

Introduction

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Neptune is a landmark play. Like many truly distinctive plays, what makes it so special also marks it out as a product of its times. A feminist play with a distinctively second-wave context, *Neptune* captures its times through its passionate perspective on what it means to be a professional woman who is also a lesbian, in the late twentieth century. Seen from the perspective of the 21st century, intersectional third-wave feminisms and the changes in LGBTQ+ rights, it's a play so clearly in the right that the concerns it details seem quaintly ridiculous but, at the time of its première in 1986, were urgent and impassioned. Yet *Neptune*, rightly provocative in 1986, is far from irrelevant today. Timely and beautiful, the play is a rewriting (or is that reshaping?) of the Greek myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone in a contemporary, British setting exploring mothering and the right of divorced women to have custody of their children. Its arresting title alludes to the point when there is least difference between high and low tides at the first and third quarters of the moon. The neap is the point where the tidal pull of the sun and the moon counteract each other suggesting that here in the play, the push and pull of Claire's life and the custody battle she is involved with are equal and oppositional and cancel each other out. Furthermore, since the sun is often seen as associated with the masculine and the moon with feminine, it becomes the point when women's powers are strong enough to counteract the patriarchal order.

The play is a landmark one for a number of reasons. First, it's an award-winning play: it won the George Devine Award (in honour of the Artistic Director of the English Stage Company who died in 1966) in 1982. Second, it was one of the first plays written by a woman to receive its premiere at the National Theatre in London and the very first to have a full production in one of the main performance spaces.ⁱ Third, Daniels' rewriting of myth links it to the contemporary issues of her day that make this play so much more than simply about mothering or a lesbian play rights because she links maternity, sexuality and mental health. It's no accident that when the National Theatre celebrated 50 years of the decriminalization of male homosexuality in Britain with a Queer Theatre season, such an important feminist play was picked as the opening piece. ⁱⁱ

Although *Neptune*, stands in its own right, it is also significant as a representative work of one of the pivotal playwrights of the 1980s and 1990s who has been described as one of the 'feminist "canonicals"' and a 'well-established figure on the contemporary English stage'.ⁱⁱⁱ Writing as early as 1987, just a year after *Neptune's* première, Mary Remnant, an early editor of Methuen's ground-breaking, long-running *Plays by Women* series, remarked that Sarah Daniels' 'work may uplift or offend – it cannot be glossed over or ignored, nor "assimilated"'.^{iv} It is this quality and presence as a writer that marks Sarah Daniels out as a major figure of the British stage whose distinctive voice is impossible to ignore. Nicole Boireau in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* describes this feature in the early plays as 'tinted with Joe Orton's outrageousness and Oscar Wilde's aphoristic brilliance'.^v The play is the fourth of Daniels' works to be given a professional theatre production, after a debut at the Royal Court's smaller, upstairs venue in 1981 and come just three years after Daniels' 1983 play, *Masterpieces* which also available in the

Methuen Modern Classics series, which caused the kind of stir from the theatre reviewers that would not be outdone until another Sarah, Sarah Kane's debut play *Blasted* (1995) premièred at the Royal Court.

John Burgess, the director of *Neptune* at its première was the receiving reader of Daniels' first attempt at writing a play in October 1978. Observing that this initial piece was 'probably too packed to be quite workable' he nonetheless identified one of the distinctive markers of her writing in his assessment that 'Not many people are writing like this for women – casual, angry talk, shrewd, bitter, violent, witty'.^{vi} His report prompted Sarah Daniels to continue writing and in her 1991 volume of collected plays she acknowledged her debt to his early reading, remarking that 'I now realise it was an astute piece of criticism [...]'. The worst thing a play can be is embarrassing. Bring melodramatic is equally high in the "cringe" awards. The second worst thing a play can be is boring.'^{vii} This productive work relationship has continued between writer and director and, most recently, Burgess directed Daniels' 2014 play, *Between Us*.

The 1980s, Feminist Theatre and the Political Landscape

From a chronological perspective, *Neptune* epitomises Sarah Daniels' work in the mid- to late 1980s and early 1990s but it retains much of the youthful, indignant rage of her early plays that made her such a remarkable and, at times, divisive writer for the stage. One of the earliest figures to pick up on Daniels as a major playwriting figure whose work sits uneasily within mainstream theatre, Elaine Aston identifies, 'particularly her early work, is centrally concerned with the family as an oppressive heteropatriarchal site'.^{viii} *Neptune* is

a bridge from this early work with later work such as *The Gut Girls*, *Beside Herself* and *Head-Rot Holiday* all of which question binary notions of public and private of patriarchal oppression. As a writer, Sarah Daniels has produced a body of plays that are often savagely funny, contain puns and a plethora of intelligent, fully rounded female characters.

Academics and writers documenting theatre in the 1980s including Elaine Aston, Helene Keyssar, Michelene Wandor, and Lizbeth Goodman all observe that feminist theatre began to reach mainstream audiences. In an era which had seen unprecedented gains in women's rights in Britain including the Abortion and Equal Pay Acts alongside the decriminalization of male homosexuality in the early 1970s and late 1960s and the election of the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the limits of these recently-found rights were becoming all-too-clear. The play is a testament to this decade and its contradictions between social change and conservatism. In an article entitled 'About Now: Contemporary British Drama,' the playwright David Edgar, reflecting on the many changes in theatre since John Osborne and *Look Back in Anger*, puts it thus:

something new did emerge at the end of the nineteen seventies but it sure as hell was true socialism [...] In 1979, there were two currently-writing, nationally-known women writers in Britain (Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill). A decade later there were dozens.^{ix}

Edgar here alludes to the explosion of new writing by women for the stage but also to the emergence of women's political power with the election of the Conservative, Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. Edgar positions this as class-based analysis giving way to the politics of difference. In one sense Edgar's separation of the two is careful approximation of the change brought about by the increasing numbers of women playwrights having their

work produced but it is a reductive one since many of the same women playwrights sought not to abandon explorations of class and politics but simply to bring them into the home and to the family. *Neptune* is no exception: Daniels is quick to point out that Claire and her sister Val are the first generation of their family to attend a university and that each has a responsibility to the next generation. In the same article, Edgar opines that

Young feminist writers attacked the socialist writers of the nineteen seventies, not only on the gender balances of their casts, but on the very location of their plays. Charlotte Keatley and Sharman Macdonald, in particular, placed the politics of the mother-daughter relationship at the centre of the art, challenging the view that politics stopped at the front door.x

Neptune is a challenge to the notion that class and the politics of gender are antagonistic. Rather, it displays intergenerational relationships that are co-operative and supportive to foreground gender and to a lesser extent, class. The mothers in the play care for their children (Joyce supports Val and Claire and Claire in turn nurtures Poppy) but crucially the home and mothering are never presented as something removed from the social and political spheres and neither are the characters.

The story that unfolds in the play, tells of women's lived experiences at the core of the political sphere. *Neptune* elegantly weaves together three contemporary themes – mothering, sexuality and mental health and wellbeing - that are not simply reducible to class but nor are they immune from it. At the core of Daniels' tale, mothering becomes the locus of the social and political worlds. Three generations are presented: Joyce, her middle-class, educated daughters, Claire and Val, their children, notably Poppy, and in Claire's case, the

girls who are students in the school she teaches in. Through these characters Daniels explores the personal (and social) costs of being a woman and of being a mother. From the outside, Val is a happily married mother of two sons but even her own mother, Joyce, observes 'happiness doesn't grow on trees' when psychologist Jean observes of Val that 'from what I can see, I think she's just unhappy'.^{xi}

Contemporary Theatre and Greek Myth

The Greek myth of Demeter and her daughter, Persephone runs through the events of *Neoptide*. Like several of her playwriting contemporaries in the 1980s and 1990s, including Timberlake Wertenbaker (*Love of the Nightingale*) and Sarah Kane (*Phaedra's Love*) Daniels turns to ancient Greece to explore extreme human experiences. Daniels takes the theme of abduction of child without the mother's permission and rewrites it thus inviting her audiences to see parallels between Persephone being taken to the underworld and the hellish situation of a child being removed from the care of her mother and awarded to her father against her wishes because she is not deemed fit to look after a child because of her sexuality. This is underlined throughout the play as the story is read by the mother in question to her child, Poppy. This works two ways: first, it briefs audiences who are unfamiliar with the story or have forgotten details about the salient aspects of the myth and second, as Claire reads the story with Poppy, explicit links are drawn between characters in the myth and those in the play making the direct alignment between the two texts impossible to ignore. Rewriting of stories of the past in ways that inflect them with the perspective of women is one clear way that Sarah Daniels' work is aligned with feminist thought and practice. Whether it is seen from the perspective of the inter-textuality of Julia

Kristeva or fellow playwright, Helene Cixous' *voler* (flying/stealing) from what has come to be known as Francophone feminist thought or the Re-Vision of American, Adrienne Rich: 'Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, or entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.^{xii}

At first glance, the mythic elements of the play seem to belong to the main plotline of Claire's struggle to keep her daughter, Poppy, from being taken by her former husband, Lawrence, with Demeter as the mother figure with Poppy as Persephone. The book that Claire reads aloud to her daughter instructs that 'Demeter, the goddess, of life gave birth to four daughters, whom she named Persephone, Psyche, Athena and Artemis'.^{xiii} A little later on, Poppy identifying Demeter with her grandmother, remarks to own mother, Claire, 'There's only three. Demeter had four' to which Claire responds, 'You're the fourth.'^{xiv} As Frances Babbage noted in her study of feminist use of myth in contemporary theatre, 'In Daniels' version, Demeter has four daughters. Poppy assigns all these roles to her own family members leaving the audience in no doubt of the author's intention to suggest a connection'.^{xv} The rewriting of the myth for Daniels' feminist ends is evident in intent as Frances Babbage suggests, and in content. The dialogue extends the myth beyond the parallels between Demeter's loss of her child and Lawrence's attempt to take Poppy away from her mother to a broader exploration of maternal power and its limits. The play invites not a strict exploration of an updated myth so much but through the broad explorations of how mothers and daughters lose out to patriarchal power. Thus, the three main storylines of Claire's custody battle for Poppy, Val's depression and Claire's workplace battles to keep

two talented students from being expelled can all be seen through the prism of Demeter's partial loss of her daughter to patriarchal power.

Feminist Theatre and Sexual Politics in the 1980s

The timeless universality of the mythic dimensions of the play are in stark contrast to the specifics of events which are grounded in the British political landscape of the era in which it was written. *Neptune* urgently reflects on the contemporary moment with its many contradictions for women. Crucially Claire and her housemate, Jean, are highly qualified professional women who combine motherhood with careers in education. In contrast, Daniels presents two portraits of much more traditional families through Claire's sister and mother, Joyce and Val. It picks apart heteronormative assumptions about families and women's roles within them as wives and mothers. Thus, Claire is thriving personally and professionally while her sister, Val, the wife in a conventional household with two children, struggles with depression and the limits of her life. Sarah Daniels places these differences at the forefront of her play: formerly married Claire identifies as a lesbian albeit a single one living in a house share with a feminist friend and not with a partner. A product of a time when it was legal to discriminate against people because of their sexual orientation, the play explores the many injustices that were prevalent in a society where homophobia was common. The school in which Claire works provides a microcosm of that society with a panoply of different attitudes on display and a bewilderingly delightfully large lesbian population that shows that Claire is not isolated. The two worlds collide when Claire ex-husband uses the knowledge of her sexuality in order to seek the custody of Poppy.

From the lens of the Twenty-first century, *Neptune* seems like a proto-intersectional play with its focus on lesbian motherhood and contrasted with a savagely funny portrait of the heteronormative ‘happily ever after’, which is anything but. Keen to honour her feminist contexts, at the very start of the printed text of the play, Sarah Daniels tells her readers that her ‘grateful thanks’ are due to ‘Dr Phyllis Chesler for permission to quote from her interpretation of the Demeter myth and her book *Women and Madness* (Avon Books, 1972)’.^{xvi} The ‘and’ here is significant and characteristic of the playwright, whose carefully crafted plays always reward their spectators and readers in depth analysis. Some of Val’s quotations about her mental state and a stage direction a realization of part of Chesler’s feminist antipsychiatric study.^{xvii} Links between the winter of Demeter’s enforced separation from Persephone and the depression that the ‘happily’ married Val feels are transformed into a continuum of women’s oppression.

Attitudes towards LGBTQ rights have been transformed in the United Kingdom since the 1980s and with them a corresponding change in legislation. At the time Sarah Daniels was writing *Neptune* there was an increasingly hostile environment towards rights of LGBTQ people. Fewer than twenty years had passed since male homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967, same sex marriage was nearly thirty years away from being legalised and, crucially for the story of this play, it was still legal to fire people from their jobs on the grounds of sexual orientation. Daniels makes much from this last fact as Claire’s open acknowledgement of her sexuality at work requires her to risk her professional livelihood and means of providing for her child and results in the Headteacher asking Claire to resign. *Neptune* paints a picture of a public work that is obligate in its heteronormativity. Crucial to her tale is that those people policing this heteronormative environment are not

necessarily themselves straight. It is worth asking if much has changed for LGBTQ people in the intervening years, what hasn't? Writing just after the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act of 2013, Ben Clements and Clive D Field published an analysis of surveys into attitudes towards homosexuality in the UK from the 1940s right up until 2014. They concluded that British attitudes toward homosexuality were overwhelming negative [...] but started to liberalise following decriminalization in 1967. They suffered a temporary setback with the advent of AIDS in the mid-1980s as a result of which 32 per cent admitted to being personally less tolerant of homosexuals [...]. The thaw resumed in the early 1990s and accelerated following the millennium.^{xviii}

The general trends in public opinion, then, are in line with the picture painted in *Neaptide* of a workplace where people are forced to hide their sexuality.

The play's provocative stance against a homophobia status quo is brought to the fore because of the kind of profession that Claire is in. As a schoolteacher, Claire is in charge of helping educate impressionable adolescents. Clements and Field note that opposition to LGBTQ people in specific roles in public life is even more marked in Gallup polls exploring attitudes. The observed, 'Whereas two thirds were comfortable with homosexuals as sales staff, the same ratio was hostile to them becoming junior school teachers, or prison officers. Views were more equally split about clergy, doctors and members of the armed forces'.^{xix} This prescient play predates further legislation that entrenched these views. In 1988, Clause 28 of the Local Government Act demanded that:

A local authority shall not—

(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;

(b)promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.’^{xx}

The play’s storyline pre-empts such a legislative move. Claire’s public coming out and defence of the schoolgirls places her and therefore the school in a position whereby it might be seemed not to promote but accept LGBTQ people. Something the Headteacher will not risk. In Sarah Daniels’ world, Claire’s act of coming out is not a minor, private event, important only to her but a risky, political, public and defiant act of solidarity with the students she seeks to educate and protect from societal homophobia. Sandra Freeman goes as far to suggest that ‘the disturbance caused in the school by the appearance of deviant sexuality is as essential to the plot, perhaps even more [...] than Claire’s husband’s efforts to obtain custody of their seven-year-old daughter.’^{xxi} Freeman reads Claire in contrast to Bea, the school’s headteacher, who is also in a same sex relationship but upholds the heteronormative and homophobic *status quo* remarking that ‘By coming out, Claire has won, although she was prepared to lose everything.’^{xxii}

i The novelist, Iris Murdoch’s socratic style dialogue, *Art and Eros*, was given a rehearsed reading at the National in 1980.

ii <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/lgbt-reading-neaptide>

iii Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights 1990-2000*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) p. 39.

iv Mary Remnant, ‘Introduction’ in *Plays By Women: Volume Six*. Ed Mary Remnant, (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 7.

v Nicole Boireau, ‘Sarah Daniels,’ *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* eds Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz. (London: Methuen, 2011), p118.

vi John Burgess, qtd in Sarah Daniels, ‘Introduction,’ *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. ix.

vii Sarah Daniels, ‘Introduction,’ *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. x.

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- viii Elaine Aston, 'Daniels in the Lion's Den: Sarah Daniels and the British Backlash,' *Theatre Journal*. 47 (3) (October 1995). p. 394.
- ix (Edgar) p. 156.
- x (Edgar) p. 156.
- xi (Daniels)pp 277-8.
- xii Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken,' *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, (London: Virago, 1980) 35.
- xiii (Daniels), p. 238.
- xiv (Daniels), p. 247.
- xv Frances Babbage, 'Re-visioning Myth: Feminist Strategies in Contemporary Theatre,' Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2000. p.61.
- xvi (Daniels), p.233.
- xvii INSERT STP reference here.
- xviii Clements, Ben and Clive D. Field. 'The Polls – Trends: Public Opinion Toward Homosexuality and Gay Rights in Great Britain,' *The Public Opinion Quarterly*. 78 (2) (Summer 2014): 523-47. p.541.
- xix Clements and Field, p. 533.
- xx Local Government Act 1988. Available <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28/enacted>
- xxi Sandra Freeman, *Putting Your Daughters on the Stage: Lesbian Theatre from the 1970s to the 1990s*. (London: Cassell, 1997), p 159.
- xxii Freeman, p. 160.