

## Women's Parts on the Modern Stage: Inventing the "Strong Female Lead"

Rebecca Kastleman | English 98r | Fall 2017



Anna Nazimova (standing) and Alice Brady (seated) in the premiere of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)

Without Ibsen, there would be no Netflix streaming as we know it. Before viewers could filter for shows “featuring a strong female lead,” they could take in the latest plays by George Bernard Shaw or Tennessee Williams—works that were certain to affirm as well as unsettle spectators’ gender stereotypes, not unlike recent seasons of *Girls* or *Big Little Lies*. While female protagonists dominated the novel in the nineteenth century, the theatrical figure of the leading lady was invented somewhat later, on twentieth-century stages. Who was this figure, and how did she come about? How does she continue to hold sway over the theatrical repertoire today?

This tutorial features the work of a number of powerful women dramatists, but most plays we will read were not written by women about their own experiences. Instead, they reflect male playwrights’ fantasies about women—their bodies, virtues, passions, faith, and madness. These dramas suggest what sorts of female roles appealed to the sentiments of contemporary audiences, even as they probe the limits of what those audiences would accept. For

example, spectators swooned for Ibsen’s brazen Nora, but Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was deemed too risqué for Britain’s stages and was denied a license to perform. Dramatic parts for women provide insight into modern cultures of theater-making, revealing the trajectories through which actresses fashioned their careers. At the same time, they show the force of female celebrity to shape dramatic reception and to catapult authors to new heights of stardom.

“Women’s Parts” provides a broad introduction to major works of modern drama as well as to the field of theater and performance scholarship. In surveying dramatic roles for women and considering the actresses who introduced them to the public, we will ask how these plays reflect and reinvent gendered norms of representation. We will also explore the roles women played behind the scenes of the modern theater, as acting teachers, managers, and mentors. Just as important to our analysis are the intersectional identities involving race and sexuality that come into focus through an investigation of gender in the modern theater. These complex gender representations are the products of particular social and historical contexts, and yet they have never entirely vanished from the stage; because these plays remain staples of the repertoire, they continue to shape the challenges and opportunities available to contemporary actresses.

The main goal of the tutorial is for each student to produce a stellar junior paper. To that end, we will study a wide variety of criticism that attends to script analysis and production history and will share work in multiple peer writing workshops. No experience in the theater is necessary to enroll in this tutorial! However, those with a practical interest in performance may enjoy the chance to cull some exceptional audition monologues from our reading list.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

Weekly assignments, attendance, and active participation in seminar discussion	15%
Attendance at library visit and completion of related assignment	5%
Attendance at tutorial-wide meetings and meeting with Departmental Writing Fellow	5%
Short paper (5–6 pages)	15%
Prospectus and bibliography for junior paper	10%
Drafts of junior paper (one 10-page draft; one complete draft)	10%
Junior paper (20–25 pages); submission is required in order to pass the course	40%

## **TUTORIAL PROGRAM MEETINGS & DEPARTMENTAL WRITING FELLOW**

The English Department has scheduled mandatory meetings for the Junior Tutorial Program (dates and times to be indicated on the syllabus), which you are required to attend. In addition, the Departmental Writing Fellow (DWF) has been appointed exclusively as a resource for writers of the junior paper. You are required to meet with the DWF at least once prior to submitting your prospectus. I encourage you to schedule these prospectus appointments early, and to meet with the DWF as frequently as you find helpful throughout the term.



Stella Adler, founder of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting

## **SHORT PAPER**

A short paper (5–6 pages) will be due early in the term, date TBA. This paper will analyze one or more of the works we read in the first three weeks of the course. A strong short paper will develop an engaging and persuasive argument, make effective use of literary evidence, and demonstrate a clear and sophisticated writing style. Students will meet with Rebecca the following week to discuss the strengths of the short paper and identify areas for further growth.

## **JUNIOR PAPER & DEPARTMENTAL JUNIOR PAPER CONFERENCE**

One of the primary goals of the course is the writing of an insightful, original, and authoritative junior paper (20–25 pages), due date TBA. There will be ample opportunity over the course of the semester to discuss strategies for crafting a successful paper, and a variety of resources will be available to support your research and writing. A vital component of the junior paper writing process is the submission of multiple drafts, which will be discussed with Rebecca and other members of the tutorial. In addition, students are required to attend the departmental Junior Paper Conference, at which each participant will present a five-minute summary of his or her research.



Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra, 1891 (image courtesy of Harvard Theatre Collection)

## WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS

Details of the weekly assignments will be discussed on the first day of class. These assignments include two brief (five-minute) presentations of scholarly articles, two peer writing workshop exercises, and two monologue performances. The monologue performances may feature any character in any play that we have read up to that date; they will not be evaluated for their acting polish, but rather for the interpretive choices they reveal. (If you *really* do not want to perform a monologue, you have the option of submitting a response paper instead.)

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### ***I. The New Woman on the Modern Stage***

#### **Week 1. Staging modern marriage**

*“Our home has been nothing but a playroom”*

1. Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll’s House* (1879)
2. Mabou Mines, *DollHouse* (2003); film screening TBA
3. Joan Templeton, “The Poetry of Feminism” in *Ibsen’s Women* (1997)

*Recommended:* Gay Gibson Cima, “Introduction” to *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage* (1993)

#### **Week 2. Exploding constraints**

*“For once in my life to have power to mould a human destiny”*

1. Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* (1891)
2. Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928)

*Recommended:* Alla Nazimova, “Ibsen’s Women” (1907)

\*In class: We will contrast *Hedda* with a closely related drama, August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* (1888). Some would argue that *Miss Julie* belongs on this syllabus, but I am currently resolved that I will not teach this play. I’d like us to debate this position and consider the pedagogical stakes of abstaining from teaching *Miss Julie*, as well as the artistic stakes of its place in the dramatic repertoire. For the purposes of this discussion, there is no need to read *Miss Julie* or to have any prior familiarity it, though you may find it interesting to peruse this significant drama if time allows. If you happen to have already encountered the play, please come prepared to share your thoughts about it.

\*Widener library visit scheduled outside of class this week.

#### **Week 3. Icons of sensuousness**

*“I am amorous of thy body”*

1. Oscar Wilde, *Salomé* (1893), in edition with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley
2. Charles Bryant, *Salomé* (1923), starring Alla Nazimova; watch on [YouTube](#)
3. Sharon Marcus, “Salome!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity” (2011)

\*Article review #1 – with Rebecca’s guidance, each student will select one scholarly article on Wilde to review and present in class.

\*Visit to Harvard Theatre Collection to view Sarah Bernhardt material scheduled outside of class this week.

#### **Week 4. Affective economies**

*“I am like you: I must have work”*

1. George Bernard Shaw, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893), including Preface
2. L. W. Conolly, “Mrs. Warren’s Profession and the Lord Chamberlain” (2004)  
\*Article review #2 – with Rebecca’s guidance, each student will select one scholarly article on the topic of the “New Woman” to review and present in class.  
\*Short paper due on Friday of this week.

## **II. Women’s Theatrical Labor**

#### **Week 5. Producing parts for women**

*“And suddenly, just as if my heart had sprouted wings, I cheered up, I felt relieved and once again I started wanting to work, work...”*

1. Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters* (1901)
2. Eva Le Gallienne, “Reasons for Repertory” (1926)
3. Robert Schanke, “Production Record of Eva Le Gallienne” in *Shattered Applause: The Lives of Eva Le Gallienne* (2010)  
\*Monologue assignment #1 due in class this week.

#### **Week 6. Theater collectives and women’s alliances**

*“I might have known she needed help!”*

1. Susan Glaspell, *Trifles* (1916)
2. Cheryl Black, “Introduction” to *The Women of Provincetown* (2002), and choose one additional chapter of this book to skim
3. Brenda Murphy, “Glaspell and O’Neill” in *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (2006)  
\*Library assignment due on Friday of this week.  
\*Meet with DWF by Friday of this week.

#### **Week 7. Advocating for reform**

*“We have suffered long enough. We have forgotten how to laugh. We would learn again.”*

1. Angelina Weld Grimké, *Rachel* (1916)
2. Koritha Mitchell, “Scenes and Scenarios: Reading Aright” and “Redefining ‘Black Theater’” in *Living with Lynching* (2011)  
*Recommended:* Elizabeth Robins, *Votes for Women* (1909)  
\*Two-page prospectus and bibliography due on Friday of this week.

#### **Week 8. A comic bit of her own**

*“A girl who lost her reputation and never missed it”*

1. Mae West, *Diamond Lil* (1928)
2. Lowell Sherman, *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), film adaptation of West’s *Diamond Lil*; film screening TBA
3. Pamela Robertson, “‘The Kinda Comedy Where They Imitate Me’: Mae West’s Identification with the Feminist Camp” (1996)  
\*In class: Peer writing exercise #1.  
\*Revised prospectus due on Friday of this week.

### III. *The Method to the Madness*

#### Week 9. Turbulent interiors

“Beneath the mask-like veneer of her face”

1. Eugene O’Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)
2. Travis Bogard, “Alice and Alla” (1994)
3. Stella Adler, notes on *Mourning Becomes Electra* in *Stella Adler on America’s Master Playwrights* (2012)

\*Monologue assignment #2 due in class this week.

#### Week 10. Dangerous illusions

“I tell what ought to be truth”

1. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)
2. Elia Kazan, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951); film screening TBA
3. Rosemary Malague, “Respect for the Actress: Uta Hagen on Playing Female Roles” in *An Actress Prepares: Women and ‘The Method’* (2013)

\*First 10 pages of Junior Paper due on Friday of this week.

#### Week 11. Psychic breakdowns

“When the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads”

1. Edward Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)
2. Mike Nichols, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966); film screening TBA
3. Shonni Enelow, “She’s Crazy” in *Method Acting and its Discontents: On American Psycho-Drama* (2015)

\*Peer writing exercise #2 completed outside of class and submitted by Friday of this week.

### IV. *After the Leading Lady*

#### Week 12. The normativity of the female lead: race, sexuality, embodiment

“White women are always like, ‘What about the fact that I’m a woman?’”

1. Young Jean Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006); watch on [Vimeo](#)
2. Kee-Yoon Nahm, review of Young Jean Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show* (2012)
3. Eng-Beng Lim, “G.A.P. Drama, or the Gay Asian Princess Goes to the United States” (2013)

*Also suggested (may be substituted per student interest):* Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (1996)

\*Complete draft of Junior Paper due on Friday of this week.

#### Week 13. Must the “strong female lead” be superhuman?

“She must never know the truth of who she is”

1. Patty Jenkins, *Wonder Woman* (2017); film screening TBA
2. Reviews of *Wonder Woman*, TBA; each student to choose one review or social media post about the film to circulate with the class 48 hours before our meeting

\*In class: mock Junior Paper presentation and discussion of research methods.

Note: Readings may be adjusted to reflect student interest.