme Court of Iowa based its reversal, the most significant of which were the following: that the hairs found under the corn crib were not proven to be from the murder weapon and had been taken by the County Attorney and given to the Sheriff and could not, therefore, be introduced as evidence; that the dissension in the Hossack house had abated at least a year prior to the murder, and could not, therefore, be introduced in the case.

unable to reach a verdict: nine voted for conviction and three for acquittal.¹⁸ In papers filed in April 1903, the prosecutor stated that since no further information had surfaced, it would be a waste of taxpayers' money to ask a third jury to hear the case.¹⁹ Mrs. Hossack, then near sixty and in failing health, was ordered released, and was allowed to return to her home, her guilt or innocence still in question.

Eight years earlier, a court in Fall River, Massachusetts had freed Lizzie Borden because they could not imagine that a refined, New England "Maiden" who wore demure silk, carried flowers, and wept copiously in court could wield the axe that slew her family. So strong were the prevailing views about femininity, that even the prosecuting attorney found it hard "to *conceive*" of the guilt of "one of that sex that all high-minded men revere, that all generous men love, that all wise men acknowledge their indebtedness to."²⁰

What is striking in the Hossack case is how ready the community was to assume the guilt of "one of that sex." Unlike Lizzie, who quickly read the signs of the time and played the part that was demanded of her—she learned to cry in court—Margaret Hossack, for all her tears and Glaspell's mid-course correction and subsequent, embellished descriptions of "the frail mother of nine," did not win over the jury. The jury may not have been convinced that she was guilty of murder, but she certainly was guilty of questionable female behavior. She had left her husband, discussed her marital troubles with neighbors, and—most damaging—had been pregnant before marriage. To have found such a woman innocent or to have explored the question of justifiable homicide would have been unthinkable in the Iowa court of 1901. Such a direction in the trial would have necessitated an investigation of the family, the power wielded by the husband, his physical abuse over a long period, and the circumscribed lives of the wife and children; both the prosecution and, tellingly, the defense seemed loath to pursue such investigations. Instead, as Glaspell's accounts indicate, their cases were each discourses in evasion, argued on small, tangential points, few of which addressed the central issue of motive. Even the Supreme Court ruling, which acknowledged John Hossack's repeated beatings of his wife—with his hands and with a stove lid—couched its findings:

The family life of the Hossacks had not been pleasant perhaps [sic] the husband was most to blame. He seems to have been somewhat narrow minded and quite stern in his determination to control all family matters.²¹

However, absent from the seven points on which the Supreme Court reversed the lower court decision was abuse. In fact the court argued that prior relations in the family should not have been introduced in the original trial since harmony had been established for over a year. Domestic life, thus, remained untarnished.

Why such juridical sidestepping? Because John Hossack was a pillar of the society, he had been nominated "for some of the highest offices in Warren County" (12 December), and "the twelve good men" Glaspell describes sitting in judgment of

¹⁸ See Polk County Transcripts of Court Records, Case #805, 2 April 1901–3 March 1903.

¹⁹ Warren County Court Records, Hossack Trial, April 1903. I thank the Warren and Polk County Court Recorders' Offices for their help in securing these files.

²⁰ Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 231.

²¹ *Northwest Reporter*, 9 April 1902.

Mrs. Hossack were all men who knew him well and who had a vested interest in protecting his name if they could no longer protect his person. The women attending the trial in their Easter finery—perhaps even the sympathetic Sheriff's wife—might have been able to offer a different reading of the case, but they were not accorded the opportunity in the court or in the newspaper accounts Glaspell filed. Sixteen years later, in her play Glaspell offers them the opportunity to be heard.

III

Trifles begins at home. A murder has been committed, a man strangled while he slept; his wife—who claimed to be sleeping beside him at the time—has been accused of the crime and taken to jail to await trial. Those prosecuting the case, County Attorney Henderson and Sheriff Peters, have returned to the scene to search for clues that will provide “a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling,” and explain “the funny way” the man was murdered, “rigging it all up like that.”²² Accompanying them are Mr. Hale, who found the body; Mrs. Peters, the Sheriff's wife, charged with bringing the accused woman some of her things; and Mrs. Hale, who keeps her company in the kitchen below while the men move around the upstairs bedroom and perimeter of the farmhouse searching for clues.

In the absence of the wife, the women, like quilters, patch together the scenario of her life and her guilt. As they imagine her, Minnie Foster is a lonely, childless woman, married to a taciturn husband, isolated from neighbors because of the rigors of farm life. When they discover a bird cage with its door ripped off and a canary with its neck wrung, they have no trouble making the connection. The husband has killed the bird, the wife's only comfort, as he has killed the bird-like spirit of the woman. The motive and method of murder become clear to them as the signs of sudden anger they infer from the half-wiped kitchen table, and Minnie's erratic quilt stitching. Based on such circumstantial evidence, the women try the case, find the accused guilty, but dismiss the charge, recognizing the exigencies that led her to the act. In the process of judging, they become compeers: Mrs. Peters recognizes her own disenfranchisement under the law and her own potential for violence, and Mrs. Hale recognizes her failure to sustain her neighbor and thus her culpability in driving the desperate woman to kill.

This brief summary indicates how few specific details remain in Glaspell's revisioning of the Hossack case. There is mention of “that man who went crazy” (4), but he is not named or connected to the events.²³ Of the names of the participants, only Henderson is used, assigned to the country attorney rather than the defense lawyer. Margaret Hossack has been renamed Minnie Foster Wright, the pun on the surname marking her lack of “rights,” and implying her “right” to free herself against

²² Susan Glaspell, *Trifles*, in *Plays* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Co., 1920), 15. All further page references appear in the text.

²³ See Elaine Hedges, “Small Things Reconsidered: Susan Glaspell's ‘A Jury of her Peers,’” in *Women Studies* 12 (1986), 89–110. Rpt. in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi. Hedges discusses insanity in rural American life and also the practice of women on the plains having canaries to provide them company.

the societally sanctioned “right” of her husband to control the family, a right implicit in the Hossack case.²⁴

Glaspell’s most striking alterations are her excision of Minnie and the change of venue. The accused woman has been taken away to jail before *Trifles* begins, her place signified by the empty rocking chair that remains in her kitchen. By not bringing Minnie physically on to the stage, the playwright focuses on issues that move beyond the guilt or innocence of one person. Since the audience never actually sees Minnie, it is not swayed by her person, but by her condition, a condition shared by other women who can be imagined in the empty subject position. And by situating her play in the kitchen, not at the court, in the private space where Minnie lived rather than the public space where she will be tried, Glaspell offers the audience a composite picture of the life of Minnie Wright, Margaret Hossack, and the countless women whose experiences were not represented in court because their lives were not deemed relevant to the adjudication of their cases. Most important, by shifting venue, Glaspell brings the central questions never asked in the original Hossack case into focus: the motives for murder, what goes on in the home, and why women kill.

Motives are writ large in *Trifles*. The mise-en-scène suggests the harshness of Minnie’s life. The house is isolated, “down in a hollow and you don’t see the road” (21)—dark, foreboding, a rural, gothic scene. The interior of the kitchen replicates this barrenness and the commensurate disjunctions in the family, as the woman experienced them. Things are broken, cold, imprisoning; they are also violent. “Preserves” explode from lack of heat, a punning reminder of the causal relationship between isolation and violence. The mutilated cage and bird signify Wright’s brutal nature and the physical abuse his wife has borne. Employing expressionistic techniques, Glaspell externalizes Minnie’s desperation and the conditions that caused it.²⁵ She also finds the dramatic correlative for revenge. Rather than use an axe, this abused wife strangles her husband: a punishment to fit his crime. So powerfully does Glaspell marshal the evidence of Minnie’s strangled life, that the jury on the stage and the jury who observe them from the audience presume the wife’s “right” to take violent action in the face of the violence done to her. They see what might cause women to kill.

When Glaspell turns to the characters in her play, she again reworks the figures from the Hossack case, offering a revisionary reading of their roles in the original trial. The lawmen in *Trifles* bear traces of the original investigators: the County Attorney and the Sheriff. Mr. Hale, however, is Glaspell’s invention, a composite of the Indianola farmers who testified at the Hossack trial, his name possibly derived from Mr. Haines. By introducing a man not directly charged with prosecution of the

²⁴ For other associations connected with the name, see Karen Alkalay-Gut, “Murder and Marriage: another Look at *Trifles*,” in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi.

²⁵ Glaspell often employed expressionistic techniques in her plays. See Yvonne Shafer, “Susan Glaspell and American Expressionism,” in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi. Shafer discusses expressionism in the one-act plays *The People* and *Woman’s Honor*, and in the full-length play *The Verge*. Also see Linda Ben-Zvi, “Susan Glaspell and Eugene O’Neill,” *The Eugene O’Neill Newsletter* 6 (1982): 22–29, and Linda Ben-Zvi, “Susan Glaspell, Eugene O’Neill, and the Imagery of Gender,” *Eugene O’Neill Newsletter* 10 (1986): 22–28 for further discussions of expressionism in Glaspell’s plays.

case, Glaspell is able to show patriarchal power and privilege, the united front that judged Margaret Hossack. She also illustrates the process through which an individual joins the ranks. In "A Jury of her Peers," she goes to great lengths to indicate Mr. Hale's awkwardness at the beginning of the story, as he relates the details of the case, and how easily he is intimidated by the County Attorney. However, when he is allowed—by virtue of his gender—to go upstairs with the men of law, it is Hale, not they, who directly taunts the women: "But would the women know a clue if they did come upon it."²⁶ Glaspell ironically describes Hale as speaking "with good natured superiority" when he declares, "women are used to worrying over trifles" (44). Gender transcends class here, as it did in the original trial, where the farmers, jurors, and lawyers had a common connection: they were male and as such they were in control of the court and the direction of the testimony.

However, Glaspell also indicates that the privileged club does have a pecking order. Mr. Hale is recently admitted—or more likely, only temporarily admitted—and, therefore, more likely to chide those below him in order to gain favor with those above. A similar desire to ingratiate themselves with the law and to establish a camaraderie that temporarily suspended class was clearly apparent among the farmers of Indianola, eager to play a part in convicting Mrs. Hossack, some so ready that their zeal in intruding themselves into the investigation was cited in the Supreme Court reversal.

Constructing her category of men across class lines, establishing their connectedness based on legal empowerment and rights, Glaspell summarily dismisses them to roam about on the periphery of the tale, their presence theatrically marked by shuffling sounds above the heads of the women, and occasional appearances as they scurry out to the barn. With her deft parody, Glaspell undercuts the authority the men wielded in the original case, and throws into question their sanctioned preserve of power. They physically crisscross the stage as they verbally crisscross the details of the crime, both actions leading nowhere, staged to show ineffectuality and incompetence.

In her version of the Hossack case, the women, also drawn across class lines, occupy the men's place, standing in stage center and functioning as the composite shaping consciousness that structures the play.²⁷ Glaspell carefully chooses the two women who will usurp legal agency. Mrs. Peters is the wife of the Sheriff, patterned after Sheriff Hodson's wife, whose acts of kindness to Margaret Hossack seem to have stayed in Glaspell's memory. At first, Mrs. Peters parrots the masculinist view and voice of her husband, defending the search of the home as the men's "duty."

²⁶ Susan Glaspell, "A Jury of her Peers," in *Everyman*, 5 March 1917, 42. All further page references appear in the text.

²⁷ Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are of different classes, a fact visually captured by the filmmaker Sally Heckel, in her version of "A Jury of her Peers" (Texture Films). Mrs. Hale wears a plain, cloth coat and head scarf; Mrs. Peters has a fur tippet and large, feathered hat. Their language also bears signs of their classes—a technique Glaspell often repeats. In *Trifles*, Mrs. Hale makes grammatical errors, has unfinished sentences, drops letters. Mrs. Peters speaks in a grammatically correct manner befitting the Sheriff's wife. For example, Mrs. Hale's, "I wonder if she was goin' to quilt it or just knot it?" becomes Mrs. Peters's, "We think she was going to—knot it," the omitted *g* being Glaspell's way of marking different education and position. What joins the women is the men's categorization of them, predicated on gender, erasing difference, dismissing individuality.

However, she gradually comes to recognize that marital designation—wife of the Sheriff—offers her no more freedom than it does Minnie; in fact, it completely effaces her as an individual. Glaspell illustrates this condition by having the women identified only by their surnames, while, at the same time, they seek to particularize Minnie, referring to her by both her first and her maiden name.²⁸

To the men, however, Minnie is John Wright's wife, just as Mrs. Peters is the Sheriff's wife: "married to the law" (*Trifles*, 29), "one of us" ("Jury," 37), she "doesn't need supervising" (*Trifles*, 29). Even Mrs. Hale at the beginning of "Jury" assumes that Mrs. Peters will be an extension of her husband and will share his views of murder. However, as Mrs. Peters slowly ferrets out the facts of Minnie's life—the childlessness, the isolation—and conflates the experience with her own early married days, she begins to identify with Minnie. It is when she comes upon the bird cage and the dead canary that she makes the most important connection: an understanding of female helplessness in front of male brutality: "When I was a girl—my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—[covers her face an instant] If they hadn't held me back I would have—[Catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly]—hurt him" (*Trifles*, 25).

It is significant that Glaspell attributes to Mrs. Peters, the Sheriff's wife, the memory of a murder with an axe, the murder weapon in the Hossack case, and offers as sign of brutality the dismemberment of an animal, a trace, perhaps, of the turkey in the original case. In the reversal of roles that Glaspell stages—in having Mrs. Peters act in lieu of her husband, dispensing her verdict based on her reading of the case and the motives for murder—she destroys the notion that a woman is her husband. She also stages what a woman may become when given legal power: a subject acting under her own volition, her decisions not necessarily coinciding with her husband's or with the male hegemony. She becomes self-deputized.

If Mrs. Peters is taken from life, so too is Mrs. Hale, a possible surrogate for the young reporter Susan Glaspell.²⁹ Just as Mrs. Peters recognizes her own potential for murder in the face of powerlessness, and this recognition motivates her to act and to seize the juridical position, so Mrs. Hale comes to her own awareness in the course of the play. What she discovers in the kitchen of the Wright home is her own complicity in Minnie's situation, because of her withheld aid. "We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's just a different kind of the same thing," she says, summarizing her insight about "how it is for women" (27). In light of the Hossack case and Glaspell's role in sensationalizing the proceedings and in shaping public opinion, the lines appear to be confessional; so to

²⁸ At the time Glaspell was writing the play, the question of women taking their husband's names was a political issue. One of Glaspell's friends, Ruth Hale, launched a movement called the Lucy Stone League which supported married women who chose to keep their maiden names. See Judith Schwarz, *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy: Greenwich Village 1912–1940* (Lebanon, NH: New Victorian Publishers, 1982), 14, 58, 83. Also see Liza Maeve Nelligan, "'The Haunting Beauty of the Life We've Left': A Contextual Reading of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and *The Verge*," in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi. Glaspell, like her fellow writers Neith Boyce, Mary Heaton Vorse, and others never assumed her husband's name.

²⁹ When the Provincetown Players staged the play, Glaspell chose to play Mrs. Hale and had her husband, George Cram Cook, play Hale.

her question, "Who's going to punish that?" (27), Mrs. Hale's words seem to indicate Glaspell's awareness in 1916 of her omissions and commissions in 1901: her failure to act in Margaret Hossack's behalf, and her failure to recognize the implications of the trial for her own life.

Given this awareness, it may seem strange that when Glaspell has the opportunity to retry Margaret Hossack and change the outcome of the case, she does not acquit the woman, or, as KayAnn Short argues, give her "her day in court" to prove her innocence.³⁰ Instead she has Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale assume Minnie's guilt and—as in the original trial—base their findings on circumstantial evidence instead of incontrovertible proof. However, when approaching *Trifles* in relation to the Hossack case, it becomes clear that acquittal is not Glaspell's intention, not why she wrote the play. Whether Margaret Hossack or Minnie Wright committed murder is moot; what is incontrovertible is the brutality of their lives, the lack of options they had to redress grievances or to escape abusive husbands, and the complete disregard of their plight by the courts and by society. Instead of arguing their innocence, Glaspell concretizes the conditions under which these women live and the circumstances that might cause them to kill. She thus presents the subtext that was excised from the original trial and that undergirds so many of the cases cited in Ann Jones's study: men's fears of women who might kill, and women's fears of the murder they might be forced to commit. In so doing, she stages one of the first modern arguments for justifiable homicide.³¹ By having Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale unequivocally assume Minnie's guilt and also assume justification for her part, Glaspell presents her audience/jury with a defense that forces it to confront the central issues of female powerlessness and disenfranchisement and the need for laws to address such issues.³²

However, Glaspell does not actually present the victimization of women or the violent acts such treatment may engender; instead she stages the potential for female

³⁰ Kay Ann Short, "A Different Kind of the Same Thing: The Erasure of Difference in 'A Jury of her Peers,'" *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi.

³¹ One could argue that the precedent for staging a case of justifiable homicide for women was established in *The Oresteia*, where the motives leading to Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon are delineated, or would be if one affixed to the work the murder of Iphigenia, as Ariane Mnouchkine recently has done in a production of Aeschylus' trilogy at the Théâtre du Soleil that is prefaced by Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (see *New York Times*, 27 March 1991: B-3, for a description of this performance). For a discussion of contemporary wife battering cases and the plea of justifiable homicide, see Jones, *Women Who Kill*, Chapter 6.

³² In most of Glaspell's plays, there is a political component that is directly connected to particular events of her period, which would be immediately evident to her audience, but which is often lost in contemporary discussions of her works. In *Suppressed Desires*, for instance, she takes on a noted anti-feminist of the period, one Professor Sedwick, who had said, "All women were hens" (reported in the *New York Times*, 18 February 1914). In the play, Glaspell and Cook play on the name Stephen, parodying both Freudianism and Cook's childhood pronunciation of the word (*Road*, 25). However, they also are answering Sedwick, a reference her audience would immediately have understood. Even more overtly, *Inheritors* challenges contemporary issues such as the Alien and Sedition laws, and the Red Scare, and *Chains of Dew* argues for birth control. For the relation between events of her period and Glaspell's plays, see Barbara Ozieblo, "Suppression and Society," in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi, and J. Ellen Gainor, "Chains of Dew and the Drama of Birth Control," in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi.

action and the usurpation of power.³³ By having the women assume the central positions and conduct the investigation and the trial, she actualizes an empowerment that suggests that there are options short of murder that can be imagined for women. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale may seem to conduct their trial *sub rosa*, because they do not actively confront the men; but in Mrs. Hale's final words, "We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson" (30), ostensibly referring to a form of quilting but clearly addressed to the actions the women have taken, they become both actors and namers. Even if the men do not understand the pun—either through ignorance or, as Judith Fetterley suggests, through self-preservation—the audience certainly does.³⁴ It recognizes that the women have achieved an important political victory: they have wrested control of language, a first step in political ascendancy; and they have wrested control of the case and of the stage. Not waiting to be given the vote or the right to serve on juries, Glaspell's women have taken the right for themselves. Her audience in 1916 would get the point. It would have understood that Glaspell is deconstructing the very assumption of the law's incontrovertibility, its absolutist position.³⁵ Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, by suturing into their deliberations their own experiences and fears—just as the men in the Hossack case had done—illustrate the subjective nature of the reading of evidence, and, by implication, of all essentialist readings.

In 1916 it would have been clearer than it often is to contemporary audiences that Glaspell is more concerned with legal and social empowerment than with replacing one hierarchy with another; that women's surreptitious action may comment less on women's natures than on the political systems that breed such behavior; that women do not speak "in a different voice," but speak in a manner deriving from their different position under the law, that is, from their common erasure. Glaspell's depiction of the conditions of her women is close to what Catherine MacKinnon describes in *Feminism Unmodified*: women's actions—their voices—deriving not from some innate nature but from the ways they have been forced to speak and to act. MacKinnon suggests that if legal and social changes could occur, it would then be time to decide how a woman "talks."³⁶ When women are powerless, she argues, they "don't just

³³ See Judith Butler, "Performing Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270–82, on the problems of staging victimization and thus representing the very condition the writer may wish to dismantle.

³⁴ See Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murder in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

³⁵ Questions concerning the binding nature of law were hotly debated in 1916—a time of war and protest against that war—in issues of *The Masses* and other periodicals with which Glaspell was connected.

³⁶ Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). While acknowledging the work of such writers as Carol Gilligan, MacKinnon argues that Gilligan "achieves for moral reasoning what the special protection rule achieves in law: the affirmative rather than the negative valuation of that which has accurately distinguished women from men, by making it seem as though those attributes, with their consequences, really are somehow ours, rather than what male supremacy has attributed to us for its own use. For women to affirm difference, when difference means dominance, as it does with gender, means to affirm the qualities and characteristics of powerlessness" (38–39). What is relevant about MacKinnon's argument in relation to *Trifles* and "Jury" is her emphasis on law and enfranchisement. Reading Glaspell through

“speak differently. A lot, [they] don’t speak.” Speech is “not differently articulated, it is silenced.”³⁷ In *Trifles* Glaspell, like MacKinnon, posits gender as a production of the inequality of power under law, “a social status based on who is permitted to do what to whom.”³⁸

IV

That Susan Glaspell was able to reshape the events of the Hossack case in order to focus on contemporary issues in 1916 can be attributed to at least two causes. The first is biographical. Glaspell herself had changed in the sixteen years that separated the trial from the composition of the play. When she covered the Hossack case, she was twenty-four, right out of college; when she wrote *Trifles*, she had just turned forty, and had already published three well-received novels, thirty-one short stories, and a collection of short fiction, all focusing on the lives of women. She had also spent a year in Paris, and had lived in Chicago, Greenwich Village, and Provincetown, before her marriage at the age of thirty-seven to fellow Davenport native George Cram Cook.³⁹

It is a mistake to claim that Glaspell was a slumbering midwestern woman until Cook brought her to life and political awareness when they married. Before her marriage, and even before her coverage of the Hossack case, she was already something of an iconoclast, aware of the imposition of cultural restriction on women, at

MacKinnon allows the critic to move beyond the questions of “different voice” that were the critical bulwarks of the first moment of Glaspell criticism. For example, see Linda Ben-Zvi, “Susan Glaspell and Eugene O’Neill,” “Susan Glaspell, Eugene O’Neill, and the Imagery of Gender, and “Susan Glaspell’s Contributions to Contemporary Women Playwrights,” *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 147–66; Karen Stein, “The Women’s World of Glaspell’s *Trifles*,” *Women in American Theatre*, eds. Helen Krinch Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987), 253–56; Karen Alkalay-Gut, “‘A Jury of her Peers’: The Importance of *Trifles*,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 21 (1984): 3–11; and Karen Malpede, “Introduction,” *Women in Theatre* (New York: Limelight, 1983). See also the more recent materialist readings: Judith Stephens, “Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890–1920,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 283–93; Kay Ann Short, “A Different Kind of the Same Thing: The Erasure of Difference in ‘A Jury of Her Peers,’” in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*; Liza Maeve Nelligan, “The Haunting Beauty from the Life We’ve Left: A Contextual Reading of Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* and *The Verge*,” in *Susan Glaspell: A Collection of Critical Essays*; Kathleen Carroll, “Centering Women Onstage: Susan Glaspell’s Dialogic Strategy of Resistance,” Diss., University of Maryland, 1990; and Linda Williams, “‘A Jury of her Peers’: Marlene Gorriss’s ‘A Question of Silence,’” *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories and Practices*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 107–15. However, it should be noted that as much as MacKinnon’s ideas, as used here, may provide one way of approaching *Trifles*, it is hard to imagine that Glaspell would have supported MacKinnon’s stance on censorship as a way of alleviating pornography. Repeatedly in her writing, Glaspell objected to any form of censorship, for any reason. She was involved in several anti-censorship cases, one involving the attempted banning of a book by the Davenport Public Library in 1910, and in later controversies surrounding celebrated censorship cases.

³⁷ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁹ Glaspell’s marriage parallels almost exactly the paradigm Caroline Heilbrun presents in *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), a marriage near middle age that is scandal-ridden and that both forces the woman out of society and allows her a freedom such societal marginalization provides.

least as they had an impact on her own life and the lives of the women she observed as Susie Glaspell, the eighteen-year-old Society Editor of a local Davenport newspaper. However, her nascent feminism was based on the class structure of the city. She was poor in a town that valued wealth; she worked in a society where women were expected to find others to work for them.

What she seems to have experienced for the first time in her coverage of the Hossack case was a legal rather than social powerlessness that cut across class lines: the testimony of Mrs. Hossack, the ladies in their Easter finery attending the trial, and even the Sheriff's wife were equally silenced. While Glaspell may have felt sympathy, if not empathy, for Mrs. Hossack when she entered her kitchen in 1901, and while she may have been aware of the skewed nature of the trial, she was not able to translate this experience or insight into her writing, certainly not into her newspaper reports. As Ann Jones shows in her description of the coverage of a variety of murder trials of women during the period, the news accounts offer what the society will bear. The possibility of exploring the implications of the Hossack trial in terms of gender roles or of pursuing the question of justifiable homicide would have been unthinkable in Iowa in 1901, even if Glaspell had consciously been moved to do so.

In 1916, it was not. If Glaspell had changed, so had society. Although the general public might still resist such positions, the people for whom Glaspell fashioned her theatre, if not her fiction, would certainly see the Hossack trial in light of their own agitation for the nineteenth amendment, women's rights, socialism, and the dismantling of absolutist thought in all areas.⁴⁰

At the time she wrote *Trifles*, Glaspell was living in a community passionately concerned with socialism and feminism; she herself was a founding member of Heterodoxy, the New York-based group of women whose numbers included activists Maria Jenny Howe, Crystal Eastman, Elizabeth Irwin, Mary Heaton Vorse, and—for a time—Charlotte Perkins Gilman.⁴¹ The audience for the Provincetown Players was

⁴⁰ It is important to note that *Trifles* and "A Jury of her Peers" were written for different audiences. The fiction, appearing in the popular magazine, *Everyweek*, 5 March 1917, stresses identification between the reader and Mrs. Hale, a familiar farm housewife, and leads to a reading that seems to romanticize housework and traditional feminine roles far more than *Trifles* does. For example, in the story version, Glaspell has Mrs. Hale say, "The Law is the law and a bad stove is a bad stove. How'd you like to cook on this?" an image and a question with which her readers could identify, just as they could identify with Mrs. Hale's sudden call from her own kitchen to travel to the kitchen of Minnie Wright. One of the anomalies in the criticism of the two works is the failure of most critics to note that there are two versions of the same basic story and to take into consideration the differences in accordance with the nature of the audience and the differences implicit in the genre. Two of the most influential essays on these works use "Jury" and make no reference to the more subtle and radical *Trifles*. See Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Re-Reading: Or Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 93–106, and Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of her Peers,' 'The Murder in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" When Linda Williams compares the Dutch film "A Question of Silence" to Glaspell's work, she also uses "Jury" not *Trifles*. See Williams, "A Jury of her Peers."

⁴¹ See Judith Schwarz's description of Heterodoxy in *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy*, in which she lists Glaspell as a founding member; also see Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), for a detailed study of the feminist movement in New York in the years 1910–1920; and June Sochen, *The New Woman in Greenwich Village, 1910–1920* (New York:

already a body of the committed, who in 1916 agitated for suffrage and for social reform that would redress class distinctions in America, and who for the most part were opposed to Wilson and the war. Unlike many suffragists, their arguments were usually posited on a materialist rather than an essentialist reading of gender, concerned either with class struggles of which gender limitations were part or with enlightenment ideals of individualism applicable to both women and men. They did not romanticize femininity; most debunked the "cult of the home." Their major concern was in insuring "that women shall have the same right as man to be different, to be individuals not merely a social unit," and that this individualism would manifest itself in legal and social freedom.⁴² It was for this audience and at this time that Glaspell returned to the Hossack case.

Trifles, therefore, is grounded in a double-focused historical context: the Iowa of 1901 and the Provincetown of 1916, the two periods leaving traces and providing many of the tensions and fissures that produce the contemporary feel of Glaspell's best works. Thus posited, her writing acts as a palimpsest for the shifting roles of women in the early twentieth century, and for her own shifting attitudes toward the possibilities for women and for herself. It is either a testament to the skill with which Glaspell constructed *Trifles* and "A Jury of her Peers," or proof of how little women's lives have changed since 1916 that contemporary feminist critics still use the play and story as palimpsests for their own readings of contemporary feminist issues, readings that still point to some of the dilemmas which faced Glaspell and her personae in 1901 and in 1916: how to free women from the stereotypical roles into which they have been cast, how to articulate their lives and their rights without reinscribing them in the very roles against which they inveigh, how to represent female power not victimization, in short how to represent Margaret Hossack. However, in reading the works through a contemporary grid, critics should be careful of turning them into contemporary tracts, assuming that just because Glaspell offers a picture of two women who bond she is arguing for a higher moral ground for women, romanticizing femininity and home, arguing sexual difference, or the categorization of women under a fixed moral genus.⁴³ Given her own interests and concerns at the

Quadrangle, 1972), for a description of the period and of Glaspell's relation to feminists in Greenwich Village. In her *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1902* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), Mari Jo Buhle discusses how Glaspell "created female characters as working-class women with capacities to feel intensely, to understand injustice rather than internalizing oppression, and when conditions allowed to strike back at their oppressors" (203).

⁴² These quotations are taken from the *New York Times* (18 February 1914) report concerning a meeting organized by Heterodoxy president Marie Jenny Howe at Cooper Union, billed as "the first feminist meeting ever convened." At the time Glaspell was in Davenport, after suffering a miscarriage, but many of her friends were there, and she would most likely have been in the audience, if not on the dias. For other references to articles on feminism written between 1913-1916, see Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. I thank Liza Maeve Nelligan for calling my attention to the Rally, and for sharing her research on heterodoxy and the feminist movements of the period with me.

⁴³ Five years later Glaspell would write *The Verge*, her most powerful and most feminist play. Her persona, Claire Archer, would demand a life not circumscribed by the traditional roles assigned to women—mother, caregiver, hostess—and would stand in juxtaposition to her daughter and her sister, who represent conventional women whose gender does not provide them with an insight into Claire's life or her aspiration. In *The Verge* Glaspell also pursues feminism as a "transvaluation of values" on a Nietzschean model. See Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 296, in relation to Dora Marsden and a similar position. Also see Nelligan, "The Haunting Beauty of the Life We've Left," and Carroll "Centering Women Onstage."

time, and her own relation to the Hossack case, it is more likely that her play and story are illustrating the need to provide both male and female voices in court—and in art—if human experience is not to be forever subsumed under the male pronoun and if women's voices are to be heard not as difference but as equally registered.