

ANNA CORA MOWATT'S *FASHION*: THEATRICAL REFASHIONING OF THE FEMALE SELF IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN DRAMA

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The spirit of party has entered into all our Departments... Some Deify the phantom Fashion...while others Worship only at the shrine of Phytus.

Mery Otis Warren, Letter to John Adams, 29 July 1779

Studies on American theater history repeatedly tell the hackneyed story of the difficulties drama had to face in this country. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were bad times and the situation was made worse by a number of factors. Traditionally critics have focused on the strong Puritan and Quaker opposition to the stage since it was considered a nest of immorality and frivolity, the cultural dependence on Britain, the scarcity of theaters and native actors, and the priority of building a nation before a national literature. Hence, when the Continental Congress passed legislation calling for the suppression of «shews, plays and other expensive diversions and entertainments» on 20 October 1774, it was the result of pent-up anti-theatrical sentiment in the colonies. Yet, revisionist research on the period has come up with new evidence that justifies this state on new grounds. Peter A. Davis convincingly argues that it was neither the Puritan moral victory nor the prudent act of propriety in the face of a coming war which critics such as Howard Taubman and Arthur Hobson Quinn contended¹, but that the act was the result of «a long-standing

1. See Taubman 41 and Quinn 32.

legal tradition, the product of a Puritan mercantile culture that saw theatre as both an economic threat and a symbol of colonial suppression». The 1774 statute as well as its legislative predecessors reflect then «the colonies' awkward relationship with the Board of Trade and Americans' increasing desire to break their debt-ridden dependence upon British manufactured goods» (18). This implies a change in understanding theatrical development in the American colonies from shifting importance on religious fervor or war-time zeal to politically driven economic motivations. Theatre, identified as a British manufactured product expressly suited to royalist tastes, became politicized and came to represent all that the rebellious colonists despised –«a political and social symbol of English oppression» (Davis 25).

Drama continued to develop in the new-born republic during the nineteenth century and there seems to be unanimous agreement among the critics to highlight the decades of the 1840s and 1850s as probably the most theatrically significant in the century.² Among the milestones of the drama of the period stands *Fashion: or Life in New York* (1845), the nineteenth-century first and most successful national comedy of manners which immediately encouraged a group of less well executed social satires.³ Anna Cora Mowatt, according to most historians, had the greatest impact on antebellum American drama and theatre. Indeed her comedy is the most frequently anthologized of all plays not only of nineteenth-century playwrights but also of American women playwrights previous to the twentieth century. As Doris Abramson states, there is no doubt that even if there were other plays by women of Mowatt's time worth of critical attention, «only *Fashion* is securely in the canon of American dramatic literature» (39). If we agree that women writing in United States are the heirs of a tradition that has been recovered challenging what Sacvan Bercovitch labels as «unduly pervasive habits of mind» (423), we can well imagine that the same applies to

2. Claudia Johnson sums up the situation as the political events of the period seem to have been vital to what was happening in drama: «in the background was the Whig victory of 1840, following in the wake of the 1837 financial crash and widespread unemployment. Growing urban areas and an immense increase in immigration led to the nativist movement and labor agitation for better wages and working conditions. Between 1830 and 1840 railroads opened much of the frontier to settlement. What would be the two most energetic areas of English-language theater outside New York City were beginning to be settled: California in 1849 and Salt Lake City in 1847. Moreover, the 1830s and 1840s were the years of «the Benevolent Empire» when religious societies attempted to effect moral and social change in education, women's rights, temperance, prisons, and asylums, aiming to reform the poor in America as well as savages abroad. [...] Like the masterpieces of the American Renaissance, milestones in American drama also cluster in the 1840s and 1850s» (1988, 324-325).

3. Many plays with similar intent appeared in the period after *Fashion*, though «none of them represented the times so vigorously, accurately, and gaily, or achieved comparable stage success. *Self* by Mrs. Sidney F. Bateman, first performed at Burton's New Theatre on October 27, 1856, most nearly approached *Fashion* in theme and treatment. *Self* was most realistic in its representation of immediate local details, but it was decidedly inferior to *Fashion* in the quality of its characterizations and dialogue. The domestic social satires that appeared later in the century were, on the whole, superior: Howard's *The Henrietta*, Fitch's *The Climbers*, and Mitchell's *The New York Idea*. In a way *Fashion* was the forerunner, even of such twentieth-century society and family comedies as *Life With Father*» (Moody 315). Most critics agree on the inferior quality of *Self* when compared to *Fashion*. See Meserve 84-85 and Mordden 16.

women writing for the stage. With the exception of Mercy Otis Warren and Anna Cora Mowatt, standard drama histories do not include discussion, rarely any mention, of women playwrights before the twentieth century. It is likely that this absence is due to the fact adduced by Judith E. Barlow on the morality and propriety of playwriting since «women were particularly affected by the Puritan-Quaker attitude toward the theater», since, «as the supposed moral guardians of society, women could scarcely be allowed to participate –on any level– in so unacceptable an activity» (x). Yet Claudia Johnson explains that this failure of American women to write plays for the early theater, if it is to be believed, would be especially mystifying for several reasons: «women were extremely prolific novelists, plays about women and domestic dramas were popular, playwriting was the least censurable theatrical activity for a woman, and the stage gave many women lives of independence and fulfillment, as did no other segment of nineteenth-century life» (1988, 325). Moreover, these were years of what has been derisively called «petticoat management», the heyday of female stars and formidable managers who commissioned vehicles for the display of their talents. Notable among them were Charlotte Cushman, Laura Keene, Catherine Sinclair, Adah Menken, Mrs. John Drew, Lotta Crabtree, and Clara Morris. Their theatrical activity refutes any suggestion that literary contributions by women were nonexistent, and records of professionally produced plays in America before 1900 belie standard histories.⁴ These women are only the most prolific writers, selected to illustrate the defeat of that alledgedly dramatic silence.

Claudia D. Johnson writes about «supreme irony» of America's early drama: «that while its theater, recognized for its liveliness and artistic merit, constitutes one of the most active chapters of national cultural history, only the modest claims can be made for the literary excellence of its drama» (1988, 324). Accordingly, I have no intention of legitimizing new claims for the intrinsic aesthetic interest of *Fashion*, but to analyse it in the light of the main cultural ideas of the period: the cult of domesticity, because as one of the most popular plays of the nineteenth century, it lends itself to valuable contextual and ideological study, since it is my attempt to «de-sacrilize the archetypes by examining them as cultural artifacts, in terms of their specific forms and functions» (Bercovitch 423). Taking into account the historical situation of the American theatre at the time it is my contention that *Fashion* stands as a theatrical refashioning of Mowatt's self as well as a masculinization of the motherhood ethics that dominated American culture at the time in her attempt to pander to the middle-class male audience's anxieties. From this point of view, *Fashion*

4. Johnson provides the following information: Susanna Rowson, author of *Charlotte Temple*, wrote 7 plays produced between 1793 and 1810; Louisa Medina, 21 plays between 1829 and 1849; Mrs. Sidney Batman, 5 plays in the 1850s; Laura Keene, 6 in the 1850s and 1860s; Fanny Herring, 8 in the 1860s and 1870s; Olive Logan, 9 in the 1870s; Marguerite Merington; Madeline Lucette-Ryley; Charlotte Blair Parker whose *Way Down East* (1898) ran for two decades; Frances Hodgson Burnett. See also Roberts' article on women who managed major theatres in nineteenth-century America.

is not just a lively social comedy but a pungent portrayal of the female's anxiety of dramatic authorship.

Anna Cora Mowatt's life and professional career as both actress and playwright reject the traditional categorization into the Sahara of the female theatrical Bozart of nineteenth-century America. She was born in Bordeaux, France, in 1819 and died in London in 1870. A precocious child, she belonged to a large well-to-do New York family. Her first performance took place at the age of six when she played a part in a parlor theatrical to celebrate her father's birthday. Before ten she had read all of Shakespeare's plays. Her marriage at fifteen to James Mowatt, a New York lawyer and a man twice her age, gave her ample opportunity to continue cultivating her artistic skills. In 1841, after her husband lost his wealth, she turned to writing in earnest, giving public poetry readings and writing articles for the popular magazines. But when she appeared at a public reading in the Stuyvesant Institute on November 18, 1841, she was badly criticised since many condemned these activities when undertaken by ladies. Yet, some of her friends came to her defense. Mrs. Frances Osgood wrote a long poem praising her courage and daring.⁵ The first stanza read: «Ne'er heed them. Cora, dear./The carping few who say/Thou leavest woman's holier sphere/For lights and vain display» (qtd. in Moody 311).

As Mary Kelley puts it in her study on women writers in the nineteenth-century, Mowatt –like many other of her literary companions– was cast around for means of support after her husband loss of fortune and she was thrown into the literary arena by severe economic necessity, thus having a justification to become a playwright and later an actress. The year 1845 was the turningpoint in her life. Encouraged by Epes Sargent –the editor who had published her first published play in *The New World* in 1840, *Gulzara, or The Persian Slave*– she wrote *Fashion*, «the first American comedy to have a long life on the stage» –according to Hewitt (134)–, and made a successful debut as an actress, motivated by her previous success as public reader, in spite of lack of training and the stark opposition of her family and friends. In fact, Moody suggests that during her lifetime Mowatt «was more widely known for her acting than for her writing» (313).⁶ She was not only an adulated actress and famous playwright, but also a prolific novelist. She published articles in magazines such as *The Columbian*, *The Democratic Review*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, and *Graham's Magazine* under the name of Helen Berkeley, some of which were copied into London periodicals, and even translated into German, such as her prize-winning novel, *The*

5. Frances Osgood (1811-1850) was born in Massachusetts. She was a poet whose *The Casket of Fate* (1840) and *Poetry of Flowers* (1840) and *The Flowers of Poetry* (1841) are typical of sentimental feminine verse of the Victorian era. After she moved to New York, she was a friend of Poe, who praised her work in «The Literate».

6. The *New York Herald* wrote after her debut: «When the curtain fell, the applause was tremendous. A gentleman in the pit called out 'three cheers' and three loud cheers were given accordingly. Mrs. Mowatt soon appeared, led on by Mr. Crisp. The cheers –shouts–screams– plaudits burst forth afresh, whilst a whirlwind of pocket handkerchiefs swept over the boxes, and five and six hundred boots thundered in the galleries. Mrs. Mowatt courtesied, and a shower of bouquets fell at her feet» (Moody 313).

Fortune Hunter. She also wrote a series of romantic novels such as *Evelyn, or A Heart Unmasked*, *The Twin Roses* and *Italian Life and Legends*. In addition to *Fashion*, she wrote the plays *Gulzara; or, The Persian Star* (1841) and *Armand* (1847) and, in 1854, her *Autobiography of an Actress, or Eight Years on the Stage*, a book which provides penetrating insights into nineteenth-century theater.⁷ This was followed a year later by semi-autobiographical stories of the stage, *Mimic Life; or, Before and Behind the Curtain* (1856). David Grimsted explains how her sentimental fiction as well as that penned by other actresses, such as Charlotte Cushman, stressed the hardships, trials and tragedies of life on stage in an attempt to overcome the public prejudices against their professions. In 1851 James Mowatt died and she married William F. Ritchie in 1854 and retired from the stage.

Edgar Allan Poe reviewed the opening performance of *Fashion* in the *Broadway Journal*, on March 29, 1845, though basing his criticism on the reading of the original manuscript: «*Fashion* is theatrical but not dramatic. It is a pretty well arranged selection from the usual routine of stage characters, and stage manoeuvres, but there is not one particle of any nature beyond green-room nature, about it [...] Our fault-finding is on the score of deficiency in verisimilitude—in natural art—that is to say, in art based in the natural laws of man's heart and understanding». Poe finds fault in the crossings and recrossings of the actors on the stage; the reading of private letters in a loud rhetorical tone, the preposterous soliloquising and asides, among others. Yet he remarks that this is not specific of Mowatt's comedy, but of the modern drama in general, since for the critic «it has, in especial, the very high merit of simplicity in plot». On the whole, he concludes: «compared with the generality of modern dramas, it is a good play—compared with most American dramas it is a very good one—estimated by the natural principles of dramatic art, it is altogether unworthy of notice». Yet, it seems that Poe must have felt that his desire for a new and original drama had led him to be too harsh, and a week later, on April 5, he was more generous. He lamented to have done Mowatt unintentional injustice and states that her entire thesis is an original one as «we can call to mind no drama, just now, in which the design can be properly stated as the satirizing of fashioning as fashion» (Hewitt 139).

Later literary historians have understood *Fashion* as a devastating social satire that expressed the growing feeling in the United States against emulation of European manners. They have considered the play as an outstanding comedy of manners, the form of which is «thoroughly European, in the mode of the eighteenth-century bourgeois play» (Johnson 331). Notwithstanding, for them, Mowatt's importance lies preeminently on the fact that her career as a playwright and an actress can be held responsible for lifting the social reputation of the American nineteenth-century theater. According to Quinn, «real as her contribution to our drama was, her influence

7. Nathaniel Hawthorne makes it part of a list of a half-dozen good American books he recommended to Richard Monckton Milnes, along with Thoreau's *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*. Caroline Tichnor, *Hawthorne and His Publisher* (1913; reprint ed., Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1969), 135. Qtd. in Abramson 39.

upon out theatre was probably even greater. Coming into a life which, notwithstanding the many sterling men and women who pursued it, still suffered from the traditions of loose standards and of the disapproval of the Puritan element in our society, she proved triumphantly that an American gentlewoman could succeed in it without the alteration of her own standard of life. She took into the profession her high heart, her utter refinement, her keen sense of social values, and her infinite capacity for effort, and her effect was a real and a great one» (319). For Hewitt, «she was not only America's first important woman playwright; she was also the first American actress to start at the top. Without having gone through even a brief apprenticeship as leading lady in a resident company, she became at once a traveling star. A sign of the times. Moreover, she lived the dubious life of the theatre for nine years without suffering a blemish to her reputation [...] She had proved that a lady could be an actress and by inference that an actress could be a lady. The status of the profession was materially improved» (141). Albert Auster sums up her worth in American theatrical history when he stresses that, «although Cushman and Mowatt did not totally erase American prejudice against the stage, their careers and personal examples did raise its professional and artistic standards. More importantly, they provided models for a career that women, and not only men, could pursue» (18). Tubman also states that Mowatt's «credentials of respectability helped the theatre on its path to acceptance as a tolerable, even honorable profession» (76). Thus she helped modify cultural attitudes toward actresses and «even improved the quality of audiences by attracting people who had formerly scorned the theatre» (Barlow xi).

The truth is that when Mowatt approached theatrical writing and acting, she was forced to face both family and social prejudices. The ambiguity with which theater was seen by the respectable American middle-class American is evinced by Louisa May Alcott in her novel *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873). Here she tells the story of a woman's quest for independence and identity. Her struggle for life's significance takes her into the different paid occupations available to a young woman in a city such as Boston. Among these, that of actress is described in chapter three. Based on the author's own autobiographical data, Christie Devon, after some time devoted to a successful career, realizes that she is becoming too hard-hearted and gives up the stage forever. Yet, she is aware of the fact that her brief but passionate engagement with the theatre will always lurk in her life as a disreputable past to be, if not, hidden, at least, well protected. In fact, as Johnson explains, the theatrical profession was paradoxical for nineteenth-century women. On the one hand, it offered a good salary, the possibility of competition with men on an equal basis of talent and public appeal, and a secure position of management. On the other, these advantages were tainted by a dark side since the actress had, «by virtue of her association with a profession blemished in the eyes of the public, to relinquish important valuables of Victorian womanhood – a special, even reverent esteem afforded the ideal mother-wife, as well as the sympathetic support of her nineteenth-century sisters». Moreover, one of the institutions which encouraged the ostracism of the actress from good society was the church and, «although the attitude of the religious public toward actresses was based on ignorance and gross distortions, it was, irrefutably, a strongly held and widely held view, a reality to be dealt with» («Enter the Harlot» 66).

As critics have attested drawing the information from Mowatt's autobiographical account, the playwright to alleviate her family's pecuniary distress «suppressed the prejudice against public theatrical performances which had been instilled in her by the sermons of the Reverend Manton Eastburn at Grace Church» (Moody 311). Barlow also underscores this evidence and explains that for years Mowatt had refused to attend the professional theater because a minister convinced her that the stage was the home of the devil (x). Her decision was bold as it has to be understood on the idea actors and actresses were held at the time. They were social outcasts, drawn either from the lowest classes or from the sons and daughters of those already in the profession, as in the case of Susana Rowson, Fanny Kemble, or Charlotte Cushman.

Theater for Mowatt had meant home theatricals and family enjoyment and it only became a vocation when she was faced with economic trouble. As she writes in her autobiography:

I pondered long and seriously upon the consequences of my entering the profession [...] I reviewed my whole past life, and saw, that, from earliest childhood, my tastes, studies, pursuits had all combined to fit me for this end. I had exhibited a passion for dramatic performances when I was little more than an infant. I had played plays before I had ever entered a theatre. I had written plays from the time that I first witnessed a performance. My love for the drama was genuine, for it was developed at a period when the theatre was an unknown place, and actors a species of mythical creatures. I determined to fulfill the destiny which seemed visibly pointed out by the unerring finger of Providence [...] I would become an actress.⁸

It is interesting to notice the way Mowatt traces back her dramatic vocation and how she tries to dodge the climate of hostility. Firstly, she is careful enough to justify her immediate success as an actress basing it on her life-long sincere attraction and devotion to drama. And secondly and most important, that attachment is described as having been born outside the place of performance, in the home and long before she had set eyes on, let alone stepped into, a real theatre. Thus she exculpates herself from all possible condemnations that the morality of playwrights and of audiences attending the theatre in antebellum America possessed. Rosemarie K. Bank explains that many historical accounts couple prostitution with theatrical activity in antebellum New York. Yet, «unlike earlier characterizations, wherein critics of theatre assume corruption of audiences by plays or by actors, anti-theatre arguments in the Jacksonian decades focus upon corruption through contact of audience members with other audience members» (50). What is relevant here is that against the charges of moral

8. Anna Cora Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress; or Eight Years on the Stage* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1854), 216. Qtd. in Abramson 39-40.

corruption and social depravity that nineteenth-century theatre implied, literary historians have manipulated Mowatt—as she shapes herself—to legitimize dramatic art as a respectable undertaking which was rapidly losing influence during the middle decades of the century as audiences became cross-cultural and marginal layers of societies appropriated new non-elite forms of entertainment. With *Fashion* the arbiters of cultural diversity managed to redirect their cultural power by arguing that the theatre was a place for those with aspirations toward respectability. Mowatt's genteel origins also were made to counteract the charges of immorality of actors and managers that threatened the profession.

The playwright, on the other hand, was never blind to what Johnson calls «the lonely gulf» which existed between actresses and society and which could be extended to women playwrights and audiences. She was so deeply aware of the prejudices against the profession as a body that she introduced justifications of self-assertion in her play. In the edition of W. Newberry published in London in 1850, she presents a preface in which she justifies the edifying nature of her «good-natured satire» and using feminized language thanks the public for the reception of her play and for «the proverbial gallantry of Americans.»⁹ The prologue, written by the editor Epes Sargent, advances several criticisms. Firstly, the American origin of the play which discredits any attempt at quality. And secondly, the traditional indictment against woman authorship, specifically Mowatt's appropriation of a patriarchal genre:

Enter a Gentleman –Mr. Crisp– reading a newspaper [...]
 For Plays, we lack the manners and the men!
 Thus speaks *one* critic. Hear *another's* creed:–
 «'Fashion!'» –What's here? [*Reads*] It never can succeed!
 What! from a *woman's* pen? It takes a *man*
 To write a comedy –no woman can (317).

Obviously she was also concerned with the moral value of what she wrote. This made her turn to a topic that was sure to meet the public's approval. The prologue ends celebrating the didacticism that the play encloses: «Art's fair fabric rise from woman's toil/While we exhibit but to reprehend/The social vices, 'tis for *you* to mend!» (318). In this way Mowatt's cloaks social transformations taking place in the America of her day with a moral reading suitable to a respectable middle-class audience. Moreover, when she wrote *Fashion*, she made herself the heroine of the play in the character of Gertrude, which she later performed.¹⁰ In fact, it seems that Mowatt

9. Anna Cora Mowatt, «Preface» to *Fashion, Dramas from the American Theatre 1762-1909*, Ed. Richard Moody (Boston:Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 317. All further quotations from this edition of the play will appear parenthetically in the text.

10. In 1845 *Fashion* «was repeated in theatres throughout the country: Charleston, Mobile, New Orleans, frequently with Mrs. Mowatt in the part of Gertrude. New York and Philadelphia saw it repeatedly during the summer of 1845. In January, 1850, it had its first performances in London with a two-week engagement at the Royal Olympic» (Moody 215).

shaped most of her writing on this principle. George C. D. Odell complains that in her two autobiographical novels, *Mimic Life* (1855) and *Twin Roses* (1857) she was «always making herself the heroine of a novel, which was her idea of her own life.»¹¹ The playwright was following a pattern of self-reconstitution initiated in *Fashion* that means much more than what Abramson assumes when she says that these books when «taken with the usual grains of salt [...] are clearly informative» (39). This refashioning is clearly more than just informative. It is evidence of the pressures against which Mowatt was writing drama and pursuing a theatrical career. In Act IV, Scene 2, Gertrude stages a primitive play-within-the-play, which is rapidly aborted by the rest of the characters, in her attempt to prevent further damage by the Count Jolimaitre. She intends to impersonate Millinette to save the reputation of Mrs. Tiffany's daughter, though she is wrongly interpreted. In a sense, she constructs a metaphor of herself which intends to break the distance between the playwright and the audience. The fact that she performed Gertrude makes this scene even more susceptible of interpretation. Playing the heroine's character, Mowatt exposes and, at the same time, sanctions her devotion to drama on an ethical basis. As Johnson explains, some of the accusations levelled by the clergy on actresses delved on the fact that «no woman could remain on the stage and keep the purity of a saintlike femininity»:

The effect of the kind of life led by players is peculiarly pernicious to female character. It strips it of all its loftier attributes, its softer and more delicate charms. Sensibility, modesty, and refinement are gradually extinguished by the unfeminine and indelicate business of the stage, and nothing is left but the hackneyed and haggard form of injured humanity, covered and bedecked perhaps, by false and tawdry ornaments. A few female actors may have preserved their virtue, but, alas! how many have lost it forever by their connection with the stage. And if others have not been entirely ruined by this means, how greatly must their characters have suffered in purity and elevation, by the dark forms of evil with which they come into such close and continual contact (qtd. in Johnson, «Enter the Harlot» 70).

Compare this to the reaction of Adam Trueman when he discovers the secret meeting between Gertrude and the Count who was concealed in a closet. Trueman is unable to transcend the representation Gertrude has staged for herself in order to expose the impostor, the Count. Gertrude's behaviour –an actress now, impersonating Millinette's role– is immediately associated with depravity. She is cast aside even by her most affectionate friends who silence her right to defend herself:

11. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 15 vol. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-1949), 99. Qtd. in Abramson 39.

TRUEMAN: Right? How dare you have the face, girl, to talk of rights? [Comes down stage] You had more rights than you thought for, but you have forfeited them all! All right to love, respect, protection, and to not a little else that you don't dream of. Go, go! (339).

The problem of representation does not lie with the stage, but in the audience's prejudices and their own immorality. Gertrude rightly asserts that «the truly pure see no imaginary evil in others! It is only vice, that reflecting its own image, suspects even the innocent» (339). Thus, *Fashion* is not just a social satire, but a play which reveals some of the complexities of theatrical women and assumed social notions of their social unfemininity. Mowatt tries to destroy here the boundary between acting and the self, and the audience—aware of the fact that this is a comedy written by a woman—is encouraged to go beyond simple theatrical illusion.

Yet the contemporary success of *Fashion* has to be found in other elements integral to its composition. The play has been described as a comedy of manners set in New York. This is a play dealing with life in the large city which soon became allied to the «yankee play» in its exaggeration and in its success (Quinn 303). From this perspective, it derives from a thematic group of plays popular at the time. According to Walter J. Meserve, «beginning with the 1850s, an increasing number of American playwrights began to comment—humorously and seriously, with a light touch or a heavy hand—on various aspects of American society. The phenomenon occurred in theatres across the country, but the concept of 'peeping' or 'looking' at life in America obviously began in New York [...] Those with higher aspirations for American drama might comment with a modicum of originality on the social conditions that surrounded them, but their objective was usually the exploitation of social events for the effect of novelty, spectacle, and sensation based on the popular fears and fascinations of big city life» (83, 81). Hence, when Mowatt came to write *Fashion; or Life in New York*, she resorted not only to two main sources—her national dramatic background, and, more important, to the social values that the America of the 1840s was generating and women were dispersing in all types of writing: the cult of domesticity.

Fashion, according to Robert Spiller, is the most successful play to combine the two themes of the native drama produced in New York and Philadelphia during the prewar years—the glorification of the American nationality or distinctiveness, and a romantic escape into the far away or the long ago (281). It is a comedy of manners in the tradition of the English comedy of manners, inaugurated in the country by Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787). Tyler's play had led the way for the society comedy that was most apparent in fashionable theaters of nineteenth-century America. Like *The Contrast*, *Fashion* depicts the contrast between European and American cultures and how Americans who are slaves to transcontinental fashions are trivial-minded and shallow, whereas the ones sporting an ethos of national sincerity and pragmatism are substantial and the only heroes. It even retakes some of Tyler's characters: Adam Trueman is something of a cross between the Yankee type inaugurated by Jonathan and the serious-minded patriot represented by Colonel Manly; and, Mowatt's villain,

Count Jolimaitre, is also a variation on Tyler's Dimple. Moreover, it also recalls the confrontation basic to the development of the dramatic plot in *The Contrast*, between democratic innocence and European corruption. In fact, in *Fashion* Mowatt's retakes Tyler's concept of history in *The Contrast*: the republican synthesis. Lester H. Coher succinctly explains that vision of history as «a struggle between two parallel sets of opposing principles; in political terms, between liberty and arbitrary power; and in ethical terms, between virtue and avarice and corruption» (481). If *The Contrast* can be considered as a political metaphor of the anxiety of postrevolutionary America, *Fashion* emerges as a continuation of that anxiety in the antebellum scene and, in that sense, the dramatic development of what Mercy Otis Warren often called «the beautiful fabric of republicanism».

Fashion transforms the bourgeois drawing room in battlefield for waging the war against national vice and corruption, dramatized in the pretensions of the nouveaux riches who ape foreign manners, thus setting themselves apart from the American way of life based on good sense and virtuous behaviour. It is important to underline the fact that the concept of virtue, both private and public, had been woven through the fabric of the republican language since its inception. Virtue «was a quality of human character and conduct that manifested the confluence of personality and public behavior, such that civic values and practices were continuous with individual values and practices». Consequently, «virtuous people's interiors, so to speak, were mirrored in their exterior conduct» (Cohen 481). Accordingly, the welfare of the nation was intimately linked to the morality of its citizens.

On the other hand, *Fashion* was widely acclaimed because it teems with references to the contemporary cultural and social scene. Mowatt's play dramatizes one of the main changes at the level of popular ideology: the change from patriarchal household to feminine domesticity, an ominous innovation in the system of domestic education that was taking place in the decade. As Auster explains, while white women like Cushman and Mowatt were making their entry into the American theater, and Lydia Sigourney, Sarah Josepha Hale and others were carving a niche for women in literary circles, middle-class women in America were experiencing a drastic change in status. The rough equality that had existed in a frontier society where women were valued for their contribution to household production had given way to a world in which production now took place outside the home in the factory. As industrialism and urbanization expanded, the productive role of middle-class women was undermined (21). These are the years where the culture of domesticity is prevalent. Many married women from an aspiring middle-class stopped working for wages and practiced domesticity as contemporary society started to identify respectable women as wives and mothers in the home. Turning to the culture of domesticity was a way of enhancing their status. The family became the shrine for security and success. Thus these women responded by modelling a role for themselves as guardians of the nation's culture and by transforming the home into the moral center of the society. Many extended this role from the family to the society at large through charitable organizations and eventually into abolitionism and the temperance movement (21). According to the moralists of domestic culture in the pulpit, the government, and the publishing industry, men should control the institutions of worldly power while

women exercised their more spiritual expertise in home and family matters. The central values of domesticity –self-control, spirituality, sincerity, and sensibility– turned the problems of social order and economic justice back onto the family and the individual.

Fashion has to be read, then, against the background of what Mary P. Ryan has called, the Empire of the Mother. As this historian explains, «in the domestic parables of the 1840s the heroine restrained her husband's ambition and cushioned financial collapse. A home life that urged man on to excessive accumulation of wealth and power was universally disparaged. The seduction of the fashionable life was the terror of the ladies' magazine [...] Not the complicated machinations of capitalism, but the fashionable cravings of America's wives were the customary explanation for economic reversal» (38). Mowatt, naturally, retakes this motif of the dangers of fashion which can be traced back to the years of the foundations of the nation. Linda Kerber explains how improvements in women's education took place between the post-revolutionary years and the first decades of the nineteenth century thanks to the political and industrial revolution. The new schools were defended on the grounds that they address new issues relevant to the needs of women at the time. The education of girls had traditionally been geared into married life and, when possible, into «an upwardly mobile marriage». Young women were thought to need a new kind of education because «traditional training had been superficial and their resulting behavior shallow». Women's minds could not be free if they continued to be taught that their sphere was limited to fashion, music, and needlework. As Kerber points out, «fashion became an emblem of superficiality and dependence. It was distasteful in a wife, inappropriate in a republic.»¹²

Hence Mowatt transforms the *conventional drawing room comedy of manners into a satire on the influence of mothers in the expanding Republic*. Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814), the first woman dramatist of the American Revolution, had already extended her social satire on American women who imitate foreign fashions in at least two of her plays: *The Blockheads or; The Affrighted Offices* (1776) and *The Motley Assembly* (1779), both of them conceived as «political propaganda for the Patriots' cause» (Kern 251). Similarly, mothers in *Fashion* are the only spoilers, corrupters, the ones that pervert American society and its good function. Mrs. Tiffany, hysterical embodiment of the parvenu ostentation, represents that fallen housewife and mother corrupted by the attractions of fashion which threaten not only the economic prosperity of the family, but the moral welfare of her child. She is a child of fashion and as such a threat to the republic virtues. For her in the marriage market only beauty, flirtatiousness and money are at a premium; intelligence, good judgment,

12. In August 1792 the Philadelphia *Lady's Magazine* criticized a father who prepared his daughters for the marriage market: «You boast of having given your daughters an education which will enable them 'to shine in the first circles' [...] They sing indifferently; they play the harpsichord indifferently; they are mistresses of every common game at cards [...]; they [...] have just as much knowledge of dress as to deform their persons by an awkward imitation of every new fashion which appears [...] Placed in a situation of difficulty, they have neither a head to dictate, nor a hand to help in any domestic concern» (qtd. in Kerber 203).

sensitivity, at a discount. Education is appropriate for her daughter not to have a greater control over her life, but to embellish her for the sale. Thus she sells Seraphine both to fashion and to Snobson, her best financial option in the marriage market. Her husband, on the verge of ruin because of her extravagance, is her most harsh accuser: «Fashion is the cloak for more sins than charity ever covered!», he incriminates her (Act III, Scene I, 330).

But when mothers do not exist, they are even more suspicious of guilt. In fact, Gertrude's mother dies, the epitome of the sentimental novel. A reenactment of Charlotte Temple, this melodramatic character is seduced, made to break the sweet filial bonds with her father and later abandoned by a man allegedly in love with her, though truthfully in search of her money. As in traditional seduction novels, Gertrude's mother's extreme sensibility proves to be her death. Consequently Gertrude is the daughter of a fallen woman who put her private desires ahead of her familial duties, even if she seems to have been redeemed in her ultimate repentance and final death.

The concept of the virtuous citizen on whom America may thrive is principally embodied by the character of Adam Trueman. Trueman is a staunch republican, a cultivator of the American civic virtues. Patriotic, self-disciplined, autonomous, simple, moderate, prudent are among the adjectives which qualify him. He is contrasted to characters such as Mrs. Tiffany, Snobson, or Jolimaitre whose lust for personal wealth, luxury, power and artificial distinction and refinement stand as an ominous menace to national democratic principles. He rejoices when he discovers in Gertrude «the true woman at last» (Act V, 340), but in fact he is the true hero, as his name attests. Even more than that, he becomes a spokesperson for Mowatt's message in the play and the embodiment of American morality – the exemplary republican. He reunites the lovers and sees through social hypocrisy and vice. This fashion-despising patriot is the saviour of the American household in the form of a moralizing yankee against an extravagant wife and false aristocrats. Gertrude, on the other hand, if a heroine at all, is a true woman because she is precisely motherless, since that very same lack of maternal guidance has permitted her to escape the most pernicious influences of deception and immorality. «I am an *American!*», she proudly asserts (Act II, Scene 2, 327), and that means love of independence as well as freedom from filial bonds, that is to say, a self-made woman. Hence, the play becomes a feature of self-refashioning in the mode of acceptance of patriarchal values which serves as a metaphor for Mowatt's vindication as a playwright and actress.

The villain, then, is not Jollimaitre, but Mrs. Tiffany, as Trueman conflates women's sexual misconduct and mother's depravity in their role as angels in the house. What becomes clear in the play is that the «true woman» has been replaced by «Trueman» and that the yankee type is still a suitable model to follow against the extravagance and abuse that lurk behind foreign customs and manners. *Fashion* points, in the end, to the necessity for a strict moral for women, and for the supervision and control of the growing country by true men. Thus, the play uses comedy to defuse the threat that the cult of domesticity could inflict on male audiences as it might be felt as undermining their authority in the private realm of the home, and extensively, in the realm of public.

In 1924 the play was revived by the Provincetown Players, when the group was directed by Kenneth Macgowan, Robert Edmond Jones, and Eugene O'Neill at the Provincetown Theatre in New York, eventually moved uptown and had a run of more than two hundred performances. Howard Tubman explains that success of this twentieth-century reception was due to the fact that the historical revision of Mowatt's play was addressed at highlighting its archaic absurdities. In fact, «the comedy in *Fashion* was embellished into a lampoon of the play and its time. The actors, in the words of John Corbin, drama critic of *The New York Times* in 1924, trumpeted their asides at the audience through their hollowed palms and played a veritable hopscotch across the stage. The audience laughed because it felt superior, but it was not –and could not– be seeing Mrs. Mowatt's work as she and her audience saw it» (76). Barlow also agrees that «unfortunately, revivals in this century have often used inane songs and stage tricks to make fun of the play instead of asking audiences to laugh with the play» (xii). Perhaps the answer should be searched not in the naiveté of the play, but in space of how the domestic ideology has changed ever since it was first performed, and wonder if, paraphrasing Mercy Otis Warren's insistence on political writing, «the Manners –the Exigencies–the Taste– and the Times Require» a new type of «Heroics».

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