Theatre of Modern Life: Self-Regulation in Clemence Dane's A Bill of Divorcement

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In 1921, the curtain went up on *A Bill of Divorcement*, one of the most popular and longest running plays staged at St. Martin’s Theatre in London’s West End. Although the play established Clemence Dane as a respected and bankable playwright, it receives little critical attention today. Written in 1921 and set in 1933, the play imagines an England in which marriage law has been reformed so that men and women have equal access to divorce, anticipating the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 by sixteen years. Far from being a tritely conservative depiction of the middle class, my reading of the play reveals a nuanced vision of how a middle class family deals with post-war shifts in social mores, sexual identity, and mental health.

Once released by national, legal, and conventional restrictions, members of the Fairfield family must regulate their own desires and behaviors. On Christmas Day, Hilary, institutionalized since the end of WWI, escapes from the asylum with the intention of reuniting with his beloved and estranged wife Margaret. He does not know that Margaret has divorced him and plans to remarry in the New Year. Margaret, who Sydney dubs “pure nineteenth century,” already had grave doubts about her divorce. She yields to her husband’s pleas/threats and breaks off her engagement. A nineteenth century play would have ended here, but in this play, Sydney convinces her mother to leave because: “Father—he’s my job, not yours.” Sydney’s concern for her father combined with her fear of passing his illness on to her children, leads her to break off her own engagement. With this decision, the modern, feisty young woman reroutes her desire for
a family and transfers her life-long commitment from a traditional suitor to a father she has only just met. While this decision seems to demonstrate Sydney’s autonomy, I argue that it reveals her need to control the conflicting desires that frighten her: desire for tradition and freedom, motherhood and daughterhood, sacrifice and personal fulfillment, sentiment and stoicism. In a modern world, where legal and social infrastructure is shrinking, those who celebrate the changing world around them must also face the frightening prospect of navigating such a world on their own.