

JAMES A. HERNE'S MARGARET FLEMING
AND THE EMERGENCE OF DRAMATIC
REALISM IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

JAMES A. HERNE'S MARGARET FLEMING

AND THE EMERGENCE OF DRAMATIC
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By

David Lloyd Griffiths

The American stage of the late nineteenth century was dominated by sentimental melodramas written, and often produced, by expert craftsmen such as Bronson Howard, William Gillette, Augustin Daly, Steele MacKaye and David Belasco. These men relied on topicality, romance, intrigue, suspense and scenic spectacle to provide a medium of escape for their commercial audience. At the same time, European playwrights Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Gerhardt Hauptmann and others were attempting to create a drama based on serious studies of the problems of modern individuals. Often denied access to larger commercial theatres in both Europe and America, plays by the emerging realists were produced through the efforts of independent theatre managers in small, poorly equipped theatres or rented halls and for subscription audiences.

In writing and producing Margaret Fleming (1890), American playwright James A. Herne (1839-1901) raised the question of treating modern individual crises in a form capable of reflecting the nature and substance of life in American society. The play is a study of a woman's character, sexual fidelity in marriage, and double-standard morality. Although his efforts were initially rejected, Herne's

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Margaret Fleming can now be seen as one of the first steps in the development of modernism in the American theatre and, ultimately, helped to usher in such playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard and Maxwell Anderson in the 1920's.

The purpose of the essay is to examine the significance of James A. Herne's Margaret Fleming in terms of (1) the playwright's relation to and divergence from the prevailing dramatic and theatrical tendencies of the late nineteenth-century American stage; (2) the influential factors in American and European dramatic and literary arts which encouraged the writing and producing of the play; and (3) the production history of Margaret Fleming as it represents Herne's attempt to establish a new dramatic and theatrical mode in the American theatre. It is this final point which forms the basis of the investigation, for a complete description of Herne's attempt to establish "independent" theatre practice similar to that seen at the Théâtre Libre in Paris or the Freie Bühne in Berlin within the framework of the late nineteenth-century American commercial theatre has never been fully explored.

In assessing the significance of James A. Herne's Margaret Fleming the study also includes biographical notes on James A. Herne, analytical descriptions of both the no longer existant original version and the revised, published version of Margaret Fleming, an examination of contemporary

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newspaper and magazine articles on Herne and contemporary
reviews of Herne's independent productions of Margaret
Fleming.

James A. Herne spent all of his adult life working in the American theatre. His experiences span one of the most active periods in American theatrical history, the late nineteenth century. Working as a young actor with such prominent "stars" as Edwin Booth, Edwin Forrest and E.L. Davenport, Herne matured to develop his own quiet, natural style of acting based on observation of the life around him and his own personal experiences. The forces which influenced his acting are also apparent in his work as a playwright. His early plays conform to the melodramatic format of the late nineteenth-century American stage, but reveal as well an interest in theme and character unavailable in the works of his contemporaries.

Within the context of the late nineteenth-century American theatre Margaret Fleming presents, without doubt, an example of advancement and growth. The play and its production reveal the beginning of a major shift in emphasis and the desire to address theatre as a serious modern art in terms of theme, character, dialogue and setting. Margaret Fleming is a play which confronts topical problems rather than using them as theatrical background. The historical importance of Margaret Fleming as a forward-looking play is undeniable. Unfortunately, it would take

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a quarter of a century and the emergence of Eugene O'Neill's short realistic dramas produced by the Provincetown Players to surpass Herne's work in Margaret Fleming.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: James A. Herne and the Nineteenth-Century American Theatre

In the second half of the nineteenth century the American theatre saw a general increase in artistic productivity. Responsibility for this acceleration and growth in theatrical activity falls to the emerging American playwright who for the first time was able to assert himself as an artist of equal status to the actor. Prior to 1850 dramatists such as Royal Tyler (1757-1826), William Dunlap (1766-1839), James Nelson Barker (1784-1858), John Howard Payne (1791-1852) and Robert Montgomery Bird (1806-1854) had achieved temporary recognition as playwrights. Yet, in spite of their accomplishments, they often wrote for specific "star" actors and mainly from European models. In contrast, the second half of the century viewed the emergence of major figures such as Dion Boucicault (c. 1820-1890),¹ James A. Herne (1839-1901), Steele MacKaye (1842-1894), Bronson Howard (1842-1908), David Belasco (1854-1931) and William Gillette (1855-1937) all of whose works would shape the course of the American commercial theatre for more than a quarter of a century. Their plays are the most

representative examples of sentimental melodrama. In fact, many of the techniques which they first introduced continue to dominate popular theatre and mass entertainment forms today.

Of this group of prominent late nineteenth century playwrights one stands out. James A. Herne broke away from the dominant mode of sentimental melodrama practiced so expertly by his American contemporaries in order to provide the American stage with an example of dramatic art comparable in content and form to the works of his European contemporaries Henrik Ibsen, Henri Becque, August Strindberg and Gerhardt Hauptmann. In writing and producing Margaret Fleming (1890), Herne raised the question of treating modern individual crises in a form capable of reflecting the nature and substance of life in American society. Although his efforts were initially rejected, Herne's Margaret Fleming can now be seen as one of the first steps in the development of modernism in the American theatre and, ultimately, helped to usher in such playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard and Maxwell Anderson in the 1920's.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the significance of James A. Herne's Margaret Fleming in terms of (1) the playwright's relation to and divergence from the prevailing dramatic and theatrical tendencies of the late nineteenth-century American stage; (2) the influential factors in American and European dramatic and literary arts which encouraged the writing and producing of the play; and

(3) the production history of Margaret Fleming as it represents Herne's attempt to establish a new dramatic and theatrical mode in the American theatre. It is this final point which forms the basis of the investigation, for a complete description of Herne's attempt to establish "independent" theatre practice similar to that seen at the Théâtre Libre in Paris or the Freie Bühne in Berlin within the framework of the late nineteenth-century American commercial theatre has never been fully explored.

The predominant dramatic form of the late nineteenth century was the sentimental, topical melodrama; that is, plays using contemporary situations or events easily recognizable to an audience as a framework for action fundamentally unrelated to the issues characterizing the actual social or political situation. Thus, topicality became a mere device for masking actual conflict within American society. Slavery, the Civil War and alcoholism created the context for the action in numerous late nineteenth-century plays, but remained only marginal concerns of the resolution of the action itself. Rather:

a virtuous hero or heroine is relentlessly persecuted by a villain and is rescued from his machinations only after a series of thrilling escapades; an episodic story unfolds rapidly after a short expository scene; each act ends with a strong climax; all important events occur on stage and often involve elaborate spectacle, . . . the typical plot devices include disguise, abduction, concealed identity, and strange coincidence; strict poetic justice is meted out, for, although he may triumph until the final scene, the villain is always defeated. . . .²

Most of these characteristics can be easily identified in such plays as George L. Aiken's adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), Dion Boucicault's The Octoreon (1859), August Daly's Under the Gas Light (1867), Bronson Howard's Shenandoah (1889), David Belasco's The Girl I Left Behind Me (1893) and William Gillette's Secret Service (1896), as well as in nearly every other successful but less well-known melodrama of the era.

A major factor influential in the rising popularity of topical melodrama was the physical growth of the United States in the late nineteenth century. The boundless energy and sensationalism of melodrama seemed liberating and geared to the expansion of the country. According to critic Richard Moody, "The new land, the freedom from social or political restraint, the adventurous dream of unexplored frontiers were conducive to the rapid growth of a romantic spirit."³ New frontiers, either the physical rural countryside or the excitement of the growing urban centers, were a fact of life to all Americans.

Theatre also grew with the expanding country. In the East, New York was growing as a population center⁴ and theatre buildings were enlarged to hold the larger audiences. New York's Park Theatre already held twenty-five hundred spectators when opened in 1821. The Bowery Theatre sat three thousand when it first opened and was rebuilt in 1845 to accommodate four thousand people. This period of growth continued throughout the century, while theatre

machinery became more sophisticated. Quiet dialogue plays were hardly suited to this cavernous space.⁵ Melodramas requiring elaborate staging techniques, easily recognizable character types, clear-cut moral issues supporting the status quo and action-filled plots were suited to both the growing theatres and their mass audiences.

The use of elaborate scenic effects perhaps best characterizes the late nineteenth-century melodrama. The plays of Dion Boucicault exemplify the increased use of spectacle in the theatre. In The Poor of New York (1857) Boucicault created a house burning down on stage while an actor escaped with an important document. Two years later he used a similar technique in incorporating a burning steamboat into the plot of The Octoroon.⁶ In 1880 Steele MacKaye opened his Madison Square Theatre in New York with a double elevator stage allowing quick and quiet scene changes to heighten scenic illusion.⁷ At the end of the century, Ben Hur was produced in six acts and fourteen scenes which included a chariot race with real horses on a revolving treadmill.⁸

Such elaborate scenic effects seemed to obviate the need for intimate psychological character portrayal or the exploration of issues except for their excitement and suspense value in the melodramatic situation. Heroes and heroines tended to be flat, either entirely good or entirely evil, and supported the status quo moral standards. This is certainly true, for example, of Zoe in Boucicault's The

Octoroon, as well as of soldiers Kerchival West and Frank Bedloe in Bronson Howard's Shenandoah.

Even issues and events of the magnitude of slavery and the Civil War brought no self-examination in the American theatre. And although slavery and, later, the Civil War found their way into the plots of such popular melodramas as Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), The Octoroon (1859), Shenandoah (1889) and William Gillette's Secret Service (1896), these subjects provided only a topical background. According to Richard Moody they functioned much like scenic spectacle:

The average spectator was attracted to the theatre not to appraise the degree of realism in the presentation of a locomotive on the stage but to delight in the striking and thrilling melodramatic action in which the locomotive played its part.⁹

In The Octoroon, for example, slavery and miscegenation are of minor interest in comparison to the murder of young Paul, the theft of an important letter, the sale and suicide of Zoe, the burning steamboat and the wild Indian chasing the villain M'Closkey. Similarly, Howard's Shenandoah uses the Civil War as a backdrop for chivalrous modern knights and compelling romance; the reasons for the war are not made evident and slavery is nowhere mentioned or evident in the play.

The tradition of the melodrama in the late nineteenth-century American theatre served as the training ground for actor, director and playwright James A. Herne. In his early work Herne was an ardent contributor to the success of melodramatic theatre. As an actor, his first major role was

young George Shelby in a production of Uncle Tom's Cabin.¹⁰ He played many similar roles and his daughter Julie wrote: "Two of Herne's greatest successes as a young man were Claude Melnotte, in 'The Lady of Lyons,' and Armand Duval in 'Camille'."¹¹ As a director, Herne found employment at the Grand Opera House in New York in 1869, the Theatre Royal in Montreal in 1870 and at Tom Maguire's New Theatre in San Francisco in 1874. At these theatres, his early directing experience was focused on sentimental, melodramatic offerings such as East Lynne, Oliver Twist and The Child Stealer.¹² Finally, his own plays such as Chums, written in 1879, with David Belasco, The Minute Men of 1774-1775 (1886), Drifting Apart (1888) and Shore Acres (1892) are some of the finest examples of late nineteenth-century American melodrama.

In spite of his close connection with the traditions of the late nineteenth century, Herne was also responsible for bringing to the American theatre its first true example of Realism. Herne's interest in this new dramatic and theatrical form had developed throughout his career in the theatre. In fact, the roots of his interest in developing an American Realism can be traced back to his earliest experiences.

James A. Herne was born on February 1, 1839 in Cohoes, New York, the second son of Patrick and Ann Temple Ahern. Herne dropped the A from his last name when he began acting. All six Ahern children were given a grammar school education and received strict religious training from their mother.

Living near the Hudson River and the Erie Canal, young Jim had a boyhood desire of going to sea. His father, however, put a stop to his one attempt to run away and become a sailor. Herne's love of the sea is evident in several of his plays. Hearts of Oak (1879), Drifting Apart (1888), Sag Harbor (1899) and Shore Acres (1892) are all set on the coast.

At the age of thirteen Herne was removed from school and put to work in a factory. His father's employer offered to assume the cost if the young Herne would remain in school, but his father could not see the need for his son's further education and refused the offer. In spite of his lack of extensive formal education, Herne read extensively throughout his life. He continued to expand his horizons, not only in literature, but in social issues of his day as well. Social concerns ranging from Women's Rights to Henry George's Single Tax became additional interests which would ultimately surface in Herne's plays.

Herne's first taste of the theatre came in his early teens when his older brother, Charles, took him to see the great American tragedian Edwin Forrest star in a performance of Robert Montgomery Bird's The Gladiator at the Museum Theatre in Albany. Herne was spellbound by Forrest's performance and decided then that he would be an actor. Patrick Ahern knew nothing of his son's ambition and the young Herne continued to work at the factory until he was twenty years old. During those intervening years he

visited the theatre as often as he could, even taking supernumerary roles. Later he was able to take small juvenile roles with James Connor's stock company.

Herne quit the factory at the age of twenty and planned to use his savings to purchase a theatrical wardrobe. Unfortunately, he was persuaded instead to finance a small touring company which quickly vanished along with his money. Nevertheless, he joined Connor's company and made his first regular appearance as George Shelby in a production of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Because Connor thought it would make for a more appealing billing, Herne dropped the A from his last name.

Herne's theatrical apprenticeship began with Connor's company and he spent approximately two years with theatres in Albany. During this time, he took lessons in voice, movement and fencing and began to refine himself in his art. Herne was an agile and adaptive young actor. While with Connor he had the opportunity to perform with numerous visiting stars, which further helped him develop his acting techniques. Julie Herne relates one of his peculiar abilities as an actor:

. . . Herne was frequently cast for leads because of his quick study, and he never refused a new part on the score that he did not know it. If necessary, he would "wing it," that is, would memorize it scene by scene, while standing in the wings during the performance.¹³

The ability to learn quickly helped Herne acquire important roles and his experience with various acting styles and a large repertoire of plays also proved helpful in his

development as a playwright. In effect, he learned not only what to include in his plays, but what to avoid as well. In referring to the treatment of the subject of the Civil War Julie Herne records Herne's feelings:

Herne contended that the field had been worked out, and that the next play on the subject must of necessity deal, not with heroes and battles, defeats and victories, but with the effect of the war upon the lives of a single family or group of people.¹⁴

Herne's apprenticeship as an actor spanned the Civil War. During the war he was engaged by John Ford in his theatres in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. While with Ford he gained popularity and began playing with the Booths, Edwin Forrest and E.L. Davenport. He also began to develop his own style of acting. While playing opposite Edwin Booth the star expressed interest in Herne's line interpretation and asked Herne where he had heard it:

Herne admitted that he had never heard the line read in that way before; that it was his own reading, one which seemed to him to be the only right way to speak it. "Unusual--but very fine," Booth said.¹⁵

The more intuitive and natural style which characterized Herne's mature acting style began to develop at this time.

In 1864 Herne left Washington and began to travel. After playing briefly in Philadelphia, he went to Montreal where he married a young actress named Helen Western. Herne had previously worked with both Helen and her sister, Lucille. He had, in fact, been very much in love with Lucille. However, Lucille was already married and Herne's attempt to transfer his love to Helen resulted in a troubled marriage

which lasted only three years. After he divorced Helen in 1868, Herne began a tour of California as a leading man with Lucille Western.

After one year in California Herne was offered the position of manager at the Grand Opera House in New York. In 1870 he and Lucille travelled back to the Theatre Royal in Montreal where Herne had been hired as manager. After six years of travelling and working as a manager Herne left Lucille Western and returned to California to manage Maguire's New Theatre in San Francisco.

The years in California brought Herne's first attempts at playwriting. While he was managing the New Theatre in San Francisco David Belasco was the stage manager. The two collaborated to produce three plays in 1879, but only one of them was successful, Hearts of Oak, originally entitled Chums.

While working on the West Coast Herne remarried. Katharine Corcoran was a young and talented actress who would prove to be a great influence on Herne's work. The Herne's would be collaboration artists: "His estimate of her powers as an actress is shown by the fact that he wrote all of the leading feminine parts in his plays for her, and she created all but one of them."¹⁶ Katharine Herne's contribution to her husband's work became particularly apparent in 1909 when a fire destroyed the only known copy of Margaret Fleming. Her collaboration with Herne in writing the play and her experience playing the title character allowed her to reconstruct the play from memory.¹⁷

Hearts of Oak was financially successful on the road and the Hernes toured the play for several seasons. In the off-seasons they settled in Boston, where Herne worked on his plays and scheduled their upcoming season. His first independent playwriting venture, The Minute Men of 1774-1775, an historical drama of the American Revolutionary War, was written at this time. The play opened in Philadelphia on April 6, 1886. Arthur Hobson Quinn writes that although "it is uneven in merit and at times is reminiscent of a much older manner," it also demonstrates "how his skill was developing."¹⁸ His second original play was Drifting Apart, first entitled Mary the Fisherman's Child. The play was produced at the People's Theatre, New York City, on May 7, 1888. The play was a strong step toward Realism in its treatment of the problem of drunkenness. Neither of these plays was a financial success, but they did receive some favorable notices from critics.¹⁹

One such critic was Hamlin Garland, the radical young naturalistic author of A Son of the Middle Border (1917), Main Travelled Roads (1891) and Crumbling Idols (1894). He saw Drifting Apart in Boston, in 1889, and was so impressed by the work that he wrote to Herne and asked if they could meet. It was through Garland that Herne met the prominent critic and novelist William Dean Howells, America's chief spokesman for Realism and Naturalism. Garland spent many evenings with the Hernes and later wrote: "They met me on every plane of my intellectual interests, and our discussions

of Herbert Spencer, Henry George, and William Dean Howells often lasted deep into the night."²⁰

These discussions had a lasting impact on James A. Herne as well and he began developing his theory of realistic art and the role of the artist. In the 1897 essay "Art for Truth's Sake in the Drama," he wrote of the new American artist: "In other words: if he has a truth to manifest and he can present it without giving offense and still retain its power, he should so present it, but if he must choose between giving offense and receding from his position he should stand by his principle and state his truth fearlessly."²¹ Herne's ideas came to fruition in his third play, Margaret Fleming. The play is a study of a woman's character, sexual fidelity in marriage and double-standard morality. Quinn calls the play "daring in its fidelity to truth," unlikely "to appeal to the public."²² Margaret Fleming was not well received and Herne's attempts at producing the play independently were costly, even though it established a landmark in American theatre history.

The financial failure of Margaret Fleming plunged Herne into a whirlwind of acting, directing and playwriting to recover his losses and, hopefully, to find a producer for Margaret Fleming. He worked for a time as an actor and a director for Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger in New York. This left Herne with little time for writing and his next major work, Shore Acres, did not appear until 1892. Tentatively titled The Hawthornes, the play was extremely

popular and became the most successful play of Herne's career.²³ Opening in Chicago at McVicker's Theatre, Shore Acres was produced with Margaret Fleming and both were financial failures. When Shore Acres opened in Boston early in 1893 it was an immediate success and Herne played "Uncle Nat" for the next five years from New York to San Francisco.

Between 1892 and 1897 Herne completed work on Griffith Davenport, a stage adaptation of Helen Gardener's An Unofficial Patriot, and began his last major work, Sag Harbor. A revision of his earlier work Hearts of Oak, the situation involved two men in love with the same girl. Unlike the earlier work, this play ended with a happy reconciliation reminiscent of the closing of Shore Acres.

After the economic failure of Griffith Davenport Herne began to prepare Sag Harbor and direct Israel Zangwill's Children of the Ghetto. The combined effort was a strain on his health. He had an attack of rheumatism in the winter of 1899, and before he recovered he began touring in Sag Harbor. He finally dropped out of the tour and spent nearly two months recuperating. The following season he again attempted to tour in the play. This time the illness was too much and he died on June 2, 1901.

As a playwright Herne produced sixteen plays; of these, seven were original works. The first of his plays to achieve any popularity was Hearts of Oak. The play presents a contrast between the sentiments of paternal love and duty

and those of romantic love. When the old husband realizes the sacrifice made by his young wife and her true love, he departs, leaving the young couple together. The plot was taken by Herne's collaborator, David Belasco, from an old melodrama, The Mariner's Compass, but the most melodramatic scenes were removed. Arthur Hobson Quinn compared the Herne-Belasco version with the original and showed the more natural overtones of the latter play:

But the difference can be appreciated only in a careful reading of both plays, for it lies partly in the closer fidelity to the natural language of human beings and partly to a deft change which deepens the tenderness of the affection existing among Terry, Chrystal and Ruby, while it lessens the theatrical intensity of its expression.²⁴

The love that the three main characters share moves the plot along logical lines. There is no villain to manipulate events. The dialogue comes naturally, revealing and developing the characters as the scenes progress. Terry, Ned and Chrystal no longer retain dramatic credibility, but the play does mark Herne's visionary concern for naturalism in stage characters.

Herne's second play, The Minute Men of 1774-1775 (1886), is a seeming "relapse into the old romantic melodrama"²⁵ in its treatment of the American Revolution. The twisting, action-oriented plot complete with long lost children, young lovers and gallant soldiers marks the play as melodramatic. However, Herne's ability to create believable three-dimensional characters raises the play above the average American

war play. Herne is able to capture natural characteristics, especially in his female characters: "the indomitable spirit that animated the women of that time is expressed not only in Dorothy but also in Ann Campbell."²⁶ The play shows that Herne is still influenced enough by his past experience to retain a melodramatic plot but his increasingly naturalistic characters reveal his movement toward Realism.

Herne's second major work, Drifting Apart (1888), further demonstrates this movement toward increased realism in theme and character. In the play a happy family is seemingly brought to ruin by the husband's drinking. After two acts portraying the hardships, degradation and, ultimately, death that resulted from his drinking, the husband awakes to discover that the actions were all a dream. He vows never to drink again and the play concludes on a positive note. The sentimental ending prevents Drifting Apart from being considered a realistic play. Yet, the plot is simple enough, the events follow logically, and the only surprise rests on the discovery that the play was a dream. The characters are simple and natural; again, they are the rugged, stoic people of a small New England fishing village that Herne used in Hearts of Oak. Thus, the play represents a further step in Herne's departure from melodrama. The tone of Drifting Apart is lower key and the sentimental resolution does not obscure the seriousness of the theme. Drifting Apart represents a logical step in Herne's development as a playwright which led to the emergence of realistic form in Margaret Fleming.

James A. Herne spent all of his adult life working in the American theatre. His experiences span one of the most active periods in American theatrical history, the late nineteenth century. Working as a young actor with such prominent "stars" as Edwin Booth, Edwin Forrest and E.L. Davenport, Herne matured to develop his own quiet, natural style of acting based on observation of the life around him and his own personal experiences. The forces which influenced his acting are also apparent in his work as a playwright. His early plays conform to the melodramatic format of the late nineteenth century American stage, but reveal as well an interest in theme and character unavailable in the works of his contemporaries. His life style also distinguished him. Herne was an individual of strong social as well as artistic conviction and his theatrical experience with consciousness of and strong feeling for a truthful art reflecting human problems combined in the writing and producing of Margaret Fleming.

Footnotes

- 1 Dion Boucicault was born and his initial theatre activity was in Ireland, but he is remembered for his major accomplishments on the American stage.
- 2 Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), p. 366.
- 3 Richard Moody, America Takes the Stage (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 1.
- 4 Garff B. Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Hair (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 66.
- 5 Ibid., p. 107.
- 6 Dion Boucicault, The Octoroon in Representative American Plays, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), p. 394.
- 7 Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A.: 1665 to 1957 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 235.
- 8 Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A., p. 274.
- 9 Richard Moody, America Takes the Stage, p. 207.
- 10 Herbert J. Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne: The Rise of Realism in American Drama (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1964), p. 4.
- 11 Julie A. Herne, "Biographical Note" in Shore Acres and Other Plays, ed. Mrs. James A. Herne (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1928), p. xiii.
- 12 Herbert Edwards and Julie Herne, James A. Herne, p. 17.
- 13 Julie A. Herne, "Biographical Note", pp. xii and xiii.
- 14 Ibid., p. xxvi.
- 15 James A. Herne, p. 8.
- 16 Julie A. Herne, p. xv.
- 17 Representative American Plays, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957), p. 516.

18 Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1927), p. 136.

19 Ibid., p. 138.

20 James A. Herne, p. 49.

21 Quinn, A History of the American Drama, p. 139.

22 Ibid., p. 140.

23 Julie A. Herne, p. xxv.

24 Quinn, A History of the American Drama, p. 135.

25 James A. Herne, p. 40.

26 Quinn, A History of the American Drama, p. 137.

CHAPTER II

American Dramatic Realism and Art for Truth's Sake

The work of James A. Herne in the theatre was based on his powers of observation and assimilation. In an 1891 article entitled "Mr. and Mrs. James A. Herne," Hamlin Garland refers to James and Katharine Herne as two of the most intellectual artists in the dramatic profession: "Books are all around him." The Herne household seemed to be alive with the advanced topics of the day. Garland notes Katharine's interest in discussing Spencer's law of progress, and Henry George's theory of land-holding, and refers to the Hernes as "individualists in the sense of being for the highest and purest type of man, and the elimination of governmental control."¹ Garland's words and their publication in the intellectual journal The Arena proves that Herne was highly regarded by his contemporaries. He was highly receptive to new social and literary ideas and was, therefore, enthusiastic about the movement toward Realism in the theatre.

Dramatic Realism was new to the American theatrical world, but it was already a subject of heated debate in the

literary world. The sentimental romantic novel was yielding to the realistic novel. In an 1889 article called "The Claim of 'Realism'," Albion W. Tourgee described Realism saying:

The "realist" keeps to what he deems a middle course . . . Truth, he says, does not lie midway between extremes, but embraces the antipodes. The absence of vice or virtue is not life, but the union and contrast of them.²

The late nineteenth-century American novelist Frank Norris believed Realism was "the commonplace tale of commonplace people."³ In this definition he found value in the artistic description of the problems of every day people and life. American critic and theorist William Dean Howells speaks of a "'new realism,' which presents a psychological study of character in its environment."⁴ For Howells, Realism embraced the truth of contemporary life and expressed this truth through character examination. This philosophy was slow to emerge in the theatre and it would require the efforts of playwright James A. Herne to open the door for Realism on the American stage.

The emergence of Realism as a literary and dramatic movement began in Europe in the late nineteenth century finding its first clear manifestations in the writings of Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), and the essays, novels, and plays of Emile Zola (1840-1902). The movement grew through the prose plays of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Gerhart Hauptmann, Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev, and through the development in the 1880's and 1890's of the Independent

Theatres. These factors combined to produce a new form of dramatic art better able to interpret the problems of an increasingly industrialized society.

In his History of English Literature (1868), Hippolyte Taine adapted scientific terms and methods to literary interpretations of human actions. His hypothesis was that three factors control man: race, milieu, and moment.⁵ Race was the hereditary factors expressed in man's temperament and physical body; milieu, his total environment; and moment, his historical age. These ideas would be adapted by the more influential Emile Zola. The "Preface" to his play, Thérèse Raquin (1873), became the manifesto for Naturalism on the French stage. Zola demanded scientific objectivity and saw the author as an experimental scientist.

The movement was started by the new methods of science; thence, Naturalism revolutionized criticism and history, in submitting man and his works to a system of precise analysis, taking into account all circumstances, environment, and "organic cases."⁶

In his "Preface," Zola points out that the play is a "purely human study," the action being the inner struggle of the characters. The setting and action attempt to adhere to the social position of the main characters, "lower middle class shop-keepers." The use of petty bourgeois characters indicates the direction that Naturalism would take. In the later essay "Naturalism in the Theatre" (1881), Zola elaborated on his theory saying:

. . . to increase the reality of the corpus of drama, to progress towards truth, to sift

out more and more of the natural man and impose him on the public.⁷

As the major ideologue of Naturalism, Zola exerted a great influence on the development of new dramatic forms; as a playwright, his works fell short of his own theories.

The movement toward an increased realism in the European theatre is best characterized by Ibsen and Strindberg. Although they could not be called disciples of Zola, they began to develop similar forms of drama which recorded the influences of contemporary science, economics and social problems. Ibsen paralleled Zola's ideas. First, Ibsen focused on a character's psychological and biological roots, as in Ghosts (1881), or Hedda Gabler (1890). Second, he portrayed characters in line with their environment--A Doll's House (1879) is an example. In fact, Ibsen examined the ethical problems of the modern individual in conflict with the social environment. In The Father (1887) and Miss Julie (1888), August Strindberg explored similar themes, revealing modern psychological characters caught in intensely personal conflicts and involving advanced views of sexual and environmental conditioning. The realistic plays of Strindberg and Ibsen were a primary force guiding the maturation and development of American dramatists such as James A. Herne.

Other Western European playwrights whose works contained more strident social commentary such as Henri Becque or Gerhardt Hauptmann were not as influential. More closely

related to the American development were the works of Russian realists, such as Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev. Lars Ahnebrink asserts that "the Russian realists viewed their characters with compassion and pity."⁸ Characters were drawn from life, expressing characteristics of their environment, but not completely controlled by heredity and society. American critic William Dean Howells reviewed Ivan Turgenev's Dimitri Roudine in 1873, saying that Roudine's character emerges slowly in the novel allowing the reader's feelings to "pass from admiration to despite before we come finally to half-respectful compassion."⁹ This process is similar to the gradual unfolding of the title character of James A. Herne's Griffith Davenport (1898). Herne's work reflected the Russian's ability to adapt new techniques to a native milieu.

In dealing with new social ideas, European realists such as Zola, Strindberg, Ibsen and Hauptmann encountered great difficulty in finding theatres willing to produce their works. To secure a forum for new playwrights, Independent Theatres began to appear on the continent. The movement began with the Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887. Independent Theatres not only provided a stage for Realistic and Naturalistic playwrights, but also helped establish a new scenic art. In the "Forward" to Miss Julie, August Strindberg deals with staging innovations which reflect the staging techniques of the Independent theatre. The smaller stage and auditorium necessarily reduced the separation of

audience and actor. Furthermore, he called for a completely darkened auditorium, the abolition of footlights, the use of subtler side-lighting, an increased naturalism in make-up, a technique in acting which would allow a more natural portrayal of character and a single setting capable of establishing a realistic environment.¹⁰

In America the path to Realism was somewhat different from that established by the European model. In On Native Ground, Alfred Kazin emphasizes not only contemporary skepticism and the influence of Charles Darwin and other scientific theorists, but also an increasing interest in specific American problems as well. According to Kazin major sources of conflict were

agrarian bitterness, the class hatred of the eighties and nineties, the blackness of small town life, the mockery of the nouveaux riches, and the bitterness in the great new proletarian cities.¹¹

Thus, American Realism, like European Realism, was providing a social consciousness for the arts. The theme for the Realists was the search for a new "truth" in literature and art. This truth would have to be socially, scientifically and psychologically verifiable.

The major proponent of this search in America was critic, novelist and playwright William Dean Howells (1837-1920). Though affected by the Europeans, Howells sought to assert the unique democratic nature of American experience: ". . . let it speak the dialect the language, that most Americans know--the language of unaffected people everywhere."¹²

This was the "truth" and it was Howells' belief that "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material." The essay expressed his view of fiction as an appeal to the intellect and not the emotions, saying: "If a novel flatters the passions, and exalts them above the principles, it is poisonous."¹³ Man was a microcosm of the world around him. In this sense, fiction demanded a depth of exploration into the character rather than a mere survey of surface actions.

It was Howells' contention that American realistic fiction represent the variety of American life.

American life especially is getting represented with unexampled fulness. It is true that no one writer, no one book, represents it, for that is not possible our social and political decentralization forbids this, and may forever forbid it. But a great number of very good writers are instinctively striving to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts.¹⁴

The essay also reflects Howells' own optimistic Puritanical values. For example, he asked realistic authors to present all passions, but in doing so to remember that such passions as "guilty love" should rank below loyalty, friendship, grief and others. He also suggested that characters should speak with regional accents or dialects for one to be able to trace a character to his area of the country and his social position. He was demanding a socially verifiable truth. In so doing, Howells was adapting European precedent to a specifically American context.

America also attempted to adapt the European idea of the Independent Theatre. In the spring of 1891, plans were made in the city of Boston to open the first American Independent Theatre. The plans were precipitated by James A. Herne's difficulty in finding a producer for his realistic play Margaret Fleming. The manifesto for this group carried the title "Truth For Art's Sake" and was signed by James A. Herne, Hamlin Garland, Arena magazine editor B. O. Flower and numerous other interested men and women from Boston's literary world. The objectives of the organization stressed a new credo for American theatre arts:

. . . first and in general to encourage truth and progress in American Dramatic Art. Second, and specifically, to secure and maintain a stage whereon the best and most unconventional studies of modern life and distinctively American life, may get a proper hearing. We believe the present poverty of Dramatic Art in America is due to unfavorable conditions, rather than to a lack of playwriting talent, and it is the purpose of the Association to remove as far as possible, the commercial consideration and give the Dramatist the artistic atmosphere for his work and bring to his production the most intelligent and sympathetic acting in America.¹⁵

The idea of a forum for new talent was similar to that of the Théâtre Libre or the Freie Bühne in Europe, although the focus was on native characters, problems and situations. The document further proposes the "scope" which a new kind of theatre should embrace:

- I. Studies of American Society.
 - (a) Social Dramas.
 - (b) Comedies of Life.
- II. Studies in American History.

- (a) Dramas of Colonial Times.
- (b) Dramas of the Revolution.
- (c) Dramas of Border History.
- (d) Dramas of the Civil War.

III. Famous Modern Plays by the Best Dramatists of Europe.¹⁶

One factor distinguishing the First Independent Theatre Association from its European counterpart was the opposition it encountered. At the Théâtre Libre, Andre Antoine was fighting the rules of the conventional French theatre. Fortunately, Antoine had the support of sympathetic critics familiar with new trends in art and literature. He also had the support of Parisian intellectuals, for his productions included works by established authors such as Zola, Ibsen and Strindberg.

In the United States these conditions were not evident. One problem encountered by the First Independent Theatre Association was the lack of formal restrictions to revolt against. The New York Times of May 31, 1891, points this out by saying that plays rejected in the American theatre were poor plays. The article agreed that managers produce only those plays which they know will please the audience and provide financial success, but that there was nothing wrong with that system.¹⁷ Thus, commercialism was the order of the day and stood as the criteria by which all art was to be judged. Facing the stringent financial demands, the First Independent Theatre Association never produced any works; in fact, the publication of the manifesto was the organization's only significant accomplishment.

Within the context of the late nineteenth-century American society, the theatre was viewed as a medium of escape and excitement. Rather than examine the effects of rapid territorial and industrial expansion on individuals within the social fabric, theatrical producers were content to provide mystery, romance and magic in an environment of illusionistic splendor. Producers such as Augustin Daly and David Belasco spent most of their vast talents and energy on spectacular illusions. In The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (1919), Belasco recalls spending thousands of dollars on achieving just the right lighting effect for a California sunset and then not using it. Other producers such as Steele MacKaye and Augustin Daly also reflected the popular tendency toward spectacular, life-like illusion based on suspense and intrigue.

The situation was further complicated by the plays being produced. Most commercial successes were heartwarming stories of noble sentiments. Steele MacKaye's Hazel Kirke (1880) had a run of four hundred eighty-six performances in its initial New York production, at the same time it was also played by numerous road companies. Bronson Howard's Civil War play Shenandoah (1888), achieved similar popular recognition and he received over \$100,000 in royalties the first year.¹⁸ William Gillette's Secret Service (1895) ran a full season in New York, four months in London and toured for many years.¹⁹ These popular successes were well adapted to the picturesque scenic practices of the era.

Conditioned by such popular success American theatre audiences were unwilling to accept the new form of unsentimental realism. The New York Dramatic Mirror, writing in 1890, called the realists of the Independent Theatre radicals whose reforms would strip the theatre of its charm, mystery and "sacred ornaments." John Corbin, writing in reaction to James Herne's play Griffith Davenport (1899), carried the idea further:

When one chooses to go to the theatre instead of, let us say, to a political meeting or a police court, one accepts a world of rags and paint for the real world, a world of footlights for a world of daylight--a thing no reasonable man would do, even the strongest partisan of realism, if he did not expect to find something beyond what he would have had in the actual world. The value of the world of paint and footlights lies in the fact that it is not real, and that the people who move in it cannot by any possibility be regarded as real. Paint and rags are the means by which we render unreal all but the most significant aspects of life, and by doing so are enabled to work out in the space of an evening a story or the development of a human soul that in real life would take years of intimate knowledge to understand.²⁰

The few realistic dramas that were produced in the 1880's and 1890's were unsuccessful. Helena Modjeska's performance as Nora in A Doll's House, produced in 1883, drew negative criticism and little audience. American actress Minnie Maddern Fiske (1865-1932) starred in a number of Ibsen's plays during the 1890's, including A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, Rosmersholm, Pillars of Society and Ghosts. When Ghosts was produced in 1894, New York Tribune

critic William Winter criticized the play as being obnoxious in theme, dull and dirty in content, and generally "Nauseous offal." Winter, the most influential critic of his day, characterized the American reaction to European Realism. In his Life of David Belasco (1918), he expressed a view of the theatre as "The home of that magic art which cheers loneliness of life and opens the portal into an ideal world."²¹ The influence of Winter and other traditional critics such as John Corbin of Harpers Weekly Magazine, and Alan Dale of the New York Evening Journal continued well into the twentieth century, inhibiting the acceptance of an Ibsen-like Realism.

There were, however, several important men of letters interested in promoting Realism in America. Along with William Dean Howells, one of the most active Realists was Hamlin Garland. Garland was born and raised in the difficult atmosphere of small midwestern farms. He knew firsthand the hard, bleak life of the farmer and the drudgery and subjugation of the farm wife. In Main Travelled Roads, he wrote of the problems of the small farmer. In stories such as "A Branch Road," "Up the Coolly" and "Among the Corn-Rows," he presented farm wives who leave their homes and husbands in order to lead more fulfilling lives. Garland was an active social reformer as well as writer, espousing with his fullest energy such causes as the Single Tax Issue, the Populist Party and Women's Rights.

Garland became an active supporter of Ibsen's dramas. He recalled his first witnessing of A Doll's House in 1889:

I left the theatre that afternoon converted to the new drama, and like all recent converts, I began to talk and write on Ibsenism as I had been talking and writing on Impressionism and Veritism. It became another "cause" for me.²²

Garland admired Ibsen as a social reformer, later saying in his crusading novel Crumbling Idols (1891) that Ibsen pointed the way for American playwrights. However, Garland, like William Dean Howells, made a point of expressing his belief that American drama must also reflect the optimistic and democratic spirit of the country.

The higher class of American dramas therefore must not be shambling, disconnected character studies, neither must they be sensational melodramas with thin "Realistic" tanks and horses, and lastly they must not imitate Ibsen or any other dramatist, but they must be studies of life, of social life, and must have breadth and sincerity of purpose.

He also said American drama "must be more human, more wholesome, and more humorous."²³ Those statements provide an accurate description of the transformation occurring in early Realism on the American stage. Garland's interest in Ibsen and a "new" American theatre was accentuated through his correspondence with James A. Herne.

James A. Herne ably suited Garland's idea of a modern playwright. When they met after Garland viewed Drifting Apart in 1889, he said, "In all matters concerning the American Drama we were in accord." Herne's interest in developing an American style of realism along the lines of

Ibsen's prose plays was encouraged by Garland, who gave credence to his already established beliefs. By this time, Herne had read numerous Ibsen plays and, according to his biographer Herbert Edwards, particularly admired the Norwegian's use of terse, matter of fact, prose dialogue. Other qualities attracted Herne to Ibsen's plays. The lines were short, phrased more like natural speech. Exposition came gradually in the course of the dialogue. This increased the importance of the lines for their intellectual content. At the same time, this gradual, subtle mixture of present and past drew the play into an organic whole. In short, Ibsen provided a dramatic model on which Herne could base his American themes.

James A. Herne's sympathy for a more realistic theatre which could explore individual crises in a modern society, combined with the impact of writers such as Ibsen, Howells and Garland. The theory of drama Herne evolved at this time was recorded in his essay "Art for Truth's Sake in the Drama." The essay is probably the most important document of nineteenth-century American dramatic theory and is one of the first indications of a movement toward new American forms of theatre and drama which would take another two decades to emerge fully.

In the essay, he begins by making a very clear distinction between art for art's sake and art for truth's sake:

"Art for art's sake" seems to me to concern itself principally with delicacy of touch, with

skill. It is aesthetic. It emphasizes beauty. It aims to be attractive. It must always be beautiful. It must contain no distasteful quality. It never offends. It is highbred, so to speak. It holds that truth is ugly, or at least is not always beautiful. The compensation of the artist is the joy of having produced it.

"Art for truth's sake," on the other hand, emphasizes humanity. It is not sufficient that the subject be attractive or beautiful, or that it does not offend. It must first of all express some large truth. That is to say, it must always be representative. Truth is not always beautiful, but in art for truth's sake it is indispensable.

Art for art's sake may be likened to the exquisite decoration of some noble building; while art for truth's sake might be the building itself.²⁴

His preference is obviously for the latter viewpoint:

I stand for art for truth's sake because it perpetuates the everyday life of its time, because it develops the latent beauty of the so-called commonplaces of life, because it dignifies labor and reveals the divinity of the common man.²⁵

The essay continues through Herne's acknowledgement of his debt to Hamlin Garland for introducing him to Howells and others interested in truth in art:

As I said, "it was a potentiality," an unconscious potentiality which attracted to us a sympathetic man, now an esteemed friend, who in turn brought others, and our lives were broadened and bettered, for through these friends we learned that we had been unconsciously working along the lines of thought held by some of the great modern masters of art.²⁶

He also credits early domestic dramas such as Temptation, Black Eyed Susan and Rent Day, all of which he had acted in, with helping to form his style: "the simpler the play the better for me. The more direct the talk, the more

earnest I become."²⁷ Among his favorite characters were those of Charles Dickens, calling them "representative" and "full of humanity."

Perhaps, the most important aspect of the essay is the stress Herne gives to a drama of theme and character as the playwright's "personal expression of life. The finer the form and color and the larger the truth, the higher the art."²⁸ For Herne, artistic truth must be concerned with contemporary social life:

In all art, ancient and modern, that which is in touch with contemporaneous life adheres closest to truth, because it is produced through some peculiar social condition.²⁹

In the final paragraph Herne summarized the power and purpose of his theory of "art for truth's sake," distinguishing it from prevalent dramatic modes:

It is generally held that the province of the drama is to amuse. It claims that it has a higher purpose--that its mission is to interest and to instruct. It should not preach objectively, but it should teach subjectively; and so I stand for truth in the drama, because it is elemental, it gets to the bottom of a question. It strikes at unequal standards and unjust systems. It is as unyielding as it is honest. It is as tender as it is inflexible. It has supreme faith in man. It believes that that which was good in the beginning cannot be bad at the end. It sets forth clearly that the concern of one is the concern of all. It stands for the higher development and thus the individual liberty of the human race.³⁰

James A. Herne had been developing a realistic approach to theatre throughout his career as an actor, director and, finally, a playwright. The theoretical stance developed in

"Art for Truth's Sake in Drama" is another extension of the strong attraction new artistic ideas held for Herne. Arthur Hobson Quinn exemplifies this by noting that Herne was "subconsciously in sympathy" with Realistic ideas long before he even knew there was such a movement.³¹ Thus, the European movement of Realism in theatre and drama, best characterized in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, and the establishment of the Independent Theatres began to influence Herne's artistic development. More important was the parallel American development surfacing in the novels, plays and essays of William Dean Howells. Herne combined these influences in his attempt to create a more profound dramatic form capable of embodying distinctly American contents. In Margaret Fleming he created America's first example of dramatic realism.

Footnotes

- ¹ Hamlin Garland, "Mr. and Mrs. James A. Herne," The Arena (1891), pp. 543-560.
- ² Albion W. Tourgee, "The Claim of Realism" quoted by Lars Ahnebrink, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1961), p. 127.
- ³ Lars Ahnebrink, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction, p. 157.
- ⁴ William Dean Howells, "Benito Perez Caldos" in Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, ed. Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 132.
- ⁵ Hippolyte Taine, "Introduction" to History of English Literature, in What is Naturalism? Materials for an Answer, ed. Edward Stone (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1959), pp. 48-49.
- ⁶ Emile Zola, "Preface" to Therese Raquin in European Theories of the Drama, Barrett H. Clark (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 377.
- ⁷ Emile Zola, "Naturalism in the Theatre" in The Theory of the Modern Stage, ed. Eric Bentley (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1968), p. 368.
- ⁸ Ahnebrink, p. 31.
- ⁹ William Dean Howells, "A Turgenev Novel," in Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, p. 115.
- ¹⁰ August Strindberg, "Author's Forward to Miss Julie," in European Theories of the Drama, pp. 327-328.
- ¹¹ Alfred Kasin, On Native Ground, quoted by Ahnebrink, pp. 15-16.
- ¹² William Dean Howells, "Criticism and Fiction," in Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, p. 51.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 47.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹⁵ Ahnebrink, p. 451.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 452.

- 17 New York Times, May 31, 1891, p. 13.
- 18 Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A.: 1665 to 1957 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 256.
- 19 Arthur Hobson Quinn, Representative American Plays: From 1767 to the Present Day (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957), p. 548.
- 20 John Corbin, Review of Griffith Davenport in Harpers Weekly Magazine, March 4, 1899, p. 213.
- 21 William Winter, Life of David Belasco, quoted in Herbert J. Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne: The Rise of Realism in American Drama (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1964), p. 35.
- 22 Ahnebrink, p. 364.
- 23 Ibid., p. 366.
- 24 James A. Herne, "Art for Truth's Sake in the Drama," The Arena (Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1897), p. 362.
- 25 Ibid., p. 369.
- 26 Ibid., p. 367.
- 27 Ibid., p. 367.
- 28 Ibid., p. 368.
- 29 Ibid., p. 363.
- 30 Ibid., p. 370.
- 31 Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day I (New York: Harper and Brothers publishers, 1927), p. 159.

CHAPTER III

Margaret Fleming As Dramatic Realism

When James A. Herne finished Margaret Fleming in 1890, a glance at the contemporary commercial theatre could have told him that the play set him apart from his American contemporaries. Sentimental melodramas characterized by stereotyped characters, contrived plots and scenic spectacle continued to dominate the popular taste. Herne, however, was not a conventional playwright and his Margaret Fleming pointed toward a new direction in the American theatre. For the first time fully dimensional human characters confronted major social and moral issues in a modern form which can be appropriately labelled Dramatic Realism.

In Margaret Fleming characters are established naturally and their actions develop from individual needs. In other words, Herne reproduces the mannerisms of complex psychological people to enhance his scenes. The dialogue is natural: sentences are short, concise, and phrased according to character action, the emotional moment and social credibility. Finally, the success of the play depends on its theme, for Margaret Fleming is a profound treatment of domestic

crisis reflecting actual conflicts apparent in late nineteenth-century American society.

The original version of Margaret Fleming was produced in Boston and New York in 1890 and 1891. The play was subsequently revised by Herne for production in Chicago in 1892. It is this latter version of the play that has been published; the former survives only in contemporary descriptions. The revision represented Herne's final feelings on the form of the play and indicates an overall superiority in playwriting technique.

The first scene opens with Bobby, an office boy, arranging the chairs in the office of Philip Fleming, owner of a large industrial mill. Philip enters, makes small talk with Bobby, reads some letters and then engages one of his managers in a business conversation. After the revelation that Philip is having financial difficulties, Joe Fletcher, an ex-foreman at Philip's mill, enters. Joe had taken to drink, lost his job and is now an itinerant peddler. Their conversation reveals that although Philip has done more than his share of high living, he has settled down, married and has a daughter. Doctor Larkin, Philip's physician, arrives and Joe leaves with Philip's reminder to stop at his house to see if his wife, Margaret, needs anything. Larkin has just left the bedside of a dying, unwed mother who had just given birth to Philip's illegitimate child. The doctor finds Philip's adultery and mention of abortion irresponsible and disgusting and extracts a promise from

Philip that he will go see the woman.

The second scene takes place in the Fleming home on the evening of the same day. Margaret has just finished feeding her daughter and is upset because Philip is two hours late. Maria, the nursemaid of little Lucy Fleming, is also upset. Her sister, Lena Schmidt, is dying due to complications resulting from the birth of her illegitimate child. Unknown to Maria, the father is Philip Fleming. A touch of comic relief lightens the action when it is discovered that Joe Fletcher is Maria's estranged husband and was unceremoniously evicted by Maria when he attempted to sell some of his wares to Margaret. When Philip arrives home Margaret is at first angry with Philip for being late, but her anger is quickly replaced by concern when she discovers that he is disturbed. With his business in financial difficulty, Philip attempts to put the deed to the house and some bonds in Margaret's name. Margaret, however, will not allow such actions; she would rather help him to settle his financial affairs honestly.

Act II brings Dr. Larkin's diagnosis of Margaret's eye disease--glaucoma. He tells Philip that any sudden shock could cause blindness. Joe arrives to see Philip, but Maria discovers him and physically throws him out. Maria then asks Margaret to visit her dying sister, which Margaret agrees to do, without telling Philip. The act ends with Margaret happily flirting and playing with Philip before she leaves to visit Lena.

The third act opens with Dr. Larkin entering the cottage where Lena Schmidt had been staying only to find she had died that morning. As he is leaving, Margaret arrives and both express surprise at finding the other at the cottage. The doctor attempts to hurry Margaret out of the house, but she feels compassion for the infant and would rather stay to help. She finally agrees to leave but she stops when Maria comes from Lena's room with a letter exposing Philip as the father of the child. Maria, in a rage, draws a pistol and threatens to kill Philip. She relinquishes the gun to Margaret, but still believes that Margaret will take his side because she is his wife and can return to her comfortable home. Margaret explains she intends to confront Philip there in the cottage. The act ends as Margaret is going blind from shock. She is alone in the room, lost in thought attempting to quiet the motherless child. Philip enters in time to see Margaret, now totally blind, unbuttoning her dress in order to give the infant the mother's milk it needs.

The last act opens seven days after the close of act three. Philip's whereabouts are unknown and when he returns he discovers that Margaret has taken his illegitimate child into their home to raise as a brother to Lucy. Margaret confronts Philip on his return, tells him that her blindness can be cured by an operation, that she wants to forget what has happened and that she believes Philip should resume his responsibilities in his house. Crucially, she also explains

that their relationship will never be the same. Margaret says she can no longer love him as a wife loves a husband; she cannot accept a double standard because she too cries "pollution." Their life together will be only for the sake of the children.

It is in this final act where major changes were made by Herne in the second version. His original writing of the fourth act was very pessimistic. Seven years pass between the third and fourth acts. During this time Margaret and Philip have been separated, with Philip leading a life of destitution. Margaret has also run away and even spends some time in an asylum. The bastard child dies and little Lucy Fleming is kept by Maria and Joe Fletcher who have been reconciled. Joe meets Philip in the park and takes him home to see his child. When they arrive, Maria still has not forgiven Philip and starts a row that ends at the police station. Here Philip and the still-blind Margaret are given the chance to talk. Margaret's convictions concerning the double standard are the same as in the published version. In the original, the differences between Margaret and Philip are irreconcilable and they go their separate ways.

The second version is an advancement over the original basically because it is simpler. By removing the scenes showing the park, the Fletcher home and the police station, exposition is cut and Herne proceeds directly to the resolution scene between Margaret and Philip. The tone of the dialogue is the same in both versions, expressing Margaret's

firm determination in her course of action. That course is the basis of the difference between the two versions. In keeping her family together Margaret is acting more consistently with her "womanly instincts" expressed throughout the first three acts. The second version also replaces Herne's pessimistic view of the conclusion with a more hopeful one. Margaret will stay with Philip for the children's sake and Philip believes he can win back her love. The second version keeps the Ibsen-like logical conclusion and instilled in it a note of American optimism.

Margaret Fleming displays a degree of advancement over previous American plays due to the techniques Herne used throughout both versions of the play. The difference between this technique and that evident in typical melodramas such as The Octoroon is the manner in which all this information is established. In the opening scene of The Octoroon practically all the main characters are given lines explaining who they are and how they came to the place and point in time that opens the play, while in Margaret Fleming the scene flows in an orderly, life-like manner. The characters are revealed through actions and not merely by narrative description. Philip's opening conversation with Bobby and the other employees shows a normal day with the friendly, yet businesslike, relationship of Philip to his workers. There is a natural division of importance in what they say. Information concerning a character's background or establishing the situation is given in casual, almost off-hand

conversation similar to Ibsen's use of exposition. This produces a low-key atmosphere that will set off the emotional and psychological conflict that follows.

This first scene also shows a number of instances of the foreshadowing that Herne uses to connect one scene to another or even one act to another. What is involved is off-hand information that prepares and then justifies later actions. For example, in Philip's conversation with Mr. Foster, the plant manager, Philip's financial difficulties are mentioned. These money problems surface in the second scene when Philip attempts to give Margaret the deed to the house. In his conversation with Joe Fletcher Philip glibly comments that if his wife left him, he would kill himself; Philip does attempt suicide in the last act. In these details, Herne creates a greater continuity between the events and the actions of the characters than was evident in earlier American plays.

In the opening of the second scene additional exposition and foreshadowing further establishes the credibility of the action. Margaret tells the baby that Philip is "naughty" for being late and that one day they will leave him to see if he enjoys being alone. In the original version, Margaret does leave Philip after learning of his affair. A more important incident in foreshadowing occurs in Act II when Dr. Larkin explains Margaret's eye condition. Thus, Herne bases one of the major thematic devices of the play on scientific information. Larkin carefully describes Margaret's

glaucoma, noting the possibility of blindness if she were confronted by a sudden shock:

Doctor: She is showing slight symptoms now that if aggravated would cause very serious consequences.
 Philip: (Puzzled.) I do not understand.
 Doctor: The eye--like other organs, has its own special secretion, which keeps it nourished and in a healthy state. The inflow and outflow of this secretion is equal. The physician sometimes comes across a patient of apparently sound physique, in whom he will find an abnormal condition of the eye where this natural function is through some inherent weakness, easily disturbed. When the patient is subject to illness, great physical or mental suffering--the too great emotion of a sudden joy or sorrow, --the stimulus of any one of these causes may produce in the eyes a super-abundant influx of this perfectly healthy fluid and the fine outflowing ducts cannot carry it off.
 Philip: Yes. What then?
 Doctor: The impact continues--until the result--is--
 Philip: Yes? What is the result?
 Doctor: Blindness.¹

This scientific explanation realistically foreshadows Margaret's blindness at the end of the third act. Herne's use of glaucoma in Margaret Fleming is similar to Ibsen's use of syphilis in Ghosts, in that the disease and its symptoms are accurately described. The logical movement from symptom to disease again separates the play from earlier melodramas such as Steele MacKaye's Hazel Kirke in which the father goes blind from grief. This technique of foreshadowing allows characters and their previous actions to be deciphered naturally over the course of the first two acts.

Another advancement demonstrated by Herne in Margaret Fleming is the attention paid to life-like detail. In the first scene in Philip's office he describes the desk as full of papers and complete with small pictures of Margaret and Lucy. The office appears as a working area and not as just any room. The office is a functional environment and helps, as do the play's other settings, to establish the multidimensional relationships of the characters. For example, the Flemings' living-room is described in the stage directions:

The scene is the living-room in Margaret's home. At the back large glass doors open on to a spacious porch with a garden beyond. There is a fire-place with logs burning, in the corner on the left, and beside it a French window opening on the garden. Below it is a door leading to another room. There is another door on the right going to the main part of the house. There is a table in the center, a baby grand piano on the lower right, and a baby carriage close by the doors at the back. The room is furnished in exquisite taste showing in its distinct character the grace and individuality of a well-bred woman. (M.F. I.ii.526)

This is contrasted two acts later with Mrs. Burton's cottage where Lena had her child:

The scene is a neat, plainly furnished sitting-room in Mrs. Burton's cottage. The walls are covered with old-fashioned wall paper of a faded green color. Sunlight streams in through two windows at the back. In one there is a small table holding a few pots of geraniums, and in the second, a hanging basket of ivy. A few straggling vines creep about the windowframe. There are doors at the left center, down left and on the right. In the center of the room stands a table with a chair to the right of it, and a few haircloth chairs are here and there. A sofa stands against the left wall below the door, and there is a low rocking-chair on the left. (M.F. III.536)

Going beyond mere scenic detail, Herne's greatest use of realistic detail is involved with the depiction of character through dialogue. His use of dialogue in the play separates Margaret Fleming from the plays of his contemporaries. In previous plays the dialogue is used to impart exposition and verbalize emotion. For example, in the first scene of The Octoroon, George Payton and Mrs. Payton are discussing what has happened to precipitate the action of the play:

Mrs. Payton: George, you are incorrigible. Ah! you remind me so much of your uncle, the judge.
 George: Bless his dear old handwriting, it's all I ever saw of him. For ten years his letters came every quarter-day, with a remittance and a word of advice in his formal cavalier style; and then a joke in the postscript, [sic] that upset the dignity of the foregoing. Aunt, when he died, two years ago, I read over those letters of his, and if I didn't cry like a baby--²

Dialogue also marked itself as theatrical speech, if not in verse form, then with such oddities as the riddles and puns of a comic character such as Pittacus Green in Hazel Kirke:

Green: That is my distinguished name: Pittacus Green or, as I am called for short, Pitty Green, which is maddening! If it was Pitty Brown, Black, or Blue, but Pitty Green--it's so hanged appropriate. Of course everybody does pity Green. You may not believe it, but they say I'm Cracked.³

In typical nineteenth-century melodramas, dialogue leads characters to a point of conflict that can be resolved only with violent actions. This is true in The Octoroon in the trial of M'Closky which ends in the fight between

M'Closky and Wahnotee, the Indian.⁴ It is also the case in Bronson Howard's Shenandoah when Colonel Kerchival West, wounded and under military arrest, breaks away from his lover to lead a countercharge against the confederate army.⁵

Herne rejects this subjugation of intellect to the violent physical expression of emotions. The crisis precipitated by Margaret's discovery of Philip's affair and her confrontation with him is resolved first through Margaret's conversation with Maria and Dr. Larkin and then through a discussion with Philip. Margaret does not declaim her fate when Maria discloses the affair, rather she quietly tells Maria that she is the one who has suffered.

Margaret: (Calmly, pityingly, holding out her hand as though to quiet her.) Maria! Stop! How dare you talk like that to me? Give me that pistol. (Maria, awed by Margaret's spirit, meekly hands her the weapon.) You think--I--am happy--because I am his wife? Why, you poor fool, that girl (She points to the door on the left) never in all her life suffered one thousandth part what I have suffered in these past five minutes. Do you dare compare her to me? I have not uttered one word of reproach, even against her, and yet she has done me a wrong, that not all the death-bed letters that were ever written can undo. I wonder what I have ever done to deserve this! (M.F.III.538)

This speech of Margaret's is a good example of Herne's fidelity to environment. Margaret has had a secure and happy life to this point and she is unprepared for the sordid affair of the man she thought equally as pure.

The dialogue of Margaret Fleming is crisp, concise and natural. The believable pattern of conversation is

established early in the play as Philip and Joe chat:

Philip: I've sowed my wild oats.
 Joe: You must have got a pretty slick crop
 out o'yourn.
 Philip: Every man gets a pretty full crop of
 those, Joe, before he gets through.
 Joe: Ye've turned over a new leaf, eh?
 Philip: Yes--married.
 Joe: Married?
 Philip: Yes, and got a baby.
 Joe: That so! Did ye marry out'n the
 mill? (M.F. I.i.523)

Furthermore, phrasing is important in the establishment of consistent emotional characters. Even in secondary characters such as Dr. Larkin, the rhythm of the language aids in the expression of personal feelings. In Act Three, Larkin effectively pleads, "deeply moved," with Margaret:

Larkin: If you continue in this way, dear lady,
 you are exposing yourself to a terrible affliction--this--trouble--with
 your eyes. You are threatened with--
 if you keep up this strain--a sudden
 blindness may fall upon you. (M.F.III.539)

Herne also uses language to define characters, their social status and their personality. Secondary characters such as Maria are written with convincing dialects, (as Howells had requested in "Criticism and Fiction").⁶ Her obviously German accent emphasizes both the confusion of her situation and the tragicomic diversity of the play. Similarly, Joe Fletcher slurs words together indicating a character lacking in, as Dr. Larkin says, "moral nature." Even Hannah, the cook, who has only four lines in the play, is given a speech pattern. She parrots everything Margaret says in a dead-pan manner. Social position is also indicated by the colorful dialogue. There is a difference in

the speaking manners of Margaret, Philip, or Dr. Larkin, and Maria and Joe. The former are obviously well-to-do people and the latter, working class characters. This variation in dialogue provides the characters with a more natural demeanor, reflecting the speech patterns of everyday life.

Herne's use of detailed dialogue and character business indicates his dedication to the depiction of real life. He did not wish to leave the character portrayal to an actor or actress schooled in sentimental melodrama. In the second scene of the first act, Herne very carefully details Margaret's actions while she waits for Philip to come home:

Margaret turns away with a sigh of disappointment, goes to the French window and peers out at the rain. The Maid enters with several letters, leaves them on the table and goes out. Margaret turns from the window, brushes the tears away impatiently, and drifts purposelessly across the room toward the right, her hands clasped behind her back. Finding herself at the piano she listlessly sits before it and plays a plaintive air, softly. Then she suddenly dashes into a prelude to a gay love song. As she sings half through a stanza, the song gradually loses spirit. Her hands grow heavy over the keys, her voice breaks, and the words come slow and faltering. She ends by breaking into tears, with her head lowered and her fingers resting idly upon the keys. The child attracts her and she goes quickly to her. She laughs through her tears into the wide-open eyes and begins scolding her for not going to sleep. Soft endearing notes come and go in her voice. A tender joy takes possession of her spirit. She takes the child in her arms. (M.F.I.iii.528)

Margaret is the center attraction of the play. She is a believable realistic character because her character has

been slowly established and she acts out of that character. Actions such as her breast-feeding of Lena's child are the actions of a woman acting out of strong maternal and loving instincts established earlier in the play.

Her relationship with Philip exemplifies the many facets of a woman's love. Philip and her child, Lucy, occupy the center of her affection. When Philip arrives she scolds him for causing her such worry. However, Margaret cannot remain angry, especially when she sees that he is wet and cold. Immediately her maternal feelings for Philip emerge. She warms his slippers, gives him a robe, has his dinner brought to him and attempts to give him some medication. Margaret also plays the role of the partner in marriage in this scene. Philip wants her to control the deed to the house in case anything should happen to him. Margaret says she would rather be able to sell the house. She wants to be able to assist Philip through difficult times. Herne also brings out the flirtation and playful sharing of private jokes and games that are a minor, yet natural, part of a happy marriage.

Margaret: (Laughing.) Sorry. Did you see my gloves?

Philip: Yes.

Margaret: Where?

Philip: On your hands, of course.

Margaret: Now, don't be silly!

Philip: (Playing with the baby.) Margaret, you know, baby's eyes are changing.

Margaret: No.

Philip: Yes. They're growing like yours.

Margaret: Nonsense. She has your eyes.

Philip: (Eyeing the baby critically.) No, they're exactly like yours. She's got my nose though.

Margaret: (Giving a little cry of protest.)
 Oh, Philip--don't say that.
 Philip: Why?
 Margaret: It would be terrible if she had your
 nose. Just imagine my dainty Lucy with
 a great big nose like yours.
 Philip: (Feeling his nose.) Why, I think I
 have a very nice nose.
 Margaret: (Coming in, laughing.) Oh, yes,
 it's a good enough nose--as noses
 go--but-- (M.F. .II.535)

All these aspects of a male/female relationship are presented in the first two acts. Herne has established a loving, happily married couple.

Margaret's personal nobility shines through her attitude toward her husband's illegitimate child. Margaret attaches no guilt to the child. Her attitude toward Philip after his return is also very magnanimous. It is her nobility that will accept Philip as a friend, but no longer as a husband. She said she had worshipped him, but that he had betrayed her trust. She had too much respect for what their relationship was to allow it to continue after this "pollution." Margaret is a loving wife and mother, but she is not without her own sense of right and wrong. She believes that a husband must be as pure as a wife. It is also Margaret's belief that there can be no sexual inequality for women:

Margaret: Can't you understand? It is not a
 question of forgetting, or of for-
 giving--(For an instant she is at
 a loss how to convince him.) Can't
 you understand? Philip! (Then sud-
 denly.) Suppose--I--had been un-
 faithful to you?
 Philip: (With a cry of repugnance.) Oh,
 Margaret!
 Margaret: (Brokenly) There! You see! you are
 a man, and you have your ideals of--

the--sanctity--of--the thing
 you love. Well, I am a woman--
 and perhaps--I, too, have the
 same ideals. I don't know. But
 I, too cry "pollution." (She is
 deeply moved.) (M.F. IV.543)

As a character Margaret Fleming is replete with all the complex emotions and ideas of any real contemporary woman. Unlike typical melodramatic heroines, Margaret does not rely on sentiment to express her love or disgust for her husband. Rather, Herne has carefully established her so that her final actions are logical, natural extensions of both intellect and emotion.

Philip Fleming demonstrates a similar character depth. He is well established as a modern businessman: decisive, logical and generally competent at the office. In the opening scene he takes control of all business situations. Philip's problems emerge in his private life. When Dr. Larkin condemns his behavior he is taken aback. Philip attempts to justify his behavior toward Lena, but Dr. Larkin cuts him off. He responds to Dr. Larkin's veiled threat and goes to see Lena.

This scene informs the audience that Philip did not love the girl and that his attachment was a passing one. His love was still concentrated on Margaret. This is proven in the last act. First, his attempted suicide is based on his idea that he would never see Margaret again. When Philip does return he is very repentant and is interested in doing only what Margaret tells him.

Philip is not intended to be a man without any moral fiber because he is never presented as a scoundrel in any aspect other than his affair. His youthful excesses were common to many men of his social position. Many modern men would be able to empathize with Philip. Herne is providing a picture of the average contemporary man. The implication is that men believe they can cheat on their wives as long as they do not get caught. Philip learns that society should not be subject to this double standard of sexual morality.

Dr. Larkin expresses the unhypocritical morality of the society. He condemns Philip's behavior, not only in his involvement with Lena, but also in his attitude that she should have had an abortion. The doctor, however, is not a completely one-sided character. He is very fond of Margaret, their relationship is close in a special way. Margaret says to him "(then with a sweet intimacy, she goes to him.) A woman has a strange feeling for the physician who brings her child into the world--I love you. . . ." (M.F. III.539)

The other two secondary characters, Joe Fletcher and Maria Bindley, are interesting in that they are foils for Philip and Margaret. In the original version they began the play apart and end together, just the opposite of the Flemings. In the published second version there is no such reconciliation--Maria and Joe serve as a reflection of possible marital discord as well as for purposes of comic

relief. Maria is the physically large, domineering wife, while Joe is the braggart who bends in the end to his wife. They also serve to foreshadow what is going to happen to the Flemings.

There are other characters in the play, most with only a short time on stage, but each embodies natural characteristics. Charlie, for example, is the young boy who announces Margaret at the Burton cottage and later takes the note to Philip. Charlie is only ten and he enters the house where Lena just died, on the run with his baseball cap on, no false decorum, just a boisterous boy. Bobby, the office boy, is another case. He too is only on stage for a short time. He projects a real young man with just enough friendliness toward his boss, but a great deal of business decorum when work begins. Herne, as an actor turned playwright, tried to make every part true to life.

Margaret Fleming is fully in line with the desired humanism of American Realism. It is simple, compact and believable. The plot shows none of the violent physical action that characterized plays such as The Octoroon or even Hazel Kirke. Herne basically unravels a situation rather than tells an elaborate story. The play is concerned with characters and a theme, not an exciting plot. It is the study of a woman's reaction to the double standard of marital fidelity, an evil condemned in theory but condoned in practice. Herne is espousing a social problem with significance to the thinking audience; the changing roles of men and

women in a modern society. The characters Herne uses to present his theme are natural, consistent and logically drawn. Maria's volatile temper and Margaret's compassion are examples of character traits established carefully and expanded as the play progresses. Unfortunately, his work went largely unappreciated. Mounting a production of Margaret Fleming was probably as difficult as the writing of the play.

Footnotes

¹ James A. Herne, Margaret Fleming in Arthur Hobson Quinn, Representative American Plays 7th Rev. ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), II pp. 532-533. All further references to Margaret Fleming are from this work and will appear parenthetically.

² Dion Boucicault, The Octoroon in A.H. Quinn, Representative American Plays, p. 376.

³ Steele MacKaye, Hazel Kirke in Quinn, p. 443.

⁴ Dion Boucicault, The Octoroon in Quinn, p. 396.

⁵ Bronson Howard, Shenandoah in Quinn, p. 504.

⁶ William Dean Howells, "Criticism and Fiction" in Howells Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays, ed. Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 51.

CHAPTER IV

Margaret Fleming:

A Production History

The great successes of the 1880's were plays like Steele MacKaye's Hazel Kirke, which ran for 480 performances in one year in New York. The play had as many as fourteen road companies playing in various parts of the country.¹ Uncle Tom's Cabin, although written in 1852, was still enjoying popular acclaim on the road, not reaching its pinnacle until the turn of the century when five hundred road companies were presenting the play and a New York production employed two hundred singers and dancers and eighteen huge sets.² William Gillette's successful 1886 production of Held By the Enemy, ran for nearly eight months and represented the popularity of the adventure melodrama. In 1891 and 1892 now forgotten melodramas such as The Merchant at Palmer's Madison Square Theatre, David Belasco's Miss Helyelt at the Star Theatre, Lincoln J. Carter's The Fast Mail and Daniel Frohman's production of Lady Bountiful at the Lyceum Theatre all enjoyed popular success.

Thus, the American commercial theatre had never appeared healthier and nowhere in the American audience was there

heard a resounding call for greater social, moral, or political authenticity. However, the American society itself was not so totally optimistic, nor was it able to ignore its problems. The Civil War had created more problems than it solved leaving great bitterness on both sides. Frustration and confusion gripped the cities as thousands of European immigrants entered the country daily. American society was undergoing the change from an agricultural to an industrial economy. These growing pangs of the country came to a head in the depression of the 1890's which left the United States with a bitterly stratified economic society. None of these problems were acknowledged in the commercial theatre of romance, sentiment and escapism. In writing and producing Margaret Fleming James A. Herne attempted to create a theatrical experience which would begin to address the significant moral and social issues of the day.

When the play was completed Herne took it to all the important Boston theatre managers in the attempt to have the play produced. A brief note in the May 2, 1891, Dramatic Mirror states, "Mr. Herne then applied to the leading theatres of the city, but was unable to obtain desirable time."³ There is no mention of the names of those theatres but they probably included the Boston Museum and the Boston Theatre, the two top Boston theatres. After two months⁴ of searching in vain and with the belief that he could acquire financial backing if producers could see the play in performance, Herne paid for a production in Lynn, Massachusetts. The Hernes

gave three performances in this little town north of Boston, beginning on July 4, 1890.

These were difficult times for the Hernes. Drifting Apart had been a financial failure, they sold their few stocks and Katharine's jewelery, and even had to mortgage their home in the attempt to keep the play running.⁵ The Hernes finished touring with Drifting Apart in early 1890 and with the time spent in the attempt to find a manager to finance Margaret Fleming it seemed likely that they had no employment between the productions of those two plays. This raises the question of exactly how the first independent production (July 4, 1890) was financed. Herne's financial resources being what they were it is unlikely that he could produce the play on his own. There is no mention of a personal loan or gift from one of Herne's supporters and it can be assumed that a manager was finally found who would assume the cost of a tryout. If this is the case, the names of both that manager and his theatre are no longer available.

Morale as well as finances were low during this period. Herbert Edwards in his biography of James Herne recounts:

One day little Julie, who was sitting on the floor by the bookcase reading, was startled to hear her father utter what seemed like an involuntary cry, wrung out of his worry and despair, "Julie," he said suddenly, "I wish I had a hundred dollars." She never forgot the deep misery in her father's voice.⁶

However, Herne did not waiver in his ideals and there is no record of Katharine attempting to dissuade him from his

course of action.

The Hernes were able to attract the intellectuals and literary community of Boston, whose support was probably based on the similarity between Herne's play and those of the Scandinavian playwright Henrik Ibsen. This similarity is likely to be the reason, along with Herne's reputation as an actor and playwright, that brought the critic from the New York Dramatic Mirror, who wrote:

James A. Herne's new play, Margaret Fleming, was brought out of Lynn last week for a stage test, and proved an immediate and immense success. It is constructed on simple lines, and unlike most plays, has a distinct and immediate purpose. It is a story of New England home life. The dialogue is strong, and some of the situations are full of pathos. Mrs. Herne made a remarkably fine Margaret Fleming and was adequately supported by her husband.⁷

Herne also received favorable comment from Boston intellectual Thomas Sargent Perry, who wrote to Herne:

I was pleased with your play, very much indeed. In general I hate the ordinary play of the period, but yours does not belong to that sort. Your third act was admirable, with its abandonment of the conventional methods, its truthfulness, and its pathos. Everyone was moved by it. It is a magnificent task you have set yourself, to paint life and not to copy sun-dried models.⁸

Unfortunately, neither the general public nor the professional managers shared the Dramatic Mirror's enthusiasm, and there was no financial backing forthcoming.

Following the unsuccessful production of Margaret Fleming, which expended much time and energy, Herne's personal resources were very low by the end of the summer. Not only

had Margaret Fleming failed to produce an income, but also both James and Katharine were "at liberty" all summer. In order to support the family Herne organized a nationwide tour of his melodramatic play Hearts of Oak to replenish his bank account. The Hernes performed in that play all fall and returned home in time for Herne to assume a role in Wilson Barrett's A Four-Legged Fortune, which opened on February 23, 1891. Following the short run of Barrett's play Herne was hired to direct Harry Mowson's A Fair Rebel.⁹ These constant diversions of his professional attention did support his family, but they must have interrupted his thoughts on Margaret Fleming and any ideas he may have had on revising the play. He would have to wait for the popular success of his more sentimental Shore Acres for financial security.

In the spring of 1891 Herne again went to New York to propose Margaret Fleming to independent producers Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger. The two men had no desire to stage the play, but they did offer Herne a job as director for all their plays. The job began in the fall of 1891. The security of a full year of employment gave Herne most of the spring and all of the summer to work on Margaret Fleming. The Hernes and Hamlin Garland set off once more on the quest for a theatre manager who would produce the play. When no manager could be found, it was William Dean Howells who suggested they hire a hall and produce the play in the same manner of the Independent Theatres in Europe. Money again

was a problem. Herne was forced to agree to write an Irish comedy, to be titled My Colleen, for an actor named Tony Farrell and the two thousand dollars he received financed their production of Margaret Fleming.¹⁰

The Herne's found a small auditorium, Chickering Hall on Tremont Street in Boston. The building was not designed as a theatre. Rather, it was a large room over the Chickering Piano Store, which was used, in all probability, for musical recitals and storage. Its basic conditions were seating for five hundred spectators, no theatrical lighting or equipment necessary for even a simple production such as this, no stage which could provide adequate acting space or visibility, and no proscenium arch necessary for the box set for which the play was written. Herne had to assume the cost of raising a stage and installing theatrical lighting before they could build a set. Katharine found material and had it made into curtains and draperies to form a proscenium arch.

Working with these limitations, Herne undertook a production which would nearly duplicate the early productions of European Independent Theatres. Andre Antoine had established his Theatre Libre in Paris only four years previous in 1887, with a rented hall and borrowed furnishings. This second production of Margaret Fleming was prepared in the same manner.

A brief in the New York Dramatic Mirror notes that:

Jordon, Marsh & Co. have offered the use of magnificent furnishings for the interior scene

of the home of Philip Fleming and a number of paintings by one of the best known artists in the city, a personal friend of Mrs. Herne, will be hung on the walls to add to the effect of that scene.¹¹

Herne was a total man of the theatre. In this Boston production of Margaret Fleming he functioned as a playwright, director, designer, technician and actor. His wife Katharine doubled as actress and costumer. Despite their frugality in these areas, the Hernes' money was soon depleted and William Dean Howells and B. O. Flower, editor of The Arena magazine, are supposed to have provided the remaining capital.¹² The actors, competent yet unknown performers who understood the problem, agreed to work for salaries far below normal.

Advertising for the play was in the form of simple posters which Chrystal and Julie Herne, the playwright's young daughters, placed in shop windows in Boston. There were also a number of open letters and circulars sent through the mails. These letters were signed by such Boston notables as William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, William Lloyd Garrison, B. O. Flowers and others. One such statement signed by Flower and Garland was titled "In the Interests of American Drama" and said in part:

As a first modest trial of the independent art theatre we take genuine pleasure in calling attention to Mr. and Mrs. Herne's coming production of their latest play, "Margaret Fleming," at Chickering Hall, beginning May 4th. We do this the more readily because these thorough artists have been working alone and (in a literary way) unrecognized in the attempt to bring the accent of life upon the stage.

"Margaret Fleming" is not a perfect play; it could not reasonably be expected to be, but it has qualities which fit it to stand for the new idea, as Ibsen's "Young Men's Union" stood for the innovation in Norway in 1869. It is absorbingly interesting, legitimately dramatic, has comedy as well as pathos, and mounts in the last act into an intellectual atmosphere unreached, so far as we know, in any other American play, and Mrs. Herne plays it with that marvelous art which conceals art, leaving the embodied character standing in place of the actress.¹³

The play opened on May 4, 1891. It was scheduled to run from May 4, to May 9, but it was extended for one extra week in the hopes that the play would draw a larger audience. The public was uninterested and the play closed after just two weeks. The New York Times in the May 24, 1891 issue gives a brief note to Herne's production:

James A. Herne has become a dramatic reformer since Mr. Howells wrote about him in the Editor's Study of Harper's Magazine. He recently produced at Chickering Hall, in Boston, a play called "Margaret Fleming," which is very modern, very gloomy, and, the old-fashioned folks say, very dull.¹⁴

The New York Dramatic Mirror only remarked:

Margaret Fleming has drawn appreciative audiences at Chickering Hall since the first night, and there has been a steady increase in attendance each evening. Concerning the strength of the piece critics differ, although all admit that it has great strength. The majority are confident that it is one of the strongest pieces of the day.¹⁵

The Mirror was still supporting the play but did not embrace it with the same fervor that the French avant-garde press greeted Antoine's first evening of plays.¹⁶ Most theatre managers pointed to the financial failure of the play as

proof that the play was not suited for the stage. However, one man, Abraham Erlanger, Herne's new employer, agreed to finance another production of the play.

The revival was scheduled for October of 1891, again in Boston. Klaw, Erlanger and Herne planned performances in Boston, a tour of New England and finally, presentation in New York. However, the play met the same fate in October that it had in May--no audience. The play opened October 5, again at Chickering Hall, ran for two weeks with the backing of Klaw and Erlanger, who withdrew, and the show played a third week with B. O. Flower paying the bills before closing. The play had drawn those persons interested in the Realistic movement who praised the attempt to improve the American stage. Perhaps the largest number of supporters that Herne acquired were other actors. There was a special matinee for actors and actresses in the Boston area on October 21, 1891, which was received enthusiastically.¹⁷

After the play closed in Boston the Hernes moved to New York City where Herne began directing for Klaw and Erlanger. Katharine was still trying to find a New York manager to produce Margaret Fleming. She finally persuaded producer A. M. Palmer to allow a matinee performance, on the afternoon of December 9, 1891. The results were nearly disastrous. Herne had been working in Chicago and was unable to conduct the rehearsals, but it was the play and not the actors that received the criticism.

The New York Times did not review the New York production as much as it did the drama itself and Realism in general.

"Margaret Fleming" is, indeed, the quintessence of the commonplace. Its language is the colloquial English of the shops and the streets and the kitchen fireplace. Its personages are the every-day nonentities that some folks like to forget when they go to the theatre. It is constructed in defiance of the laws of Aristotle and Horatius Flaccus and Corneille and Hazlitt. . . . The life it portrays is sordid and mean, and its effect upon a sensitive mind is depressing.

The drama properly is poetry; the actor's highest task is to interpret poets. The love of the sexes is ever the dramatic poet's most fruitful theme. The theme is often debased on the stage. No one needs to be told that modern drama is generally prose, not only in form but in spirit as well, and very poor prose at that. But the stage would be a stupid and useless thing if such plays as "Margaret Fleming" were to prevail.¹⁸

While attempting to ridicule Herne, the play and Realism the reviewer was, in truth, establishing James A. Herne as a landmark realistic playwright in the American theatre.

The play is consistent. It is realistic in everything. We see human beings as they are. There are no soliloquies. The meditations of the character are not spoken aloud. The author has steered clear of all the old conventions of the drama. The personages come and go naturally. It is easy to be natural in making a play without stirring climaxes and forcible dramatic situation.

The text is simple and direct and contains many unpleasant expressions not often heard on the stage.¹⁹

The second major critique of the production came from the Dramatic Mirror. It is interesting to note the abrupt change in attitude of the Dramatic Mirror:

If it be the purpose of a play to give pleasure, "Margaret Fleming" cannot be called a play. If it be the purpose of a play to reproduce with photographic details of unpleasant and unhealthy forms of everyday life, "Margaret Fleming" can be called a play. But whatever it is called, or however it may be classified, the fact remains that it is tedious in performance and that it possesses no other interest to the playgoer than the interest that belongs to a product which is unfamiliar and curious. It defies nearly every dramatic law, and therefore cannot be judged by established dramatic standards.

Whether viewed in the light of a drama designed to give enjoyment either through the medium of the intelligence or by appealing to the sensual nature, or viewed as a social lesson, "Margaret Fleming," in our humble opinion, is a failure.²⁰

The Dramatic Mirror, in July of 1890, called the play "simple" with "a distinct and immediate purpose." In December of 1891, the review was exactly opposite:

the story meanders along irregularly, halting and wandering from the path of directness with a unique disregard for the patience of the spectator. Indeed, it is as apparently free from point and purpose, and decidedly as dull as similar commonplaces observable on every hand in real life.²¹

The Critic magazine agreed with the negative responses of the New York Times and the Dramatic Mirror. They referred to the play as "a conventional domestic drama, crowded with exasperating trivialities" with ". . . no distinctive literary quality. . . ." ²² The New York Daily Tribune agreed saying that it was more of a Sunday school sermon than a play.²³

Herne was bitterly disappointed in the reaction to the play. However, the criticism was merely a reflection of the

continued interest in the escapist quality of melodrama. New York's most influential popular critic, William Winter, espoused the view that theatre is "the home of that magic art which cheers the loneliness of life and opens the portal into an ideal world," whereas Margaret Fleming does not cheer the loneliness of life, rather, it enforces it.²⁴ Nor is the world of the play an ideal one; it reflects the common world of modern individuals.

Even with the numerous adverse criticisms, Herne was offered another opportunity to produce the play and he quickly accepted. James McVicker was planning a summer season for his theatre in Chicago and he wanted Herne to perform Shore Acres, My Colleen and Margaret Fleming. It was McVicker who suggested changing the play, providing a flash of hope for the characters at the end. Herne made such a change and also removed all the excess material between Margaret's blindness and the end of the play. The play opened July 7, 1892, and ran for its scheduled twelve performances, closing July the 16th. The Chicago Daily Tribune referred to the play as a "simple pathetic story" but not the epoch-making drama that Mr. Howells had described. They did say that it was "on the whole, a brave, strong play--one to make people think."²⁵ This was the kindest reception the play had received from a general subscription newspaper.

Herne's last opportunity to produce Margaret Fleming came in April of 1894. Carl and Theodore Rosenfeld, two

producers who already owned the American rights to Hauptmann's Hannelle (1893), presented the play at Miner's Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York. The play ran for its scheduled two weeks, opening on April 9, 1894. The reaction of the press was true to form--negative:

its small share of dramatic art is not at all new. The stage has had more than enough of sordid realism in all ages, and just so far as "Margaret Fleming" is realistic, it is sordid and cheap.²⁶

The reviewer does give Herne credit for some talent as a playwright, saying, "Mr. Herne, is, however a master of mere stagecraft and he can write simple, direct, telling dialogue."²⁷

Four years had not changed the attitude of most critics toward Realism. Herne, in Margaret Fleming, combined the characteristic humanity of American Realism with the unflinching social scrutiny of Continental Realism. His four years of struggling to gain a popular audience for this type of drama convinced him that Americans would not accept this type of drama. Herne's future plays would make use of realistic characters, character development, natural dialogue, and yet retain the element of a more sentimentalized subject matter. Shore Acres, Sag Harbor and Griffith Davenport to an extent all follow those lines.

Herne never lived to see his play accepted by critics and audience. Five and one-half years after his death in 1901, his daughter Chrystal revived the play in Chicago. It was called Herne's greatest play and one of the best

efforts by an American playwright. The house was filled for each performance in the two week run. After sixteen years the public was finally ready to look at its own shortcomings.

Footnotes

¹ Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A.: 1665 to 1957 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), p. 237.

² Garff Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Hair (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 202.

³ "Boston," announcement of Margaret Fleming, New York Dramatic Mirror, May 2, 1891, p. 9.

⁴ Herbert J. Edwards and Julie A. Herne, James A. Herne: The Rise of Realism in American Drama (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1964), p. 61.

⁵ Herbert Edwards and Julie Herne, James A. Herne, p. 42.

⁶ James A. Herne, p. 43.

⁷ "Boston," Review of Margaret Fleming, New York Dramatic Mirror, July 19, 1890, p. 9.

⁸ James A. Herne, p. 61.

⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

¹¹ "Boston," announcement of Margaret Fleming, New York Dramatic Mirror, May 2, 1891, p. 9.

¹² James A. Herne, p. 65.

¹³ Lars Ahnebrink, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1961), pp. 454-455.

¹⁴ Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, New York Times, May 24, 1891, p. 13.

¹⁵ "Boston," comment on Margaret Fleming, New York Dramatic Mirror, May 16, 1891, p. 10.

¹⁶ Tom F. Driver, Romantic Quest and Modern Quarry: A History of the Modern Theatre (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 71.

¹⁷ Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, New York Times, October 21, 1891, p. 2.

- 18 Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, New York Times, December 10, 1891, p. 5.
- 19 Ibid., p. 5.
- 20 Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, New York Dramatic Mirror, December 19, 1891, p. 2.
- 21 Ibid., p. 2.
- 22 Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, The Critic, NS 16, December 19, 1891, p. 353.
- 23 Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, New York Daily Tribune, December 10, 1891, p. 7.
- 24 James A. Herne, p. 35.
- 25 Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, Chicago Daily Tribune, July 8, 1892, p. 4.
- 26 Anon. review of Margaret Fleming, New York Times, April 11, 1894, p. 4.
- 27 Ibid., p. 4.

CONCLUSION

The American stage of the late nineteenth century was dominated by sentimental melodramas written, and often produced, by expert craftsmen such as Bronson Howard, William Gillette, Augustin Daly, Steele MacKaye and David Belasco. These men relied on topicality, romance, intrigue, suspense and scenic spectacle to provide a medium of escape for their commercial audiences. Plays such as Howard's Shenandoah (1889), Gillette's Secret Service (1896), and Belasco's The Girl I Left Behind Me (1893) conform to a pattern in which character and theme are subordinated to facile statements, picturesque settings and often stilted and improbable action. That same pattern dominates much of the commercial theatre and mass entertainment forms of today.

At the same time, European playwrights Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Gerhardt Hauptmann and others were attempting to create a drama based on serious studies of the problems of modern individuals. Although A Doll's House (1879), Miss Julie (1888) and The Weavers (1892) did not initially enjoy the same popular success as did the American melodramas, their authors changed the course of modern theatre history, making theatre a serious art rather than a commercial entertainment. Often denied access to larger

commercial theatres in both Europe and American, plays by the emerging realists were produced through the efforts of independent theatre managers in small, poorly equipped theatres or rented halls and for subscription audiences. In the writing and staging of Margaret Fleming (1890), James A. Herne created an exception to the melodramatic spectacles characterizing the late nineteenth-century American theatre. Margaret Fleming parallels in content, form and production technique the work of the great European Realists.

Although similar to the works of Herne's European contemporaries, Margaret Fleming remains American in tone and theme. Like Ibsen, Herne focused on the ethical problems of modern individuals in conflict with their social environment. Like Strindberg, he concentrated on psychological and sexual crises in the lives of contemporary men and women. Like Hauptmann, he was a harsh critic of status quo social manners and mores. In short, like the European Realists, Herne wrote about the middle-class in the natural dialogue of the character's social milieu. However, Margaret Fleming retains an American bias through its underlying humor, optimism and democratic spirit. In this manner Herne's dramaturgy is reflective of the works of William Dean Howells and Hamlin Garland and such then current American issues as Women's Rights, financial panic, and growing industrialization.

The initial staging of Margaret Fleming was an American approximation of the work of and difficulties encountered by European directors Andre Antoine and Otto Brahm. Unlike these men, Herne wanted his independently produced play to have an extended run culminating in a nation-wide tour. In producing Margaret Fleming independently Herne, again, adapted the European model to a distinctly American situation.

Within the context of the late nineteenth-century American theatre Margaret Fleming presents, without doubt, an example of advancement and growth. The play and its production reveal the beginning of a major shift in emphasis and the desire to address theatre as a serious modern art in terms of theme, character, dialogue and setting. Margaret Fleming is a play which confronts topical problems rather than using them as theatrical background. Arthur Hobson Quinn found the play to be far ahead of its time.¹ Hamlin Garland concurs with this view: "Measured by any play on the American stage it stands above them in purpose, in execution, in power and is worthy to stand for the new drama."² The historical importance of Margaret Fleming as a forward-looking play is undeniable. Unfortunately, it would take a quarter of a century and the emergence of Eugene O'Neill's short realistic dramas produced by the Provincetown Players to surpass Herne's work in Margaret Fleming.

Although Herne had no immediate followers, his work was not without influence. The developments of the decades following the first production of Margaret Fleming would demonstrate a change for which Herne can be seen as at least partially responsible. Herne's best audiences and most ardent supporters were his fellow actors. His theatrical contemporaries appreciated his artistry and slowly incorporated the natural, subtle characteristics of Herne's work into their own commercial dramas. The commercial theatre also began to produce local color plays such as Augustus Thomas' In Mizzoura (1893), Arizona (1899) and Colorado (1901) and eventually dramas with realistic themes such as William Vaughn Moody's The Great Divide (1906) and The Faith Healer (1909). The interest of intellectuals in Realism and new theatre forms spread to American universities. The work of George Pierce Baker at Harvard and Frederick Koch at The University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill, display the universities' desire for a serious modern American drama. Herne's efforts in producing Margaret Fleming independently were later reflected in the "little theatre" movement and such groups as the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players. Thus James A. Herne's Margaret Fleming pointed the way for the full development of a more serious art in the twentieth century American Theatre.

Footnotes

¹ Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day, Vol I (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1927), p. 159.

² Hamlin Garland, "Mr. and Mrs. James A. Herne," The Arena, IV, October 1891, p. 560.

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- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Dramatic Mirror, 19 July 1890, p. 9.
- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Dramatic Mirror, 2 May 1891, p. 9.
- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Dramatic Mirror, 16 May 1891, p. 10.
- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Dramatic Mirror, 19 December 1891, p. 2.
- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Times, 24 May 1891, p. 13.
- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Times, 31 May 1891, p. 4.
- Anon. Review of Margaret Fleming. New York Times, 21 October 1891, p. 2.
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