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Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*: Electrifying the Female Body

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SOPHIE TREADWELL'S *MACHINAL*: ELECTRIFYING THE FEMALE BODY

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The American playwright and journalist Sophie Treadwell dedicated her literary career to exploring the lives and motives of lonely and trapped individuals. In her most renowned play of 1928, *Machinal*, Treadwell stages the latest media sensation of the Long Island housewife Ruth Snyder who, with her lover Judd Gray, was put on trial and executed for the murder of her husband. In order to distance the melodramatic media story and focus on the theme of one woman's imprisonment in a loveless marriage and the machine-age, Treadwell, in this play, employs Expressionist techniques. Through lighting and sound effects, she creates a claustrophobic world, criticizing the mechanical age responsible for the invention of electrotherapy and the electric chair. The machines in the play, often only heard, on the one hand, signify the daily drudgery of work and married life to which the young woman must submit, while on the other, these mechanical sounds, like the reported effects of electrotherapy, energize her. By the end of the play, she is transformed from a submissive child into an adult woman who, attempting to change her despondent life, commits murder.

Only eight months after Ruth Snyder was executed at New York's notorious Sing Sing Prison, Sophie Treadwell's play, *Machinal*, premiered on Broadway under the direction of Arthur Hopkins. Treadwell's interest in Snyder was tied to the newspaper coverage of the trial. Although this was not the first incident in which a woman was put on trial for murdering her husband, it was the most reported on case of its day. The attention given to the Snyder case was astounding. There were roughly 180 reporters assigned to the case and within three months over 1,500,000 words had been written on it (Jones 486; Dickey, "Expressionist" 71). Snyder's fate of being the first woman to be executed in the electric chair added fuel to the already sensational media story. One reporter, who was invited to view the execution,

snuck in a camera; his photograph of Snyder on the electric chair was published on the front page of the *The Daily News* (Jones 488). While Sophie Treadwell was not one of the reporters assigned to the Snyder-Gray trial, she nevertheless followed the case closely, attending courtroom proceedings (Dickey, “The Real Lives” 176).

Moreover, Treadwell had reported on similar but less infamous cases—Leah Alexander (1914) and Elizabeth Mohr (1916)—in the past (Dickey, “Expressionist” 72). Her articles for the *New York American*, covering the trial of Mrs. Elizabeth Mohr, who was accused of hiring three black men to ambush and murder her husband and his mistress, Miss Emily Burger, are particularly revealing. Miss Burger survived the shooting but was badly disfigured from the attack. In the first of these articles, “Mrs. Mohr on Trial To-day; Judge Shifted,” dated January 10, 1916, Treadwell compares the courtroom to a “stage well set for this drama of love and hate and death, of jealousy, revenge, and cupidity, of confession and denial, faithfulness and falseness” (MS 318; Scrapbook 8). It seems that Treadwell, already as early as 1916, recognized the theatricality of the American judicial system. Treadwell’s coverage of this case has further resonance for *Machinal*. In the same article, Treadwell describes Mrs. Mohr as “the leading woman [...] so utterly commonplace as to be almost a shock,” and later, foreshadowing *Machinal* in which she describes the protagonist as “an ordinary young woman” (Dickey, “Expressionist” 173), Treadwell writes that Mrs. Mohr is “An ordinary-looking little woman” (MS 318). Whilst, on the one hand, Treadwell’s coverage of the Mohr trial highlights the dramatic quality of the case, on the other hand she points to the commonness of it. Mrs. Mohr’s presence shocked the spectators precisely because she, like Helen Jones of *Machinal*, resembled all housewives of the day.

The trial of Elizabeth Mohr and Ruth Snyder and execution of Ruth Snyder motivated Sophie Treadwell to write a play loosely based on these cases. In an early typescript, Treadwell wrote that the plot was “[s]uggested by the case of Ruth Snyder” (MS 124; Box 11, Folder 1). While in subsequent drafts, there is no direct reference to Snyder, this and other cases, critics agree,¹ led Treadwell to look at these condemned women from an alternative perspective. Rather than demonizing them as many newspaper reporters had done, Treadwell uses the form of playwriting to explore the forces that propelled these women into desperate acts of murder, and the institutions that condemned

them.

Her heroine, Helen Jones, is described in the opening pages of the play as “an ordinary young woman, any woman” (Dickey, “Expressionist” 173), and Treadwell goes on to explain that the “woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure—all are difficult for her—mechanical, nerve nagging” (173). Treadwell, like many of her contemporaries, was ambivalent, if not at times critical, of modernity.² Regardless of the conveniences that machines offered, such as the typewriter aiding the office worker, journalist or playwright, machines also represented a threat to the individual. Having been one of the first female reporters to cover World War I, Treadwell saw first-hand the destruction war machinery caused. Treadwell wrote a series of articles about war-torn France in the form of letters for the *San Francisco Bulletin* and *Harper's Weekly* during 1915. She visited and reported on hospitals tending the wounded soldiers and reported on the hardships war widows faced, among other topics. Despite her intention to cover the front, she was denied access to the frontlines by the French government (MS 318; Scrapbook 6). And taking a keen interest in the Snyder case, she witnessed how destructive the printed word could be.

For Treadwell the institutions of work, home, marriage, maternity, motherhood, and even seeking gratification, in the modern world, are all mechanical. Everything around the young heroine is *machinal*, that is “machine-like” as Treadwell explained in her letter of 1955 to the director Philip S. Goodman (MS 124; Box 11). What we witness is a young woman caught in a “life machine,” as the play was re-titled for the London premiere in 1931. And this “life machine” not only destroys creativity, but more importantly, destroys the life of the young heroine. Unlike Zero in Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*, Treadwell’s young woman, Helen Jones, does not find herself in heaven. Treadwell’s play ends with Helen’s execution.

Even before the stage lights up in Episode One, “To Business,” the theme of mechanization is apparent; the sounds of the office machines are heard in the dark and continue throughout the scene. Once the lights are up, the audience is confronted with the daily routine of office life. The characters—Telephone Girl, Adding Clerk, Filing Clerk, and Stenographer—are not given proper names. Instead, they are identified by their tasks and machines; they have become

mechanized, speaking and behaving in the same manner as the technology that assists them in their work. Repeatedly, Treadwell describes the office workers' speech as monotonous. The Adding Clerk, "*In the monotonous voice of his monotonous thoughts,*" calls out a series of seemingly insignificant numbers (Dickey, "Expressionist" 177). Speaking "*In the same way,*" the Filing Clerk says, "Accounts – A. Bonds – B. Contracts – C. Data – D. Earnings – E" (177). The tedious voices of the Stenographer, who Treadwell describes as a "*faded, efficient woman office worker. Drying, dried*" (177), is heard typing a letter and the Telephone Girl is heard answering the phone.

Only the Filing Clerk's inability to find something to file under Q, the Telephone Girl's secret chats on the phone and Helen's tardiness disrupt the dull business routine. When the Filing Clerk stumbles on Q, the audience is made to recognize that this office worker has become so completely absorbed by his work that he cannot comprehend that nothing is filed under Q; his imagination has been filed away. Later in the play, the relevance of Q becomes clear. Nothing can be filed under this letter because there is no peace and quiet, that which the young woman longs for, in the office.

Whereas the Filing Clerk's stumbling exposes his short-sightedness brought on by machine technology, the Telephone Girl, who later takes Helen to a speakeasy, is set apart from her fellow dry, efficient office workers. Whilst she does her job, at the same time she organizes dates using the company's line. Unlike the "*amorous*" (177) Telephone Girl who can juggle her private and public life, Treadwell's young heroine is incapable of working her machine. She tells first the Stenographer, who berates her for not working, and then Jones, her boss who asks if she has "That letter done?" (184), that her "machine's out of order" (183, 184).

We further learn that the young woman is unsuited for the "nerve nagging" mechanical age when she explains her tardiness to her colleagues. She tells her fellow office workers that during her subway ride to work, she "thought [she] would faint! I had to get out in the air! [...] Like I'm dying" (181). Unlike the others, who, for the most part, have become mentally numbed or even paralyzed by their machines, this young woman is still sensitive and tender, and, as such, she is able to break out of the subway car imprisoning her, yet her escape merely leads her to the prison walls of the office and into the clutching fat and "flabby hands" (186) of her employer, Jones.

Later, when she is “*Thinking her thoughts aloud*” (185)—a typical Expressionist technique—she churns over Jones’s marriage proposal and her experience in the subway:

somebody – something – no rest – must rest – no rest –
 must rest – no rest – late today – yesterday – before –
 late – subway – air – pressing – bodies pressing – bod-
 ies – trembling – air – stop – air – late – job – no job –
 fired – late – alarm clock – hurry – job – ma – nag – nag
 – nag – ma – hurry – job – no job – no money (186).

Concluding the first episode with a lengthy look into Helen’s inner thoughts, Treadwell brings together Helen’s anxieties about work, marriage, her home life with her nagging mother, and modernity; all of which Treadwell develops throughout the play. The fragmented nature of this and other “thinks” highlights the young woman’s anxiety, and, simultaneously, reflects the fragmented modern world of the play. Yet, whereas the Adding and Filing Clerks seem content with their fragmented existence, the young heroine is tormented by hers. In all but one episode, the sound of machines, whether office machines, the radio, the doorbell, subway riveters, or the ringing of a telephone, arouses anxiety in Helen; they represent the bars imprisoning her. Trapped in the modern mechanical age and its institutions, Helen desperately seeks “somebody” or “something” to set her free.

The history of “hysteria” and electricity can shed light on this unusual play. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women displaying anxiety, sleeplessness, anorexia, irritability, nervousness, and desire—much like Helen who complains that she cannot eat, sleep and who suffers from nervousness and anxiety—were diagnosed as “hysterics.” Jerry Dickey reports that Sophie Treadwell suffered from “neurasthenia,” a nervous disorder which might have a variety of symptoms, including digestive woes, insomnia, headaches, hypochondria, and nervous prostration. It was believed to have been caused by stress due to the rapid changes in modern civilization, and it afflicted those with either extreme moral laxity or sensitivity” (Dickey, *Sophie Treadwell* 8). The symptoms of “neurasthenia” are very similar to those of “hysteria.” Although it is not known whether Treadwell was treated with electrotherapy as some “neurasthenics” were, she did spend time in sanitariums where she was treated for her nervous condition. Furthermore, it is safe to surmise that she would have been aware of the different treatments available to women who suffered from nerv-

ous disorders. The most frequently prescribed treatment for hysteria well into the twentieth century, Rachel P. Maines reports, was electrotherapy. Some of the devices used to release women's excessive pent up energy were the electromechanical vibrator originally used in medicine starting in 1878 and the jolting or vibrating chair patented in 1893 (Maines 91). These devices were said to stimulate the patient, defusing their nervous lassitude and over excitation. The popularity of electrotherapy eerily, however logically, coincided with the invention of the electric chair which was first implemented in New York's Auburn Prison in 1890. It was these early uses of electricity that Treadwell stages, and in doing so she highlights its duplicity. Electrotherapy, as the cultural critic Tim Armstrong points out, was employed to rejuvenate the patient by killing the undesirable, pathological elements in the body and psyche. Similarly, the electric chair, Armstrong goes on to explain, was put into practice to remove social dangers so that the rest of the community would feel safe and, in effect, revived (Armstrong 32).

Treadwell's young woman, devastated with her lot, is charged with the desire for love and romance. She dreams of meeting a young man who will give her a child with a head of curls (192). What she gets instead is an aging man with fat hands who on their honeymoon forces himself on her and who fathers a girl with thin, straight hair. The "nerve nagging" electrical devices and institutions that plague the young woman, however, also give her the energetic charge she needs to go out for a drink in a speakeasy with the Telephone Girl. For Helen, the mechanical world around her functions like electrotherapy. Meeting Richard Roe, the adventurer who is ignited with sexuality, she begins an elicit love affair in which she, like many of the female "hysterics" treated with electrotherapy, temporarily finds peace after being stimulated to the point of orgasm (Maines 39-42).

In Episode Six, "Intimate," Treadwell makes the explicit suggestion that Helen, who "*comes into the light*" wearing only "*a white chemise*" (223), has finally experience sexual pleasure. As she dresses, her gestures are described as "*unconscious, innocent, relaxed, sure and full of natural grace*" (224).

In contrast, Treadwell depicts the machinery of married life as a type of modern hell in Episode Seven, "Domestic." This episode went through multiple revisions. In a dramatic fragment, the stage lights up in a red glow and sirens are heard offstage; the young woman tells her

husband that a nearby building is burning. Wrapped up in his own thoughts concerning his business, he dismisses his wife's alarm. In this fragment, the stage visually becomes hell, reflecting Helen's anxiety at home (MS 124; Box 11, Folder 8). By the time the play was staged, this hellish blaze was cut out of the episode. However, in the journal *Theatre Today*, "Domestic" was given the title "Little Hell," creating a polar opposite of the previous episode, re-titled for the journal "Little Heaven," where Helen is seen in her lover's room (MS 124; Box 11, Folder 7, undated typescript).

It seems that the overt imagery of hell in "Domestic" was cast off to explore in more detail the marriage machine. The published scene begins with Helen and her husband sitting "*on opposite ends of the divan. They are both reading papers—to themselves*" (Treadwell 227). The stories each of them reads are significant to understanding the characters' inner thoughts. Jones, as suspected, reads about business and the stock market, whereas the news stories his wife reads reveal her unhappiness and her need to get away. Divulging her own desire to break out of her personal jail, she reads of a "young wife [who] disappears" (227), a woman who "leaves all for love" (227) and a prisoner who "escapes—lifer breaks jail—shoots way to freedom" (229).

Her domestic hell is magnified by the intrusion of the telephone. Three times Jones receives phone calls—each allowing him to brag about the business deal he has just sealed. His young wife, "*by rote*" (227), asks whether he has "put it over" (227). The dialogue between them is fragmented, echoing the mechanical speech of the Filing and Adding Clerks. Moreover, this fragmented dialogue is repetitious. We sense that the young woman has inquired about her husband's business deals in the same manner many times over the years. The use of clichés, such as "put it over" (227), "swing it" (227), "On the dotted line?" (228), all of which are first spoken by Helen and then repeated as a confirmation by her husband, reveal the dull, routine of their marriage which suffocates her.

At the episode's conclusion, Helen begins to feel as though she is drowning with "stones around [her] neck" (230). Her husband, however, is insensitive to the stifling feeling she experiences in this and other episodes. Consequently, her anxiety heightens to the point where she hears the voice of her former lover, who killed "a bunch of bandidos" holding him captive "to get free" (232). Identifying with Roe's imprisonment, she employs his weapon, a bottle filled with stones, to

break away, as we learn in Episode Eight, "The Law."

The final episode, "A Machine," is a complex web of emotions, which, on the one hand, clarifies the young woman's attraction to Roe and her motives for killing her husband, while, on the other hand, leaves the audience in limbo as to her salvation. When she hears the engine of an aeroplane flying over the prison as she awaits her execution, Helen pointedly says to the Priest: "Look, Father! A man flying! He has wings! But he is not an angel!/[...]/He has wings—but he isn't free!" (252). By having Helen describe the pilot of the aeroplane as a man with wings who is not an angel, Treadwell alludes back to Episode Six, "Intimate." Helen tells Roe that she went to his room because he told her she "looked like an angel" (222). Despite the freedom she gains in Roe's arms, she, like the pilot in the aeroplane, does not find lasting peace. In fact, it is their affair that eventually leads to her most demeaning incarceration.

Repeatedly, we witness Helen refusing to submit. Even though she often loses her battles and as such caves in, succumbing to marriage, maternity, confessing in court, and even in the concluding episode, having her hair cut, Helen always resumes the fight against the patriarchal machine. In refusing to submit to her husband along with the patriarchal institutions he stands for, Treadwell's heroine, in an act of desperation, struggles to recapture the freedom she sampled whilst she was with Roe. However, the very act that secured Roe his liberty deems Helen, in the eyes of the law, as dangerous and as a consequence for her actions she must be removed from society.

During the courtroom proceedings, the Prosecutor strives to rid society of the young woman precisely because she is a tender-hearted fighter. Under his "heavy artillery fire" as the first reporter puts it, and the "machine-gun attack" (245) as the second reporter notes, the young woman crumbles. Using the language of the latest war machinery, Treadwell, here, represents the courtroom as a war zone. The sensitive young heroine, so out of place in this world of subways, typewriters and courtroom mechanics, is the enemy under fire. Unable to dodge the Prosecutor's questions and Roe's affidavit, she has become a wounded p.o.w. The conclusion of this scene juxtaposes the sound of Helen moaning—a cry that conveys her isolation, desolation and agony—with that of the telegraphic instruments firing away (248).

Regardless of their temporary insight into the warfare occurring in the courtroom, the newsmen, as Treadwell depicts them, are part of

the cold machinery that condemns and imprisons Helen. They are part of the routine and repetition of the courtroom, and they, unlike the young woman, know the rules of the game (233). They create their own narrative of the story the audience has already seen, and each of them reports a different “truth.” When we hear the reporters give an account of the young woman’s testimony, the first reporter claims that “The accused woman told a straightforward story of—” whilst the second reporter notes that “The accused woman told a rambling, disconnected story of—” (239). It is interesting that neither tells what the story is; the focus is on *how* Helen tells her story, and not the events themselves. What is more, neither reporter sufficiently captures the way in which the young woman tells her tale. Although Helen initially lies in court to save herself, her act of perjury is neither straightforward nor rambling; she sounds scared and unsure of herself. Further on in the episode, the reporters disagree once more. When describing the young woman’s demeanor during the Prosecution’s attack, the first reporter notes that she is “Pale and trembling” whereas the second reports that she is “Undaunted” (245). Again, Treadwell shows just how ill-suited the patriarchal media machine is in narrating her story. The “truth” lies somewhere between the two reports given by the newsmen.

Even at the play’s conclusion, the young woman is denied a voice. Her call for “Somebody! Somebod—” is “*cut off*” (255) with the switch of a button. Indeed, in the last few pages of the play, it is the reporters that show us through their words what is happening off-stage. Despite having thrown their reliability into question in the previous episode, here Treadwell suggests that the reporters, speaking to one another rather than writing down words to sell newspapers, are earnest in their observations. The second reporter says, for example, “How little she looks! She’s gotten smaller” (254). He is astounded by her smallness at the time of her execution.

Probably the most critical dialogue shared among the newsmen goes as follows:

1st Reporter: Suppose the machine shouldn’t work!

2nd Reporter: It’ll work! – It always works! –

3rd Reporter: Hush! (254)

The second reporter, in effect, reassures the first that the so-called social menace will be removed; yet his earlier observation that the young woman has grown small and by implication harmless suggests

that Helen is not the danger but rather is *in danger*. She has become a victim of the media and the courts, and hence she will not be saved by a stay of execution.

The cultural history of the electric chair reveals another way to read this exchange. In 1890, the first time the electric chair was implemented, Armstrong reports, it, in fact, did not work:

The execution went badly; the voltage used was too small, and the electrodes were applied inefficiently. To the horror of observers, the prisoner seemed to remain alive, though unconscious, following the first application of current. Eventually he was killed, after a further protracted dose. (Armstrong 13-14)

While Treadwell would have been only five years old in 1890, she often undertook extensive research for both her journalistic and dramatic ventures. Hence, it is likely that she was aware of this first disastrous attempt at using the electric chair. After all, the horrific failure made the headlines of many newspapers which reported that this new form of capital punishment was far more barbaric than hanging (Armstrong 13-14). In the light of this historic failure and Treadwell's sympathetic portrait of the young woman, the Priest's final words, which end the play, "Christ have mercy—Lord have mercy—Christ have mercy—" (255) transform from a stagnant mechanical sound into an emotional plea to save the young woman from the world condemning her.

While *Machinal* was far from a box office hit, the brave Expressionist play received praise from most critics and was anthologized by John Gassner "as one of the best plays of the year" (Shafer 261). Sophie Treadwell's sensitive portrait of Helen Jones, a young woman, caught in the cogs of the patriarchal institutions of work, marriage, motherhood, and the law, shed new insight on women like Ruth Snyder, Elizabeth Mohr and Leah Alexander who found themselves held captive in unhappy and often abusive marriages. Even though Helen's method of breaking down the prison walls smothering her is by no means justifiable, nonetheless her desire to live and love, and her longing for peace save her from being condemned, at least in the eyes of the audience. We recognize her anxiety brought on by the modern world and commend her struggle to rise above it. We can only hope that Helen, and women like her, find solitude in their tragic deaths.

NOTES

¹ Barbara Bywaters, "Marriage, Madness, and Murder in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*," *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*, ed. June Schlueter, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990, p. 99; Jerry Dickey, "The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell," *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, ed. Brenda Murphy, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, pp. 70-71; Jennifer Jones, "In Defense of the Woman: Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*," *Modern Drama* 37.3 (1994): pp. 485-96; Yvonne Shafer, *American Women Playwrights, 1900-1950*, New York: Peter Lang, 1995, p. 259; Ginger Strand, "Treadwell's Neologism: *Machinal*," *Theatre Journal* 44.2 (1992): pp. 163-175.

² One need only to think Elmer Rice's 1922 play, *The Adding Machine*, in which the protagonist, Zero, who has been displaced by a machine at work, murders his boss. For an excellent discussion of this play, see: Julia A. Walker, "Bodies, Voices, Words: Elmer Rice and the Cinematic Imagination," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16.2 (2004): 57-76.

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