

Murder and Marriage: Another Look at *Trifles*

Karen Alkalay-Gut

The objective plot of Glaspell's most successful play, *Trifles*, is very much at odds with the triviality of the title.¹ The story is of the brutal murder by a wife of her husband, the evidence for which is covered up by other women almost unacquainted with the perpetrator. When even a sheriff's wife is willing to become an accessory after the fact to a murder because she seems to agree to its inevitability, it is necessary to ask some basic questions: What is it that the women perceive to have in common that necessitates this bond, and what do audiences generations after have in common with these women that this decision is accepted as inescapable?

It is certainly not the fidelity to truth that encourages identification. Some of the elements of the play were drawn from contemporary reality, but the others that were altered were basic. When Susan Glaspell covered the case of Margaret Hossack, who was charged with killing her husband with an ax while he was asleep in December, 1900, she discovered the inconsistency of the legal system that excluded women from judicial decisions but judged them nevertheless. It was not only Glaspell who found herself drawn to this case: the trial drew a crowd of up to two thousand people. But despite the many parallels in the case, including the "sympathetic wife of Sheriff Hodson," who sat with Margaret Hossack throughout the trial, in reality Hossack was convicted in her first trial.

Glaspell's need to change the ending of the trial, to empower women to rectify an apparently unjust situation, is both a criticism of the legal system and an indictment of the social and romantic conventions of society. The danger to women is not only in the legal system but also for those who do not run afoul of the law, in the very structure of marriage.

Women, in the context of *Trifles* and even more in the story "Jury of Her Peers," are trapped by a social system that may lead them into crime and punish them when they are forced to commit it. It is this situation of the double bind with which the women of the play identify and which readers and audiences continue to explore. "We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing" (*Trifles* 44), Mrs. Hale tells Mrs. Peters in the play and adds in the story: "If it weren't—why do you and I *understand*? Why do we *know*—what we know this minute?" ("Jury" 260)

The typical romantic background for the brutal murder is not explained onstage, but one need only examine the name of the protagonist, Minnie Foster, to understand its integrality with what goes on in the dreary farmhouse. The name Minnie is derived from the German word for *love*; this potential for love is nurtured and cherished in Minnie's maiden name, Foster; when she discovers her ideal man, Mr. Wright (Right), it is transferred to her husband. Mrs. Wright is then an emblematic romantic heroine of standard tales for women, whose potential is "fulfilled" through the right man, when she becomes acceptable as "Mrs. Right." Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, the other women in the play, have also followed this pattern, fulfilling themselves as "wives" of men—and it is only in this capacity, as wives of the witness and of the sheriff, that they are invited to be present at the investigation at all.

As the emblematic woman, Mrs. Wright's own life becomes, of necessity, trivial. Her absence throughout the play emphasizes this tangentiality to existence. But it is also apparent in the position of the other women, who have, as Christine Dymkowski has pointed out, been confined to the least significant room of the house, the kitchen, for the duration of the investigation. And even that kitchen is available to the women only when it is vacated by the men. When the women remain by the door until the men leave, "the separateness of the female and male worlds is . . . immediately established visually and then reinforced by the dialogue" (Dymkowski 92).

For the significant world is elsewhere: the men search for clues in the barn, in the bedroom, in higher spheres—"upstairs"—and in the world outside the farmhouse, and they allow the women in the kitchen no relevance. The women are present only to collect Minnie Wright's trivial

and unaccountably needed paraphernalia for her stay in jail. The apron that Mrs. Wright requests—irrelevant to her prison activities yet essential to her concept of self as practical and protected servant—would only be a further source of derision to the men, who are far too ready to laugh at any woman's request, even those that might appear to make sense. Not only Mrs. Wright's concern for the jars of fruit that might freeze in the unheated kitchen but also Mrs. Hale's apprehension about leaving her work undone and her curiosity about Mrs. Wright's sewing are at best causes for impatience on the part of the men.

And yet, of course, it is precisely their unwillingness to perceive the potential relevance of the kitchen, the world and pattern of the women, that excludes the men from understanding what has happened: they fail to comprehend the motivations for the events, and the method of uncovering the underlying pattern eludes them. The little squares of material being formed into a quilt that the women decide to bring to Mrs. Wright to "occupy her time" is ridiculed by the men but provides an unrecognized key to this male exclusion because this quilting method parallels the only way clues could form the truth: the joining together of scraps of details allow the women to comprehend the situation of Minnie Foster and her development from housewife to criminal. The "log cabin" patchwork the women discover in Minnie Foster's sewing basket is made exactly in this fashion: rectangular strips are sewn around the original square or rectangle, followed by a series of longer scraps, which are measured to the increasing size of the patch. Each patch has an individual entity, but its beauty (and meaning) is in relationship to the other patches formed with similar painstaking consideration. The colors are coordinated and contrasted by balance and relationship, but the general pattern is one that emerges with the quilt.

The significant world for the men is elsewhere, but for the women it is in the ordering of the scraps of information around the central "square" of marriage and the total dependence of the wife upon her husband for all physical, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment as well as validation as a human being. The shabbiness of the clothes that Mrs. Wright requests for her stay in jail, the broken rocker and the bad stove in the kitchen indicate John Wright's "stinginess," his unwillingness to provide basic warmth and shelter for his wife. Wright's objection to a telephone, Mr. Hale's initial

reason for his visit and the reason for his discovery of the crime, are unquestionably further deferences on the part of the husband to his wife's communication with the world and validation as an individual.

It is because she realizes that these details don't count to the men that her communication with the outside world will be deemed irrelevant, that Minnie Foster can retell her story with many particulars, the significance of which she can be certain will escape her interrogators. When asked about her husband's murder she explains, "He died of a rope round his neck." In retrospect it becomes clear that her explanation reflects her vision of the murder as a symbolic retribution, a revenge execution for the strangling of her canary (in itself a symbolic act).

Yet this is not all that Minnie explains in these lines. The physical complexity of this method of murder is apparent to Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, who in the play puzzles, "They say it was such a—funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that" (*Trifles* 39), leaving the reader to interpret the action. For to Minnie this is an administered death and not a murder, and the husband is not a "victim" but, instead, dies as one would die of a long chronic illness, "of a rope around his neck." Mr. Hale, the one man who is not totally alienated from the world of women, seems momentarily to grasp the significance. "It looked . . ." begins Mr. Hale, in both the story and the play, but is overcome by emotion and cannot continue, because this particular method of murder not only recalls the woman next to him in bed to whom he too is bound but also the situation of marriage in general, in which the couple are bound together; and marriage for the husband is popularly referred to as a noose. Mrs. Wright's further description elaborates on this relationship: "Weren't you sleepin' in the bed with him?" Mrs. Hale's son, the only unmarried character, asks her. "Yes," says she, "but I was on the inside." Spatially, the couple slept in the same bed and should have defended each other against the world outside, but because the woman was "on the inside," in the protected and passive position, she claims to have been rendered helpless and even unconscious. Since the primary differences between men and women are described in spatial terms like this throughout the play as well as the story, with the "significant" events repeatedly placed on the outside and the "trivial" on the inside,² this detail is crucial and foreshadows the affected innocence of the wives at the end.

"If I am given no power," Minnie Foster seems to say, "then how can I claim to have any?" How can she claim to have murdered if she has always been on the "inside," where important things don't happen, and, if she has always been thought to know only trivia, why should she now claim to have known more? The women accept this premise and base their final decision on the same premises. Relegated to the kitchen, they do not point out that it is, ultimately, the most significant room in the house. Reduced to poking through a sewing kit while the men look for important clues, they do not reveal that in this inner sanctum is the secret that could validate the men's case.

This behavior alone does not simply illustrate the generally accepted feminist message that women must stick together. As Karen Stein argues: "The women here realize, through their involvement in the murder investigation, that only by joining together can they, isolated and insignificant in their society, obtain for themselves and extend to others the support and sympathy that will help them endure the loneliness and unceasing labor required of them."³ Underlying Stein's attitude is the assumption that the women's lives are individually trivial and that their only strength and/or success can come from banding together. Triviality can be overcome by the unification of large numbers, by sewing together the scraps into a quilt.

There are two important problems with this assertion. First, it is only in the most limited sense that the women's lives can be seen to be occupied with trivia. And second, what brings the women together, what forces them to endanger themselves for a criminal, is the fact that they do not only sympathize but also *identify* with the murderers.

Trivia, the concerns of life that are weighed as insignificant when compared to more central and weighty interests, begin the story, although not the play. Mrs. Hale is compelled to leave her own kitchen, where she has been engaged in sifting flour, in order to participate in a murder investigation. But she finds the decision difficult to make: "It was no ordinary thing that called her away—it was probably farther from ordinary than anything that had ever happened in Dickson County. But what her eye took in was that her kitchen was in no shape for leaving: her bread all ready for mixing, half the flour sifted and half unsifted" ("Jury" 256). The kitchen is a world of simple imperatives—cleanliness, order,

productivity, economy, and fruitfulness. Mrs. Hale's dilemma in leaving her kitchen might suggest her lack of hierarchy in values, her "typically feminine" concern for insignificant details, but although she keeps the investigators waiting out in the sleigh while she contemplates this scene, it is this contemplation that allows her later to comprehend the urgency of Minnie Foster's actions, for Mrs. Hale, like Mrs. Wright, was impelled by a "chill wind" to abandon the making of bread.

The detail assumes centrality, then, when the "important" clues fade, lead in the wrong direction, and/or disappear. This is something Mrs. Hale learns when the county attorney criticizes the dirty towel in the Wright kitchen. "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say Ladies?" he asks rhetorically, both in play and story, and Mrs. Hale feels moved to defend Mrs. Wright on the basis of her sympathy with the difficult life of farm wives, while accepting his conclusion from the evidence. Later, when her evaluations have assumed different proportions, she understands that the attorney's deduction was based upon the necessity to integrate the perceived details with the assumption of Minnie's guilt and her accompanying inevitable character flaws as a woman.⁴ At that point she can release her observation from his psychological imperatives and realize that the towel is dirty because the deputy wiped his hands on it when he made the fire.

For the men details, then, are not trivial but become integrated into the male preexisting vision. The trivial minutiae in themselves cannot be examined because they are not conceived of as separate from a larger fabric, a more general theory, clues to support a thesis. It is this limitation that prevents the men from understanding the murder case, and it this same limitation that prevents them from comprehending their wives' situation, which in turn forces the wives to employ passivity and subterfuge. Mr. Hale, increasingly influenced by the demeaning attitude of the other men toward the women, asks "Would the women know a clue if they did come on it?" unaware that the approach of the women has been far more productive and also of the fact that his attitude has made it impossible for his wife to share vital information with him. His silence for the rest of the play is an indication of his inaccessibility to the women.⁵

The initial discriminatory division between the men and women of the play becomes one of choice. Women band together to protect one another

from the evaluations of men because the men are simply not capable of understanding their situation, the same situation that led to the murder in the first place; and it is a political as well as a social condition.

The political nature of the situation is made clear by the title of the story, "Jury of Her Peers." Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in her address to the Legislature of the State of New York on February 14, 1854, used the term first:

The most sacred of all rights, trial by a jury of our own peers. . . . [S]hall an erring woman be dragged before a bar of grim-visaged judges, lawyers, and jurors, there to be grossly questioned in public on subjects which most women scarce breathe in secret to one another? Shall the most sacred relations of life be called up and rudely scanned by men who, by their own admission, are so coarse that women could not meet them even at the polls without contamination? [And] yet shall she find there no woman's face or voice to pity and defend? Shall the frenzied mother, who to save herself and child from exposure and disgrace, ended the life that had but just begun, be dragged before such a tribunal to answer for her crime? How can man enter into the feelings of that mother?⁶

When *Trifles* and "Jury of Her Peers" were written, women in the state of Iowa did not have the right of which Stanton spoke. Women served in juries only in Utah, Washington, Kansas, and California (Kerber 16). Suffrage, of course, was in the future. This disenfranchisement makes inevitable a different perspective on justice and the concept of primary responsibility to the law. "The law is the law," Mrs. Peters first asserts, in the story version but not in *Trifles*, horrified by her gradual revelation that there may be something other than the law, and Mrs. Hale soon adds: "The law is the law—and a bad stove is a bad stove." The law just does not apply here—because women have nothing to say in matters that concern women and because the scale of values is simply different for men and women. Carol Gilligan has pointed out that this distinction is seen as a flaw in women's judgment. Freud, writing at the same time as Glaspell, noted that "for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men . . . [and] concluded that women 'show

less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility" (Gilligan 7).

My point here is that the problem is far more complex than that of loyalty to women rather than to men. Legally, the women who protect Minnie Wright are criminals, accessories after the fact, guilty of concealing evidence. If the legal system is right (Wright) then their crimes are plainly wrong, their sympathies allowing them (as often is the case with women in stereotypical situations, according to Freud and others) to ignore the higher significance of their actions as they allow their emotions to take over. The gradual process in which this incipient "criminality" develops could help to prove this argument. For as Weisbrod points out, the women progress in their deception from concealment to a lie. Beginning with the fruit that has been spoiled because the fire in the faulty stove went out (another obvious symbol of the thwarted fruition of Mrs. Wright's life due to an absence of warmth), when Mrs. Hale says: "If I was you I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone! Tell her it ain't. . . . Here—take this [the one surviving jar] to prove it to her!" (*Trifles* 44), the progression is from concealment to a lie to, finally, a truth put forward to prove a lie, so that the woman in jail will not be further injured by the knowledge that her fruit has been ruined. "This scene anticipates the women's concealing the evidence" (Weisbrod 78 n. 67). Indeed, from lying about the fruit they move to a lie about the murder.

It is, however, only when they realize that the men are not capable of understanding the evidence before them, when they realize that there is no chance for a fair trial, that they resort to these deceptions. These are not deceptions of weakness or of emotions and sisterhood overriding logic and morality. They are calculated deceptions that are only perpetrated upon those who have proven themselves blind to the clues, insensitive to the trivia that delineate the lives of all the women in the play, including Minnie Foster. For not only do all women share the loneliness of housewifery, each woman alone in her own house, not only do the women feel the potential for violence on the part of the men in their lives (as does Mrs. Peters, remembering her kitten playfully slaughtered like Mrs. Wright's canary), but they all suffer from the unwillingness or inability of the men to understand their situation of helpless isolation, their con-

strained passivity, their overwhelming enforced dependence. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale know that, like Mrs. Wright, their identities, their lives, and their futures have been determined totally by the men they have married. Mrs. Hale's fortune is better than the rest, perhaps, and Mrs. Peters has been enlisted, by marriage, into a stable system of justice with which she need not argue. But had the situation been different, either of these women might have been in Mrs. Wright's bed and compelled to murder the man whose total control over her was, in this case, totally negative. "If they hadn't held me back," says Mrs. Peters, remembering her slaughtered kitten, "I would have—(*Catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falter weakly*)—hurt him" (*Trifles* 44). In this situation, in which the individual is not free to make decisions, to determine the consequences of actions, the legal concept of justice is simply not relevant. What would be murder to a free agent is here tyrannicide and/or justified revolution. The emotional responsibility of Mr. Wright to provide for his wife's needs was ignored by him and would be ignored by any all-male jury.

And yet the concluding scene is one of total feminine community, symbolized by the work of quilting. Not only is quilting a simple communal task in which the trivial becomes integrated vitally into a larger framework, but it also makes use of hidden patterns and significances. To quilt a blanket is to sew the joined patches to the lining all the way around the borders of the patch. It is to make a thin, flat quilt, in which all the thicknesses are equal. To knot a quilt is to sew the fabric together, generally through a thicker lining, only at the corners of each patch. Quilting equalizes the thickness of the blanket, knotting emphasizes the distinctions. When the women inform the men at the conclusion that Minnie was planning to knot the quilt, although they had not discussed this matter between them, they determine to differentiate between the legal definition of the crime, in which all considerations external to the act itself are meaningless and equal, and their moral definition of the crime, in which nothing is even and flat. Distinctions must be made, with the delicacy of a needle, and they have made them.

Patchworking is conceived as a collective activity, for, although it is the individual woman who determines the pattern, collects and cuts the scraps, and pieces them together, quilting work on an entire blanket is too

arduous for a single person. Minnie's patchwork would have been knotted and not quilted because knotting is easier and can be worked alone. And the guilty-hearted Mrs. Hale knows this.

With her hand against the pocket of her coat, where the bird is hidden, Mrs. Hale emphasizes the additional meanings of the phrase "knot it"—meanings she is certain her investigators will overlook, as they have overlooked every other significant fact. "Knot it" conveys the sense of knotting the rope around the husband's neck: the women disclose the murders. But they will "knot" tell. Mrs. Hale speaks a language understood now by Mrs. Peters but totally incomprehensible to those who cannot perceive the significance of trifles.

If the women "trifle" with the evidence, it is with the full recognition that they are meting out a different form of justice, the justice of women, the justice of those whose case could not be understood by anyone unwilling to proceed from details to an unprejudiced understanding of truth.

NOTES

1. I am particularly grateful to Aviam Soifer, Dean, Boston College Law School, who first helped me to see the legal issues of this play.
2. For an elaboration of this concept, see my article: "Jury of Her Peers: The Importance of *Trifles*," *Studies in Short Fiction* (Winter 1984): 1-9.
3. Karen Stein, "The Women's World of Glaspell's *Trifles*," *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Crown, 1981), 251-54.
4. The prevalent belief about women who murder at the time of this play seems to have been that only a depraved woman could murder. If a depraved person sins against society somehow, the fault lies in his or her mind, but, when a "normal" socialized person commits a murder, there is an implied criticism of society. Therefore it is necessary for the county attorney to understand Minnie as deviant as a housewife. This, of course, explains the general masculine criticism of Mrs. Wright's housekeeping as well as the attempts to perceive Mrs. Wright as out of her mind.
5. Speaking as a sign of empowerment has been noted and discussed by Marjane Camilleri, "Lessons in Law from Literature: A Look at the Movement and a Peer in Her Jury," *Catholic University Law Review* 39 (1990): 588. The

effect on the stage is the women's silence in the presence of the men, and, of course, the overwhelming pervasive silence of Minnie Wright.

6. I am indebted to note 46 in the article by Carol Weisbrod, "Images of the Woman Juror," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 9 (1986): 59-82, for pointing out this passage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's address has been reprinted in *History of Woman Suffrage*, 1848-1861, ed. E. C. Stanton, S. B. Anthony, and M. J. Gage, 2d ed., (New York: Arno Press, 1969): 595-98. Lucy Stone also used this phrase in an even more relevant context, pleading for a fair trial for Lizzie Borden ("A Flaw in the Jury System," *Women's Journal* [June 17, 1893]: 188).

WORKS CITED

- Camilleri, Marjane. "Lessons in Law from Literature: A Look at the Movement and a Peer in Her Jury." *Catholic University Law Review* 39 (1990): 557-94.
- Des Moines *Daily News*. 14 Jan. 1901.
- Dymkowski, Christine. "On the Edge: The Plays of Susan Glaspell." *Modern Drama* 31 (March 1988): 91-105.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Glaspell, Susan. *Trifles*, in *Plays by Susan Glaspell*, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby and Christine Dymkowski. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Kerber, Linda. "The Case of the Broken Baseball Bat: Women and the Obligation of Jury Service." *Hoyt v. Florida* 368 U.S. 57 (1961). Ms.
- Stein, Karen. "The Women's World of Glaspell's *Trifles*." *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins. 251-54. New York: Crown, 1981.
- Weisbrod, Carol. "Images of the Woman Juror." *Harvard Women's Law Journal* (Spring 1986) 59-82.