Political Bodies: Spectacle and Embodiment in Women’s Suffrage Theater

“Alone among all literary productions, the theatre’s medium is the physical body – the virtual corporality of the text makes the drama unique.”

-Lynda Hart, *Making a Spectacle*¹

“Forty-nine women, picked for their statuesque beauty, and forty-nine men, selected for their Adonis-like proportions, will be present in couples representing the forty-eight states and Alaska.”

-from a description of the suffrage pageant, *A Dream of Freedom*²

“A pageant has more power to convince people of the truth of our cause than any other means. A pageant is a forceful and vivid form of drama. It combines the medium of the spoken word, the dance, pantomime, stirring music, masses of people in striking costumes, strong contrasts in situation, in its appeal. It is an intensely moving thing to witness.”

-Hazel MacKaye, prominent suffrage pageant director³

In the campaign for the vote, suffragists experimented with a wide variety of techniques whose attention-getting power derived from the spectacle of the female body on display in public space. The range of these performances is evidence of the creativity and energy of the movement’s participants. From the seemingly impromptu street-corner speeches in which an individual woman addressed a crowd to the vast and carefully choreographed parades and pageants, from defiant hunger strikes and picketing efforts to comic one-act plays and vaudeville

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¹ From Hart’s introduction to the 1989 collection of essays on women’s theater she edited, p. 5.
² The pageant, talks to be given by Theodore Roosevelt and Anna Howard Shaw, and a parade and meeting to be held the next day are all mentioned briefly in a May 2, 1913 Associated Press article titled “Roosevelt to Talk Suffrage Tonight.” The pageant was held that night at the Metropolitan Opera House.
³ From MacKaye’s “Pageants as a Means of Suffrage Propaganda,” p. 6.
shows, suffragists explored the many possibilities of employing the female body as spectacle. While all of these could be fruitful topics for study, I focus primarily here on the genres that illustrate the suffragists’ conviction that it was productive to combine the literary with the political. Looking at a sampling of plays and pageants, I examine the complexities of suffragists’ use of spectacle and display, arguing that suffrage performers’ “political bodies” served a pedagogical function in society and illuminated women’s problematic relationships to the concept of “citizenship.” [Note – trying to decide whether to keep the claim about pedagogy in here, as I reduce a long dissertation chapter to a shorter article for publication]

The role of spectacle in suffrage theater has received surprisingly little attention. Existing scholarship tends to focus either on spectacle or on drama, but not on the relationship between the two. Lisa Tickner’s *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-1914* explores the visual aspects of the British campaign but focuses primarily on arts and crafts (including painting, drawing, and fabric arts) and on the display inherent in parades and other public demonstrations. Similarly, in *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage, 1905-1938*, Barbara Green notes that suffragists conscripted a variety of different public spaces during their campaign, often through theatrical/spectacular performances, but she does not focus on theater itself, arguing that the plays, pageants, and skits are not as politically effective as other genres. Historical studies of the relationship between suffrage and theater, on the other hand, make an invaluable contribution to the recovery of information about the plays, performances, and people involved but do not examine in detail the role theater played as political spectacle. 

This chapter [essay] bridges the

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4 Relevant histories include Sheila Stowell’s *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, which discusses suffrage drama and feminist playwrights in Britain; Albert Auster’s *Actresses and Suffragists: Women in the American Theater, 1890-1920*, which traces the relationship between theater and suffrage in the United States; and Bettina Friedl’s anthology, *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement*,
gap, examining the role of the female body as spectacle in suffrage theater and exploring the relationship between activism and performance. [shorten/condense diss-speak?]

In part, the power of suffrage spectacle lay in the degree to which the events were performed in spaces that could be deemed “public.” As Carole Pateman notes, “the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle” (118). The extensive body of feminist historical work on women and the public sphere confirms Pateman’s claim. Women have “never been completely excluded . . . from public life,” as she explains; yet, “the way in which women are included is grounded, as firmly as their position in the domestic sphere, in patriarchal beliefs and practices” (132). Work for the vote was spurred by the hope that this pattern could change, and much suffrage literature functions explicitly by calling the notion of separate spheres into question. The genres examined here do so not only in their content, which often addresses the desire of women to have a voice in the political realm via the vote, but also in their form, as these plays and pageants were performed in spaces that ranged from the semi-public arena of a middle-class parlor filled with guests to the fully public arena of Pennsylvania Avenue and the Treasury Building in Washington, D.C.

In the following pages, I examine the relationship between suffrage spectacle and social pedagogy. This chapter paper considers several of the ways American suffrage plays (a genre frequently dismissed for its didacticism) are actually much more complex pedagogically than is usually acknowledged and anticipate ideas that appear in later theories about performance and pedagogy. As an illustration of the ways suffrage writers worked to find a balance between pushing boundaries and remaining accessible enough to reach their audiences, I also discuss the
work of Hazel MacKay, the most prominent figure in American suffrage pageantry. [One of the things I need help with is determining how much of this material really should be included in the version I submit – and therefore, how best to revise the intro, to match. I am not giving you the whole chapter here – just the first main section. Perhaps this is enough? Or an additional part of what I introduce together with it?] The performances of these plays and pageants educated audiences about women’s history (and particularly about patterns of injustice), about the problems inherent in separate spheres ideology, about women’s potential for agency in the struggle for their own rights, and about the value of coalition. Such teaching could have been done through essays and news articles (indeed, it often was), but the spectacular aspect of the theater genres, the presence of female performers’ bodies on display before an audience, creates a different type of pedagogy altogether. This pedagogy functioned in several ways. Among other things, suffrage plays and pageants employed spectacle as a way of engaging the heart and the mind simultaneously, manipulated and subverted the woman-as-object aspect of spectacle, experimented with form and introduced realism into portrayals of women’s lives and women’s history, and created works that were intentionally didactic in some traditional ways and yet also represented a complex feminist form of pedagogy.

*The Embodied Signature: Spectacle as Suffrage Strategy*

The term “spectacle,” when mentioned in the context of the women’s suffrage movement, immediately evokes images of the tremendous parades that filled public avenues

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5 It is important to note that definitions and connotations of the word differ significantly. In theater-specific usage, according to Patrice Pavis, meanings of the term, which refers to “the visual aspects of the theatre phenomenon,” vary across time (346). In the nineteenth century, the (impermanent) visual performance was understood as “opposed to the deep, lasting nature of the text” (347), and although performance and text were later considered to be of equal importance, echoes of this earlier conceptualization are present in current-day definitions that dismiss spectacle as frivolous, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s “a piece of stage-craft or pageantry, as contrasted with real drama.” Pavis adds that theater is “often accused of making sacrifices for the spectacular, i.e. seeking
with marching women and curious onlookers. These parades were themselves a form of theater, carefully choreographed and directed, and in order to understand more fully the pedagogy of the plays and pageants, it is therefore useful to consider the suffragists’ harnessing of spectacle in these mass performances – and their understanding of the concept itself. In an article published in *Votes for Women* in 1910, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence used the word to describe the British suffrage parades, claiming that “all London comes out to see them, and those that see the amazing spectacle of two miles of women – women of every class, of every profession and calling – realize perfectly well that they represent a very great and widespread and irresistible demand” (qtd. in Tickner 55). Indeed, the American suffragists perceived, there was a unique kind of power in a performance that filled the eye and filled the streets with female bodies.

Although earlier American suffrage parades had been held in New York, the March 3, 1913 parade in Washington, D.C. that was timed to coincide with President Wilson’s arrival for his inauguration is one of the best remembered. Paired with Hazel MacKaye’s pageant, *The Allegory*, this parade “stirred Washington deeply” according to one writer for *The Suffragist* (Flanagan 8). Making the spectacle visually appealing was part of the strategy, and in a 1919

facile effects or masking the text and reading beneath a mass of visual signs” (348). Such definitions, with their high art/low art distinction, may well have contributed to the overall lack of critical attention suffrage plays and pageants have received. However, many common-usage definitions are more neutral. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines a spectacle as “something that can be seen or viewed, especially something of a remarkable or impressive nature” and as “a public performance or display, especially one on a large or lavish scale.” The *Merriam Webster* definition is similar, with the additional caveat that the public display be “eye-catching or dramatic.” Interestingly, the correlating negative definitions focus on the poor judgment of an individual person being looked at, and do not refer to large-scale, orchestrated displays at all. *American Heritage* suggests “a regrettable public display, as of bad behavior,” and *Merriam Webster* refers to “an object of curiosity or contempt,” offering as illustration the all-too-familiar phrase, “made a spectacle of herself.” It is this latter definition that interests feminist scholars who consider the daring of suffragists’ decisions to appear in public, attentive to what Lynda Hart refers to as “the warning generally given to women to avoid having attention drawn to themselves, a prohibition against being publicly seen and heard” (1). Surprisingly, the 1913 *Merriam Webster* does not include these negative definitions, despite what amounted to a cultural taboo on performance and self-presentation by women; it identifies spectacle as “extraordinary, or as unusual and worthy of special notice; a remarkable or noteworthy sight; a show; a pageant; a gazingstock.”

article reflecting on “The Woman’s Party and Pageantry,” Annie G. Porritt was happy to point out that “the National Woman’s Party has a genius for picturesque effect” – or rather, that its members included many women of genius who contributed their skills and artistry; she writes that every demonstration, mass meeting, or pageant since the 1913 parade “has been characterized by the beauty and the high symbolic meaning that were first seen in the streets of Washington” on that day (7). That the NWP intended its visual displays to be educational as well as pleasing is evident in Porritt’s further comment that the organization “has always beauty and a serious lesson to offer to the onlooking public” (7).

But what was the relationship between the performance and the lesson? How did spectacle function as a pedagogical strategy? In part, it was the very fact of the material body that gave these “lessons” their power. The women’s visible, corporeal presence lent an authority that other forms of communication did not have. Noting a shift in campaign tactics from the collection of signatures on petitions to the organization of attention-getting public demonstrations, Tickner characterizes the British suffragists’ “taking to the streets” in large part as a response to Prime Minister Asquith’s demand for “proof” that a significant number of women wanted the vote. She suggests that suffragists responded to the challenge by “embodying their political commitment” in public displays such as parades (55). In the American campaign too, as news articles in suffrage-era magazines and journals frequently noted, women found themselves called upon to offer some sort of “proof” that they either did or did not want the vote. Public displays, where a woman’s body could stand in, literally, for her word, were a

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7 Tickner argues that organizers of the British suffrage spectacles were drawing consciously on precedent, influenced by state ritual and the “invented traditions” surrounding the British monarchy, by labor-movement activities, and by an “Edwardian fascination with pageantry” in general (56).

8 American suffragist Frances Boardman Squire Potter sensed not only a call to prove that women supported suffrage, but also a call to indicate clearly that theirs was not a selfish desire, but rather one aimed at improving the world. In a typed manuscript titled “Womanhood and Woman,” she explains that “the burden of proof is upon us, that what we desire is for the certain betterment of existing conditions” (n.p.).
logical next step. As Tickner explains it, the women’s physical presence in a parade offered a powerful response to objections that petitions “were fraudulent or signed in ignorance and haste” (55); they provided through spectacle what I would argue constituted an embodied signature, one impossible to forge.

It is evident that suffragists – and the “onlooking public” – perceived each individual woman’s body as “counting” in an important way; numbers figure prominently in descriptions of their public demonstrations. The March 3, 1913 parade in Washington was reported to have included eight thousand women marchers (Flanagan 8). Just two months later, the May 3 parade in New York was expected to be “the greatest woman suffrage parade ever held – 30,000 strong” (“Roosevelt to” n.p.). And the May 9th parade in Washington the following year was reported as featuring, among many other contingents, a “chorus of 1,000 voices” who would sing Ethel Smyth’s famous march (“The May Ninth” 5). As each of these women marched, her physical presence affirmed and asserted her support for the suffrage movement. The theater, also, was evidently a location where the embodied signature could be “inscribed” before the eyes of an audience, as the description of the pageant A Dream of Freedom included at the head of this chapter indicates. The forty-nine women and forty-nine men who represented the states and Alaska during the performance at the Metropolitan Opera House also “stood in,” literally, for suffrage. And it wasn’t only the bodies onstage that “counted” at this particular event. The Associated Press carefully reported that “one hundred and seventy-five college women will act as ushers” (“Roosevelt to” n.p.).

Suffrage theater performances ranged in size and scope, but the lesson that a woman both stood for suffrage and could occupy public space towards this end could be conveyed by even a single female body on stage. Some performances were quite basic when compared to pageants
like *A Dream of Freedom*, which the *New York Times* described as “elaborate and imposing” ("Roosevelt Centre" 1). On January 9, 1909, for instance, the Equality League for Self-Supporting Women organized a public reading of Elizabeth Robins’s *Votes for Women*. On January 9, 1909, for instance, the Equality League for Self-Supporting Women organized a public reading of Elizabeth Robins’s *Votes for Women*. Berkeley Theatre was “thronged” when the play, already well known in England, was introduced to a New York audience by reader Marion Craig Wentworth, who “received close attention throughout the three acts of the play” (“Votes for Women Wins” 13). And a number of monologues, duologues, and skits with very small casts were written during the movement.

Suffrage playwrights also clearly felt, though, that there was a special element of spectacle in the various types of public demonstrations suffragists were engaged in, and they sometimes wrote these directly into their plays. The second act of Robins’s *Votes for Women*, for instance, depicts a full-fledged suffrage meeting in Trafalgar Square, complete with crowd, speakers, and hecklers. The characters in Alice C. Thompson’s comedy, *A Suffragette Baby* (1912), discuss the speeches that were given at the day’s suffrage meeting and make plans to attend “the monster parade on Friday” (223). And the first act of Hester N. Johnson’s *On to Victory* (1915) depicts Barbara Manning and her friends preparing to march in a suffrage parade, making final arrangements and admiring the ribbons and the large banner that will decorate their efforts.

While *A Suffragette Baby* and *On to Victory* both imply that suffrage parades are taking place, *Melinda and Her Sisters* (1916) actually puts one on stage. According to the *New York Times*, the February 18, 1916 performance of Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont and Elsa Maxwell’s suffrage opera, which took place in the grand ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, featured “a real

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9 The play was first performed at the Court Theatre in London in 1907 (Spender and Hayman 37). The first full-scale production in America took place shortly after the reading at the Berkeley Theatre. Starring Mary Shaw in the role of Vida Levering, the play, produced by the Actors’ Society, started its run at Wallack’s Theatre on March 15, 1909 ("To Produce” X8).
suffrage parade and a soapbox suffrage speech” (“Society Satirized” 11). The paper describes how these were staged:

The suffrage parade came in from one side of the ballroom, marched across the room, and up the centre of the stage. It carried torchlights, banners, and soap boxes. Marie Doro [who played the part of Melinda Pepper] led it, preceded by a band. She was followed by a number of Red Cross nurses, and then came what had been kept a secret in advance, that ardent suffragist and peace advocate, Mrs. Inez Milholland Boissevain, carrying a large American flag, and as the procession reached the stage her tall figure dominated the scene.

Then the little suffragette [Melinda] called for her “throne,” a Red Cross nurse brought the soap box, and the speech began. (“Society Satirized” 11).

*The Suffragist* reports that Doro’s delivery was effective – that Melinda, wearing a “simple yellow frock” and “surrounded by factory workers,” made a speech that “won over the Pepper sisters . . . and incidentally converted the audience” (“Suffrage Opera Scores” 6). To what degree the latter is true, it is impossible to tell. The *New York Times* would only go so far as to say that Melinda’s speech had “perhaps” won over the audience. But it appears to have persuaded Doro herself, at any rate; she is said to have been impressed with the words and surprised to learn “there was so much in suffrage” (“Society Satirized” 11). And the opera was certainly getting attention. According to the *Times*, “Mrs. Belmont and Miss Maxwell cannot sleep nights because of telephone calls and telegraph messages from managers all over the country who want to get a chance to produce it” (“Marie Doro in” 6).10

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10 It is not clear whether this interest resulted in other productions of *Melinda and Her Sisters*. I have not yet found records indicating so, but such records may exist, and recovering more of the performance history of suffrage plays would be a valuable future contribution to the field. It is also possible that historically, this performance may have served as an unofficial “grand finale” for suffrage theater, as tactics changed in 1917.
Suffrage spectacle, as I have mentioned, depends for its force on the presence of the female body, and in all its iterations it drew power from the ways its performances enacted the unfeminine as well as the feminine. The embodied signature was a gendered inscription on public space, and the version of femininity it presented was both constructed intentionally by the performers and shaped by culture in ways beyond their control. Green suggests that the widely varied spectacular events organized by suffragists all worked by “attach[ing] symbols of protest, political action, and social involvement to the feminine body – making the feminine body into a civic body” (1). Indeed, aspects of traditional femininity were used both to explain why women ought to be considered full citizens (“who better to mother the nation?”) and to make more palatable to an audience gender transgressions in other areas (particularly the desire to participate in the political process). Suffrage spectacle employs “a theatrical and sensationalized femininity,” simultaneously “catering to and challenging a public gaze” (Green 5). This simultaneous acquiescence and agency makes spectacle a complex strategy, but suffragists embraced it all the same and found in the theater genres a variety of opportunities to employ it.

There is no way to determine the degree to which suffrage pageants and plays were or were not effective as tools for winning the vote, but the enthusiasm and fervor so many women and men brought to writing, producing, and performing in them makes it clear that they were perceived, at least for a time, as having political and pedagogical power. Embracing theater (whether in the parlor, on a traditional stage, or in the streets) was a move both logical and daring.

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11 See Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* for a discussion of the “performativity” of gender.
12 As Green notes, the concept of the “civic body” originates in Richard Sennett’s *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*.
13 In “Women’s Suffrage Drama,” Katharine Cockin notes that “suffragists had good reason to believe that plays were effective in changing attitudes” because in Britain, “a change in legislation was attributed to the production of one play” (128). A number of individual “conversion” stories also attest to the power of theater to persuade viewers of the need to work for women’s suffrage. Yet no reliable method exists to measure the actual overall effectiveness of suffrage theater, and I am more interested here in considering how spectacle functioned pedagogically and what it might have communicated than in arguing for or against theater as a political tool.
for the suffragists. It made sense in the context of the growing importance of and interest in theater during the years the suffrage campaign took place. The end of the nineteenth century saw significant growth in the entertainment industry (Auster 4). The first drama schools were founded in the 1880s (51), and the number of stage performers in the United States increased significantly, from around 2,000 in 1870 to nearly 10,000 by 1890 (Glenn 13). The number of female theater-goers rose as well (14), offering an increased opportunity to reach women audience members through the performance of suffrage plays. Even so, theater had not entirely freed itself from connotations of sinfulness and promiscuity. Although attitudes changed a great deal over the many decades of the suffrage movement, anxiety about the stage and the propriety of women who chose to perform upon it did not dissolve entirely.

In part, it was for this very reason that suffragists could count on the spectacle of women onstage to surprise, intrigue, and lure in spectators who might otherwise have been uninterested in hearing anything at all about women’s suffrage. When society women started to embrace the movement and even began appearing on stage in increasingly public venues, eventually working alongside professional actresses (many of whom had been involved in the suffrage movement since its early stages), it afforded new opportunities for manipulating public curiosity and interest in the social elite. Organizers of plays and pageants took to casting prominent women specifically for the purpose of drawing a larger audience, giving them permission to look, even to stare, as a way of inducing them to listen, to consider the arguments for suffrage. In doing so, they were capitalizing on the titillation of an association between the “best” women and the “promiscuity” of the theater. Casting well known actresses like Mary Shaw or Marie Dressler (who played Mrs. Pepper in the Waldorf-Astoria performance of Melinda and Her Sisters) could

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14 Auster attributes this to industrialization and the increasing amounts of leisure time that resulted, combined with a lessening of the “clerical influence” in America (4).
help fill seats, as their star power had an allure of its own. But putting society women on stage drew even more attention to the cause.

Suffragists took advantage of this and even advertised it. For instance, an article in The Suffragist about a benefit performance of two British plays scheduled for February 20, 1914 at the Columbia Theater announced in advance that the cast for Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St. John’s How the Vote Was Won “includes many of Washington’s most prominent social leaders” (“An Afternoon” 7). The mainstream papers, too, were keenly aware of the class shift in suffrage theater. A New York Times article about Belmont and Maxwell’s suffrage opera noted that “the chorus will be made up of the most charming of the debutantes of the season” (“Suffrage Opera Tonight” 11). Similarly, a notice about the Metropolitan Opera House performance of A Dream of Freedom announced that “society women, actresses and opera singers will participate” and “Mme. Nordica will take the part of freedom” (“Roosevelt to” n.p.).

In addition, articles about performances often printed eye-catching cast lists in table form, making it easy for a reader to notice familiar names running down the columns. And reporters were well aware that it wasn’t only those on stage the spectators went to see; therefore, they often listed the names of prominent box holders, thus “counting” certain members of the audience in their corporeal tallies, affirming them as part of the spectacle. In these ways, suffrage spectacle both relied upon masses of bodies and capitalized on the recognizability of the few. If every female body constituted an embodied signature, some were perhaps writ a little larger, in bolder “ink” than others.

[now, below, I’ll include small excerpts from additional sections, in the hope that you can help me decide what makes a coherent/complete paper for publication…..]

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15 Mentioned are Mrs. Randolph Keith Forrest, Mrs. Mary Kealty Claggett, Miss Jean Walsh, Miss Eunice Oberly, Mrs. Carol Bird, Mr. Morven Thompson, and Mrs. L. W. Jordan (“An Afternoon” 7).
The Relationship Between Performer and Audience

Women’s role did not end with being eye-catching, and this is what I find most intriguing about the various forms of display employed during the suffrage movement. As Green points out, suffrage spectacle “depended on the female body for persuasive force” (1), and the plays and pageants explored in depth the possibility that the female body could persuade. In their explorations of the “persuasive force” of female bodies onstage, suffrage writers experimented with traditional genres while re-imagining the roles of those to be looked at and those doing the looking. In this section, I consider the ways suffrage theater constructs a relationship between audience and performers that anticipates later ideas about egalitarian pedagogical interactions.

It is important to note that spectacle, as a feminist strategy, is not an uncomplicated one. Even when carefully deployed, it remained partly outside the control of suffrage performers, making it a strategy open to misreading and interpretation. [etc.] [paragraphs omitted]…….

One of the reasons suffrage theater is especially compelling is because of its consideration of a “female gaze.” Film theorists and other scholars have contemplated female agency and spectatorship, calling attention to the ways women, while not necessarily able to escape the role of object of the male gaze, have nonetheless held simultaneously a more active role. Kaplan, for instance, asks, if viewing is typically a male/masculine act, “what does it mean to be a female spectator?” (25). In a later revisiting of her earlier work on visual pleasure, Mulvey attempts to answer this question and offers two possibilities: a female spectator can “find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer . . . that the spell of fascination is broken,” or, on the other hand, “she may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control . . . that identification with a [male] hero provides” (“Afterthoughts” 24).

Judith Walkowitz’s City of Dreadful Delight, for example, while primarily an analysis of sexual narratives in Victorian London, offers a model for imagining women as more than a part of the landscape observed by men, but as actors and (also) spectators themselves (18).
thus making a transition “out of her own sex into another” (27). But suffrage theater frequently offers its viewers heroes that are women, thus potentially bypassing, at least in part, what Mulvey describes as the “‘masculinization’ of the spectator position” (“Afterthoughts” 24) for its female viewers. …………… [discussion of plays omitted]

When Melinda Pepper leads her band of marchers onstage at the Waldorf-Astoria; when Kate Grovenor, in Ella Cheever Thayer’s *Lords of Creation* (1883), proclaims with satisfaction after taking over her ailing father’s business and paying off his debts with her own savings, “Yes, dear father, my woman’s wit has been equal to the occasion” (114); when the bold Jennie Martin expresses no fear upon discovering a burglar in her room in George Middleton’s *Back of the Ballot* (1915) and attempts instead to convert him into a suffragist; and when Mary Shaw’s “Free-souled Parrot” in *The Parrot Cage* (1914) tries to lead its cage-mates to freedom, female audience members are invited to envision themselves in all of these roles – without having to make a transition out of their sex and into another. I am not suggesting that their readings of the images before them can escape entirely patriarchal enculturation. Yet, to adapt Mulvey’s psycholanalytic explanation, suffrage theater offers women the same re-visiting of the Lacanian mirror stage that cinema typically offers to men: a fantasy image of the self that provides a “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ego” (“Visual Pleasure” 138). Because suffrage theater conflates the stage performance and reality, this “fantasy” image of female agency becomes even more accessible. The events and roles depicted onstage were similar to those that could be seen off the stage, in the movement. The performers might be one’s own neighbors or relatives (in a parlor performance), or else familiar actresses or socialites (in the later stage performances). And in moments such as the one when Inez Milholland Boissevain, known for
having led several real-life parades, marched onstage in *Melinda and Her Sisters*, the borders between fact and fiction dissolve entirely. [etc etc etc, including discussion of some plays]

**Modeling New “Fashions” – Embodying Change**

Pedagogically, in addition to challenging the traditional power dynamic of the relationship between spectator-student and performer-teacher, suffrage theater offers its viewers attractive models for change. Harriot Stanton Blatch, an important proponent of visual display as a suffrage technique, was convinced that “the actress’s powers of persuasion – her capacity to move the hearts and minds of the audience – made her vital to the suffrage cause” (Glenn 135). In large part, it was what suffrage actresses were modeling that was moving and persuasive: strong roles for women, “sisterhood,” egalitarian relationships between the sexes, and a world in which women’s citizenship was or would soon be fully affirmed by the right to vote. They also modeled techniques for reaching this desired better world. Blatch, like many others, had lost her citizenship when she married a non-American (Cooney, *Winning* 158), and was therefore especially keenly aware of the precariousness of women’s claim to the identity of “citizen.” Suffrage plays affirmed their right to this identity and depicted them as competent, compelling individuals. [etc. etc., discussion of lots of specific plays as examples]

[then, whole section on MacKaye’s pageants – probably not part of an article, but here’s how it ends, below….. ]

If the audience gets to see the power of coalition onstage when they view an impressive display, the performers experience first-hand a powerful lesson about what can be accomplished when a large number of women work together toward a single end. Even plays with very small

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17 Blatch was for a time one of Emmeline Pankhurst’s close colleagues in the Women’s Franchise League, and is one of the individuals “credited with taking militancy back to the United States” when she returned in the early 1900s (Holton 16).
casts afforded their performers this experience, but the ambitious scope of a pageant would have made the lesson indelible. MacKaye considered a pageant to be “the most potent means of welding the women themselves together” (qtd. in Blair, “Pageantry for” 43). Participants in a suffrage pageant or play weren’t necessarily already confirmed suffragists, but the experiences of working coalitionally and of enacting onstage those same positive representations of female strength their audiences were viewing would have helped them see ideas about women’s roles and rights in a new light. Thus, suffrage theater positioned audiences as actors, and performers as students – and both as potential agents of change.

[will need a clear conclusion to make this a paper. Also, I left out most of the excerpts from and discussion of specific plays – will of course need to put that type of material back in]
Works Cited
[from whole chapter, not cut to match this bit – please don’t feel obliged to print it!]


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Woman Suffrage Study Club: Minutes, 1909-1913. Book with minutes recorded in it, and occasional ephemera pasted in or enclosed between the pages. Schlesinger Library. Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.