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“Really at Honoria’s Chambers in Chancery Lane Every Day:” Vivie Versus Gender

Conventions in George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*

The eponymous “profession” in George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, though never stated explicitly but insinuated well enough throughout, is prostitution, a subject that forms the foundation for Shaw’s criticism. Rather than criticizing prostitution in and of itself, Shaw criticizes the institutionalization of prostitution, particularly regarding the nobility. Prostitution was a practice that ran afoul with Victorian mores, yet propertious members, in general, indulged in the business not infrequently. In his article, “*Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and the Politics of Prostitution,” John Allett argues that Shaw spotlights prostitution in order to indict capitalism, and Allett invokes much of Shaw’s background and personal views to substantiate this assertion (Shaw was a self-proclaimed socialist who met Friedrich Engels and associated himself with activists championing legislation curtailing the traffic of underage prostitutes) (23). If we look to the text exclusively, particularly the first half of Act One, we find that Shaw’s indictment is not solely of capitalism but of the broader sociocultural conventions that undergird its creation and preservation, namely gender conventions. Shaw indicts these gender conventions through Vivie, who begins the play by challenging and upending them through discursive and demonstrative processes and ends the play extirpating them altogether through her pragmatic work as an actuary. In challenging and then extirpating the gendered conventions that give rise to

the institutionalization of prostitution in the first place, Vivie becomes the microcosm for the more holistic critique of gender conventionality.

Because conventions are maintained by those who adhere to them, it is no wonder that the play opens with a competing discursive exchange between Vivie and Praed as they meet for the first time, an exchange that challenges feminine conventions, in turn challenging the traditional masculine-feminine power dynamic. During their conversation, Vivie does not shy away from sneering Praed, who then interprets her sneers as atypical to conventional female subordination. From the very first action Vivie undertakes in the text, “[*She resumes her work*],” after briefly glancing up from her book to speak but a mere line to Praed, she violates the notion that she is subordinate to a man (1746). By shrugging him off so briskly, she violates “The Angel in the House” Victorian archetype who is supposed to indulge a man at all times. Instead of entertaining him through her own volition, she hardly engages with the pleasantries; that is, when Vivie reacts to Praed’s question if the house belongs to Mrs. Allison, her action is depicted stiffly, “[*Sharply, as she turns on her elbow to get a good look at him*]” (1746). The adjective “sharply,” preceding the action itself makes it blatant that Vivie’s action is intense and harsh and thus contrary to the warmth and comfort Praed presumed to expect. This unexpectedness has a visceral effect on him, evident in the term “perhaps” in his reply, “Indeed! Perhaps—may I ask are you Miss Vivie Warren?” (1746). That “perhaps” is followed by an em dash, which suggests an improvised response. Because improvisation is, by definition, not rehearsed, we know that Praed is in a position of vulnerability. The first male character of the play has his authority challenged by a female.

Although Praed tries to maintain the traditional masculine-feminine gender dynamic by positioning himself above Vivie through a demonstration of masculine strength, her strength

surpasses his; Vivie's supremacy over Praed, then, upends the gender dynamic wherein a woman is subordinate to a man, a subordination that placed her mother and others like her in those dire straits that lead to prostitution. When she stands up to "[*stride*] to the gate and [*open*] it for him]," she assumes the role of the chivalric male archetype—males generally open doors for women (1748). Because she has assumed the masculine convention, she has no difficulty in assuming the associated strength during a power contest over chairs:

VIVIE Then I'll go and get you a chair. [*She goes to the porch for a garden chair.*]

PRAED [*Following her.*] Oh, pray, pray! Allow me. [*He lays hands on the chair.*]

VIVIE [*Letting him take it.*] Take care of your fingers: they're rather dodgy things those chairs. [*She goes across to the chair with the books on it; pitches them into the hammock; and brings the chair forward with one swing.*]

PRAED [*Who has just unfolded his chair.*] Oh, now do let me take that hard chair. I like hard chairs.

VIVIE So do I. Sit down, Mr Praed. [*This invitation she gives with genial peremptoriness, his anxiety to please her clearly striking her as a sign of weakness of character on his part. But he does not immediately obey.*] (1747)

Vivie's "letting him take [the chair]" presupposes that she had the true hold over it, that she holds the ability to give it to him if she so desires. Praed tries to challenge her strength by taking the chair from her and insisting he "[likes] hard chairs." Nonetheless, she puts him in his literal and figurative lower place first by telling him that she likes them too, which placed them on equal levels, and then by instructing him to "sit down" with "genial peremptoriness," which now places him below her. This phrase almost seems paradoxical: typically, peremptory instructions are, by definition, brusque and domineering, which is antonymous to geniality. Shaw, by

contrast, modifies this arrogance with geniality. Given that geniality is usually associated with the feminine *The Angel in the House*, Shaw's diction in adjoining this particular adjective to "peremptoriness" is to add the feminine to the masculine. Vivie becomes the new woman who concerns herself more with strength in the form of independence than in adhering to the prevailing cultural standards enjoined to her by the men of the play.

Praed is the first man in the play who reinforces these cultural standards when he remarks that he views culture and art as practically as Vivie views "calculations for engineers, electricians, insurance companies, and so on . . .," though Vivie cleanly delineates between art/culture and work, a delineation that motivates her to take on the actuarial role and thus precludes any semblance of ideological influence that would seek to render her subordinate to men (1749). Art and culture are spearheaded by masculinity, that is, what men consider to be crucial in teaching to the citizenry. That is why Praed reacts so disgustingly when he realizes that her choice of profession, unlike her mother's, is contrary to female conventions in that it does not keep her emotionally and financially dependent on a man:

PRAED [*Revolted*] What a monstrous, rascally system! I knew it! I felt at once that it meant destroying all that makes womanhood beautiful!

VIVIE I don't object to it on that score in the least. I shall turn it to very good account, I assure you (1749).

The forceful and absolute phrase "at least" denotes Vivie's utter disdain toward art and culture. In disdaining art and culture, she disdains the mechanisms whereby conventionality is adhered. In taking a job as an actuary assisting another woman, Honoria Fraser, with whom "[they] never dreamt of going out except for exercise" Vivie forestalls the influence of gender ideology, for her role consists of making objective mathematical calculations, not attending operas and museums

wherein she is just as likely to be indoctrinated into the traditional gender dynamic as she is by surrounding herself with proselytizing men like Praed (1749). Indeed, as Allett notes, Vivie's banishment of Frank, who wants to use her for his self-benefit, and her banishment of Mrs. Warren, who helps to sustain the patriarchal system that keeps women subordinate to men, in effect banishes all masculine, domineering influence from her life (37).

Shaw looks at the broader picture: how conventionality creates and preserves the gendered power dynamic wherein women are subordinate to men. By upending this dynamic through Vivie, Shaw demonstrates how the new woman is to avoid the circumstances that lead her to become a prostitute. For there to be a new woman, there must be a separation from the conventions that repress her, those conventions that teach her to accept her place rather than challenge the system itself. Complying with these conventions made Mrs. Warren choose prostitution as a better means of financial stability than working in the mills for slave wages (1768). And it is these conventions that are at first challenged, upended, and eventually extirpated by Vivie, whose holding them in utter disdain engenders a new path of opportunity for future women. Her clash with Praed allows her to declare solace in her own profession at Chancery Lane: a place wherein she "never enjoyed [herself] more in [her] life" (1749).

Works Cited

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