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Female Agency in Restoration and Nineteenth-Century Drama

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
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Shaw

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful boyfriend, Phillip, who has given me enduring emotional support and kept me sane throughout the process of graduate school.

I would like to thank my mother for her never-ending reassurance and my father for his steady encouragement of and contribution to my love of books. I also offer special thanks to the late Dr. Stephen Szilagyi, who first set me on and prepared me for this path.

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Abstract

This thesis examines issues of female agency in the plays *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter* by Aphra Behn, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* by George Bernard Shaw, and *Votes for Women!* by Elizabeth Robins. The heroines of each of these plays work toward gaining agency for themselves, and in order to achieve this goal, they often stray from cultural norms of femininity and encroach on the masculine world. This thesis postulates that agency for women becomes a fluid notion, not statically defined. These plays show a fluctuating and evolving sense of feminine agency.

Introduction

Attention to Aphra Behn's oeuvre fell to the wayside beginning in the eighteenth century; however, with the revival of scholarly interest in her work, Aphra Behn is now widely known as a determined woman writer who broke into a profession long deemed a singularly masculine pursuit. In attempting a career as a writer, Behn suffered much frustration – the result of the discrimination she faced due to her gender.¹ Behn often aired her frustration in her writings as she does in her “Epistle to the Reader” from *The Dutch Lover* in which she scathingly addresses her detractors. Behn further indicates in her preface to *The Lucky Chance* that she felt that in order to write she took on a masculine persona: “All I ask, is the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me . . . to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in” (“Preface” 398). This mixing of gender becomes further developed in Behn's dramatic writings, *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter*, when her heroines assume masculine roles in order to gain agency.²

¹ For more information on Aphra Behn's life, including the criticism her writing drew, refer to Janet Todd's leading biography, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. Also, Janet Todd's *The Critical Fortunes of Aphra Behn* focuses extensively on the critical reception of Behn's works from her lifetime to her place in the modern canon.

² While the particular argument that cross-dressing gains these heroines agency is my own, analyses of Behn's use of gender abound. Much of this work focuses on Behn's poetry and prose, such as Jacqueline Pearson's article, “Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn,” which looks at Behn's complex use of gender in her prose writings. Stephen Szilagyi's “The Sexual Politics of Behn's ‘Rover’: After Patriarchy” explores the sexuality of character's in the

Women's issues of agency, touched on in Behn's work during the Restoration, grew increasingly important during the Victorian era when the "woman question" became a dominant social concern.³ With women's growing demand for independence and entrance in the public sphere, the New Woman quickly became a figure of concern for Victorians, one that is encountered in both Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Robins's *Votes for Women*. In both plays the female characters strive for the right to govern their own lives, through profession in the former and the demand for women's suffrage in the latter. And choosing these routes to agency, the heroines, similar to those of Behn's plays, enter into traditionally male-dominated spheres.

The late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries provide fertile ground for examining shifting notions of agency because both periods represent moments of transition for concepts of womanhood. Restoration sexuality was much less restrictive than at later times, which will develop stricter definitions of femininity (Martin 193), and the late Victorian period saw the rise of the women's movement

Rover and how it relates to Restoration politics, using the interactions between male and female characters to support his points. Roberta C. Martin's "'Beauteous Wonder of a Different Kind': Aphra Behn's Destabilization of Gender Categories" examine numerous works by Behn including *The Rover* and looks at how Behn, at a time of fluctuating gender norms, subverts gender. Laura Runge's book, *Gender and Language in British Literary Criticism, 1660-1790*, provides an extensive exploration of gender roles in Restoration-period England, which also proves useful in this context.

³ Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments* looks at the domestic ideology surrounding Victorian womanhood, providing useful information regarding the condition of the Victorian woman. Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine* focuses on women and norms of femininity in Victorian England, arguing that femininity revolved around a domestic ideal. Much of her work examines fiction about women who deviate from that norm, such as the women of sensation novels, fallen women, and the New Woman. Sally Ledger's *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* builds on the work of Pykett and others, providing a definition of the New Woman based on the rhetoric of the late nineteenth century. Ann Heilmann's *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First Wave Feminism* looks at later constructions of the New Woman and her relation to the feminist movement.

that demanded a loosening of gender norms for women. These four plays are particularly exemplary of the development of female agency, revealing that many different versions of agency for women can exist. This creates a theme of fluid agency – an agency that shifts and changes according to the woman and situation – which has not been significantly developed in scholarship for either the plays or the period of time the plays span. Furthermore, no critic seems to extensively consider feminine agency gained through the masculine for any of these particular plays. This is a gap that I feel needs to be addressed, since doing so can reveal developments and changes in drama regarding this specific theme. This process is a necessary step to enriching the detail of our critical knowledge. Thus, I will be offering a different gendered reading for these plays and, indeed, for the theme of female agency in drama

Because of this emphasis on issues of femininity and women's agency, this thesis provides a gendered reading of the plays, exploring the governing notions of femininity for both the Restoration and Victorian periods. By examining these four plays together, we will see the development of the depiction of women's quest for agency in the dramatic genre. In particular, the heroines of these plays all seek and ultimately gain agency through actions that encroach on the masculine sphere. We can observe how agency shifts and develops, both for the women in the plays and society.

Before I proceed further with an analysis of the heroines of these four plays, it is vital that I establish an initial idea of agency with which I will be working. The Oxford English Dictionary records that as early as 1600 "agent" or

a person possessing agency can be defined as “one who . . . acts with or exerts power,” with a secondary definition as “one who acts for another” (“agent”). It is the former definition that I apply to my use of the term agency in this thesis. For the purpose of the heroines of these plays, this “power” takes the form of being able to act independently and exert control in their lives. But this gives, at best, a simplistic picture of what agency can mean for women, since as we will see through the plays being examined, agency varies and can encompass many different versions.

French feminist Hélène Cixous offers an interesting interpretation of femininity that can help us understand how the women in these plays gain agency. In her essay “The Newly Born Woman,” Cixous claims that women have long been cast in a role of passivity and kept there by patriarchal society (37-39). She goes on to assert that “newly born” woman is bisexual, encompassing elements both masculine and feminine (41-42). This, she argues, allows woman more freedom of self (44-45). This could account for why the heroines encroach on what society deems masculine as a part of their agencies. While men, according to Cixous, restrict themselves entirely to the masculine, women contain elements of both sexualities. This opens us up to the possibility that the women in these plays can draw from the masculine to gain agency while still remaining women. However, this does not account for the fact that the heroines often appear as one or the other: Miss Levering who is described as “essentially feminine” (Robins 1.1.277) or Vivie who appears entirely asexual. The women in these plays ultimately make choices that reinforce the binary concept of

male/female sexuality, so in this case the masculine is a tool used by women to gain agency rather than being an inherent part of their own sexuality.

As we examine each heroine's actions, it is also important to maintain historical consciousness regarding women's independence. Women today enjoy freedom and independence on a scale drastically higher than women of the Victorian or Restoration period. This has affected our notion of what agency means for women, and it cannot possibly be applied to the plays in question; the context is too different. Each of the heroines to be discussed achieves an agency that was revolutionary for her period, even though for modern readers it seems miniscule compared to what women enjoy today.

I argue that by examining the plays together, we will find that agency for women is not easily definable, and is instead a growing concept that develops for each heroine as the plays progress. Each character brings something new to the definition of agency, altering it and allowing the concept to expand. Thus, rather than attempting to arrive at a strict definition, we should view women's agency as an evolutionary process.

Chapter 1: Transvestism in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter*

1660 saw not just the restoration of Charles II and monarchy to England, but also the return of theater, which had been banned during the Interregnum. Restoration theater brought certain innovations to the stage, the most notable of which was the introduction of women playing the female parts.⁴ Such parts had previously been the province of boy-actors, and this marked the first time actresses stepped onto the English stage (Maus 595). The rise of women in theatrical performance was accompanied by the sexualization of the actress; as Katharine Eisaman Maus notes, "actresses' sexuality . . . was made one of the foci of the dramatic spectacle (601-602). This was particularly the case with the common theatrical practice of dressing actresses in men's clothing. The breeches part, as this trope has come to be known, allowed the shapely figure of the actress to be displayed, particularly her legs which were revealed by the style of men's dress and considered to be tantalizing (Howe 56). However, while the breeches part can be used to turn female sexuality into spectacle, I argue that some playwrights, like Aphra Behn, use transvestism for more complex purposes as well. Behn frequently utilizes the breeches part in her plays, and Susan Owen

⁴ For an interesting analysis of the women who became some of the first English actresses, see Thomas A. King's "As if (She) Were Made on Purpose to Put the Whole World into Good Humour': Reconstructing the first English Actress."

attributes Behn's usage to a political, almost proto-feminist effect (174).⁵ But politics aside, the gender implications of cross-dressing allow Behn to service her heroines' needs. In Behn's *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter*, the act of cross-dressing allows Hellena and the Widow Ranter to transcend the boundaries of femininity in a patriarchal society in order to achieve agency by being self-determining with regard to marriage.

Femininity in Restoration period England was in a state flux, transitioning from the early modern emphasis on women's impurities to the 18th century focus on domestic femininity, and, as Russell West-Pavlov notes, the conception of female sexuality moved to one defined as "benevolent [and] lust-less" (39). This transitional period may allow for more fluidity in concepts of female gender (Martin 192-193), but there were still limits of appropriate feminineness that social values dictated for women. In her book, *Gender and Language in British Literary Criticism 1660 – 1790*, Laura Runge notes that Restoration femininity was typically characterized by "being soft, smooth, regular, pleasing, soothing, sweet-sounding, loving, [and] simple" (26). While this definition is applied by Runge to John Dryden's oeuvre, it also proves suitable for contending with Behn since these are exactly the sort of characteristics Behn's heroines must wrestle with. Moreover, what Runge points out as a "perceived need for female chastity" (69) leads, I argue, to an expectation of female modesty that precludes

⁵ For example, *Cloris* of *The Amorous Prince* or *Hyppolita* of *The Dutch Lover*.

outspokenness in women, particularly when relating to men.⁶ These are the boundaries of definition from which Behn's female characters must stray by using masculinity as a mask through cross-dressing, thus allowing Behn to achieve what Runge terms a break away from "the soft and retiring character of Dryden's feminine prescription" (129). Roberta C. Martin argues that Behn collapses binary gender categories in order to create the idea of an in-between, pointing to her ambiguously gendered narrators and her repeated use of the hermaphrodite in poetry (194). A similar rupture is necessary for characters like Hellena, Widow Ranter, and the Indian Queen, because they cannot attain their personal agency by relating to men according to the social norms typically prescribed for women. Taking on a male appearance allows the heroines a freedom of speech and behavior not available to them as females, better allowing them to arrange their own marriages.

Behn herself struggled with expectations of femininity, since as a woman and an author her writing violated the expectations of a society that gendered writing as a masculine occupation. Behn often faced negative critique of and reactions to her work that were grounded in her gender and not in the merit of her writing, but, not to be cowed, Behn frequently addressed denigrators and their criticisms. She does this with a sarcastically deferent tone in her "Epistle to the Reader" from *The Dutch Lover* as she ridicules a foppish audience member who denounces her work without having seen it: "This thing, I tell ye, opening

⁶ These are the same boundaries, which will eventually lead to the Victorian need to maintain separate spheres, restricting women to the domestic.

that which serves it for a mouth, out issued such a noise as this to those that sate about it, that they were to expect a woful [sic] Play, God Damn him, for it was a womans [sic]" ("Epistle" 394). Another such instance occurred following the debut of her play, *The Rover*, which critics condemned as purely a plagiarized version of Thomas Killigrew's play, *Thomaso*. Janet Todd observes that *The Rover* was in fact based on Killigrew's work (*Secret* 213); however, when Behn addresses the issue in her postscript to *The Rover*, she insists that her play simply took its inspiration from *Thomaso* and was not a mere alteration (248). Behn attributes the accusation of plagiarism to "critics, who are naturally so kind to any that pretend to usurp their dominion" (248); in other words, writing is a male domain, and as a woman Behn is usurping her male critics' power. Todd's footnote for this section supports my claim, since Behn, in later editions, added to this line "especially of our sex," thus pointing to a *female* act of usurpation (*Aphra* 369 n. 142). It is this type of unfair, spurious and gender-biased assessment that Behn faced by those threatened by her ability to exercise agency in the form of free public voice.

In her preface to *The Lucky Chance*, Behn attempts to reconcile her femininity with the insistence on the masculinization of her chosen profession. She first bemoans what we have previously observed as the hypocrisy of gendering the role of the author: "I would sum up all your Beloved Plays, and all the things in them that are past with such Silence by; because written by Men: such Masculine Strokes in me, must not be allow'd" ("Preface" 397). Behn continues her justification of being a woman writer and concludes, "All I ask, is

the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me, (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in" (398). Having earlier identified that female playwrights frequently had to endure gender prejudice as part of the reception of their plays, Marta Straznicky concludes that Behn's plea here in the preface is driven by economic, monetary concern: "Behn's primary concern here is professional: the privilege she begs is to be 'successful' and to 'thrive' writing for the stage, something she could easily accomplish were the playing field level" (715). While this argument acknowledges one of the potential "limits" a professional female author might face, Straznicky glosses over the implications of this passage for gender limitations. This is not simply an economic concern; Behn does something more complex when, in order to justify her place as a woman writer, Behn assumes a role of masculinity for herself. As Runge notes, this is effective because Behn still retains the position of "passive female" by deferring to her audience and masculine authority (136). If anything, Behn reinforces the gendering of authorship as a masculine activity by labeling her "Poet" as masculine. At the same time, Behn "mitigates the disjunction between the female speaker and the male role" (Runge 30 – 31); Behn's utilization of the possessive pronoun "my" makes that masculinity an aspect that is already an inherent part of Behn's being: in line with Cixous's theory, both the masculine and feminine make up Behn's womanhood. Behn goes on to request the "priviledge [sic]" of being allowed to be a writer and, by putting on a mask of masculinization, creates an appropriate place for herself as a woman writer in a masculine profession. She uses

masculinity as a tool to craft a place for herself that allows her to be both writer and woman. It becomes acceptable for Behn to participate in that masculine world because claiming an amount of masculinity makes Behn a part of that world rather than a female usurper. Much as the breeches part does for her heroines, Behn's masculine mask allows her to appropriately interact with men when she achieves her goal of being a writer.

In *The Rover*, Hellena's goal is to escape the path to the convent that has been chosen for her and to instead secure a husband, yet she is prevented from achieving this goal by the expectations of appropriate feminine behavior to which she must conform. Stephen Szilagyi remarks in his article, "The Sexual Politics of Behn's 'The Rover': After Patriarchy," that Hellena's brother Pedro tries to take over in the role of patriarch given his father's absence (438). Owen points out that during the Restoration, "patriarchal family ideology . . . [was] an ideal under threat" (162). And indeed, in order to attain her desire, Hellena must particularly struggle against the patriarchal authority in the form of her brother, who attempts to dictate the direction her life will take. As Runge observes, there has been a history of "the consistent subordination of women to men in patriarchal cultures" (11), which makes Hellena's actions all the more interesting. Szilagyi argues that the siblings have "equal agency" in their parallel revolts against their father's authority (438 – 439). However, I would argue because Pedro usurps the patriarchal authority in his father's absence, it is against Pedro and his attempts to rule over them that his two sisters rebel, thus allowing for a more visible undermining of masculine rule. Hellena is intended to enter into the convent, and

her brother Pedro routinely attempts to reinforce this notion during his conversation with his sister, declaring that Hellena is “not designed for the conversation of lovers,” because she has been bred for the nunnery (*Rover* 161).⁷ Nevertheless, for each reprimand, Hellena supplies a witty rejoinder; her response to this initial reprimand from her brother is spoken in an aside in which she declares that she does not think herself suited to conversation about saints either. She grows increasingly bold in confronting her brother’s patriarchal authority over her. When Pedro tires of Hellena’s arguing with him over his choice of mate for her sister and finally orders her to be locked away until the time when she must join the nunnery, she proclaims, “I care not, I had rather be a nun, than be obliged to marry as you would have me, if I were designed for it” (162 – 163). Her declaration is made with a flippant dismissal of his punishment while she pretends not to care about being sent to a monastery. In doing so, Hellena dissolves her brother’s authority over her; he cannot effectively exercise his power over her if she is so indifferent to his punishment (the application of that power). Moreover, Hellena’s statement ridicules Pedro’s ability to choose a marriage partner, thus undermining his authority by implying that he is incapable of performing the duties of a patriarch to provide for his family. Pedro attempts to recover himself by forcefully asserting that she “shall be a nun” (163), but Hellena foils him again with her witty repartee: “Shall I so? You may chance to be mistaken in my way of devotion: – a nun! Yes, I am like to make a fine nun!”

⁷ Because *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter* are not divided by line number in the edition used, all in-text references in this chapter will be to the page number.

(163). Her mocking question and sarcastic acceptance of her intended role belie the fact that Hellena has no intention of entering into a convent. Her siblings repeatedly label Hellena as “wild,” and her wit does not suit the softness expected of women (160, 163); then, her refusal of her brother’s demands violates the expectations of female deference to masculine authority that a traditional female figure would follow. Ultimately, Pedro’s authority over his sisters will be completely frustrated when both of them manage to deviate from the paths Pedro attempts to lay out for them. By growing independent and working towards her own goal of self-determination, Hellena grabs an agency for herself that pulls her out of those patriarchal structures and demands of appropriate female behavior.

Hellena’s sister, Florinda, who is the model of feminine propriety, offers a means of measuring Hellena’s departure from the norms of femininity through contrast of behavior. Both girls wish for a relationship, but Florinda’s desire is, as Szilagyi also observes, more aligned with the romantic (439). Florinda keeps to the feminine expectations by chastely loving Belvile from afar and never admitting her love when her sister confronts her with it, replying only, “Fie, Hellena” (*Rover* 159). Hellena, on the other hand, deviates from soft female modesty and instead “plans a direct assault,” intending to meet a husband for herself through Florinda’s connection to Belvile (Szilagyi 439). Florinda also differs from Hellena by conforming to the social norm of women’s subordination to men. When Pedro proposes Antonio as her potential mate instead of the Belvile, Florinda, rather than taking a stand for her desires, instead meekly

acquiesces to her brother's authority: "Sir, I shall strive to do, as shall become your sister" (*Rover* 163).⁸ Hellena, on the contrary, openly argues with her brother and follows by assuring her sister that Pedro will not determine the marriage. In doing so, Hellena plainly challenges masculine power and dominance over women, deviating from her expected gender role as a woman. Looking at Florinda's "soft and retiring nature" (Runge 129), the wildly exuberant Hellena's version of femininity particularly stands out as non-traditional.

Masks play a highly significant role in *The Rover*, which is set during a masquerade carnival. The ability of donning a disguise allows the two sisters the freedom of identity to defy their brother's authority. Masks allow Florinda and Hellena to flit around the city attempting to further their own romances while protecting the reputation of their undisguised selves. This is advantageous for the more forward Hellena in particular, since according to Todd, "in masquerade, Hellena can flirt and make sexual overtures to a man she does not know, since the disguise allows the rare pleasure of seeing rather than simply being seen" (218). Disguise allows Hellena to move and speak more freely, further contributing to her agency. Among the numerous masks and guises Hellena and Florinda wear, each take on the breeches part just prior to settling their marriages. But, while Florinda ultimately defies her brother and marries Belvile, much of the two lovers' meetings leading up to the marriage happen by chance or through Belvile's actions, whereas Hellena actively pursues Willmore by

⁸ While this sequence of interactions was initially brought to my attention by their use in Szilagyi's article (see p440), the analysis is my own.

seeking him out herself. Florinda finally is able to marry Belvile by taking on “the habit . . . of one of her pages” in order to fly to Belvile from her brother’s house (*Rover* 233). However, this instance of the breeches part is insignificant except for its aid in contrasting Florinda and Hellena. Florinda’s cross-dressing is momentary and is used only to convey her to her future husband – keeping her well within the traditional power relations of the patriarchy. Thus, this instance of transvestism occurs on a smaller scale than that of Hellena, who uses her boyish disguise in a much stronger manner, an active pursuit of her desires which adds to her ability to be self-determining.

Hellena assumes the breeches part after a series of female disguises, which allows her to “[escape] the enclosure of a daughter” (Todd 218) or more generally of a woman living under a patriarchal system. Concerning Hellena’s use of the breeches part, Todd writes, “Helena has some distinction in ending the play in cross-dress and avoiding a scene of absorption back into society, but, like other witty heroines, she remains a virgin who seeks marriage” (218). But, unlike some of her fellow witty heroines, Hellena’s goal for marriage does not return her to a state of complete passivity.⁹ First and foremost, Hellena began assuming numerous masks and thus transgressing gender boundaries because her goal from the start was to find herself a husband. She at once revolts against patriarchal authority by defying her orders to go into the convent, while remaining within the system of patriarchy by seeking marriage. It is just this sort of

⁹ Consider, for example, the proviso scene between Millamant and Mirabell in William Congreve’s *The Way of the World*, in which the witty heroine is bested by her beau in their exchange of wits and ultimately comes out in the role of passive fiancé.

complication that makes agency so difficult to pin down: we can say her agency is gained by using transvestism to gain independence and exercise her own will, but her use of that agency will then become dependent on and subject to her husband. Helena must maintain a delicate balance between defiance and adherence to social norms in order to avoid the complete condemnation of society. The breeches part helps her in her balancing act, because cross-dressing allows Hellena to take on the role of a man thus stepping away from the expectation that a woman be soft, passive, and modest. Thus, she is able to employ a freedom of speech, movement and behavior typically denied women without being condemned for behavior unacceptable in a woman. Navigating outside these boundaries in turn permits Hellena the agency to work independent of patriarchal authority and to negotiate her marriage according to her own needs and wants. Even though she makes the marriage contract in the guise of a man, this is still very much an act of woman's agency, because Willmore is in no doubt of Hellena's femininity at the time of the proviso scene. Here the masculine is used as a tool to gain Hellena the agency necessary to be self-determining as a woman.

Hellena first establishes her masculine role as a page boy for another of her guises. This is a particularly apt role for Hellena, since a page boy is an agent for another, thus as well as agency through the ability to move and speak freely in public, this guise also allows Hellena to be an agent for herself. And indeed, she uses this role to further her own interests and frustrate Willmore's interactions with the courtesan, Angellica Bianca (*Rover* 215 – 218). Although

Willmore recognizes her, Hellena breaks off all positive relations between him and Angellica as a result of Angellica's jealous nature (218 – 221). Finally things culminate between Hellena and Willmore when they begin to negotiate for marriage in their proviso scene. Willmore's recognition of Hellena as a woman is necessary so that they can discuss their marriage in the first place, but even though she is known to be female, Hellena still retains the masculine benefits of the breeches part because her identity remains concealed since she refuses to give Willmore her name. Hellena's ability to occupy the feminine and the masculine at once (like Cixous's concept of bisexual womanhood) allows her the public agency afforded by the masculine mobility and freedom of voice while avoiding the appearance of being inappropriate, thus protecting her feminine reputation and ability to marry. Cross-dressing gives Hellena the power to leave behind the demure, passivity of the appropriately modest lady and instead make more forthright demands of Willmore for the continuance of their relationship. First, Hellena declares her sexual interest in Willmore: "Faith none, captain: – why, 'twill be the greater charity to take me for thy mistress. I am a lone child, a kind of orphan lover, and why I should die a maid, and in a captain's hands too, I do not understand" (241). As an appropriately chaste and modest woman that is the model for femininity, Hellena could never express a desire to lose her virginity and not "die a maid" and certainly could not articulate a desire to do so with a haste to "lose no time" (242). The freedom of voice permitted by Hellena's masculine guise enchants Willmore, who grows increasingly desirous of possessing her and quickly proposes that they "retire and fall to" (242). Hellena,

however, insists that they be married first and when he continues to protest, she argues, “what shall I get? a cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of repentance at my back?” (242), showing an awareness of sexual intercourse and its outcomes that an appropriately feminine character of the upper class would not admit to. In the end, Hellena succeeds, Willmore agrees to the marriage, and they finally exchange names to seal the bargain (243). This exchange symbolically ends Hellena’s usurpation of the freedom granted from masculinity, because it reveals her identity. Had she been restricted within the bounds of femininity from the start, Hellena would not have been able to openly negotiate and thus would have been unable to convince Willmore to marry. Furthermore, if Hellena remained within the lines of female gender expectations, Willmore could have fallen into his rakish ways and taken advantage of her as he attempted to do with the near rape of the passive Florinda (201-203). Thus, Hellena is ironically only able to maintain the purity expected of women by leaving the confines of femininity and using the masculine. In order to have the agency necessary to achieve her goal and marry her “handsome proper fellow” (160), Hellena must cross the boundary of the feminine as the transvestism of the breeches part allows her to do.

A similar use of the breeches part occurs in Behn’s *The Widow Ranter*, and much like *The Rover* there are two instances of cross-dressing: the Widow Ranter and the Indian Queen. However, the Indian Queen is about as negligible as Florinda, because her breeches part serves more as a plot device than anything else. In Act V, scene iii, the Queen enters dressed as an Indian warrior

as a group of Indians lead her to her escape from Bacon's camp. The Queen does not stray from the behavioral norms of her sex with her disguise and is instead, like Florinda, the typical model of femininity, adhering to the expectation of chaste virtue throughout the play rather than gaining agency as Ranter does. Even during the breeches part, the Queen acknowledges her complete passive femininity: "I have no Amazonian fire about me, all my artillery is sighs and tears . . ." (*Ranter* 317). She does not possess the masculine characteristics of the Amazons and instead relies on the soft, feminine "sighs and tears." The Queen also lacks a goal to achieve and is instead conflicted about her desires, torn between honoring her husband and giving in to her love for Bacon. In the end, the Queen is simply sacrificed to achieve the tragic part of Behn's tragicomedy. The Queen's male disguise lasts long enough for her to be wounded in the confusion of battle, and as soon as she receives individual attention she is instantly recognized (318). Her male guise only serves to further and give reason for her death.

The Widow Ranter, however, constantly breaks from the expectations of feminine gender roles, gathering agency in the process. The economic independence afforded to Ranter by her widowhood allows her a freedom of voice and behavior that Hellena can only gain through transvestism (Bacon 435). She is first described by Friendly to Hazard as "a great gallant" (*Ranter* 255), an adjective typically associated with masculinity. Moreover, she smokes and drinks all day, again adopting masculine behavior instead of the soft femininity her place as a woman should dictate. She further deviates from feminine norms, earlier

established with an analysis of Florinda's character, when she announces, "I bar love-making within my territories" (276). Having forbidden wooing, Ranter has essentially forbidden romance and with it an aspect of feminine nature. Todd superbly summarizes Ranter's character, highlighting the fact that she embodies a more masculinized type of femininity:

Ranter is a roistering woman. As such, she lives high, giving gargantuan banquets to anyone of a jolly disposition, smoking and drinking in the morning, downing pints of punch through the day, riding like a man in the evening, and roundly abusing her servants like a lord. (Secret 416)

No man, Ranter acknowledges, would approach such a woman with romantic intentions – such a man would be "a miracle" (*Ranter* 266). Thus, Ranter's boisterous and raucous behavior separates her from her feminine propriety long before she actually disguises herself as a man.

Contrary to Hellena, who uses her outspokenness to confront her brother's masculine authority over her, Ranter's forward behavior only repulses the patriarchy and figures of masculine authority. This complicates Ranter's agency because the use of it through her free behavior also prevents her from exercising her will to gain a husband; again a firm notion of feminine agency is difficult to pinpoint because the Ranter seems to both have and lack agency at the same time. Though Ranter seems unabashed by the effects of her behavior, she is upset that Daring, the object of Ranter's passion, ignores her in favor of her friend, Chrisante who represents a more traditional model of femininity. Even

though Ranter is praised as “good-natured and generous” (*Ranter* 255), her less-than-feminine nature creates a stark contrast with Chrisante’s demure femininity. Chrisante models the soft, quiet nature expected of women, scarcely speaking throughout the play, especially in comparison to the outspoken Ranter. Chrisante also fits the expectation that women should be modest, as Daring indicates when he explains, “she denies me so obligingly she keeps my love still in its humble calm” (307).

Recognizing that she cannot compete with Chrisante in the realm of the feminine, Ranter decides instead to take action: “Pox on it, no; why should I sigh and whine, and make myself an ass, and [Daring] conceited? No, instead of snivelling I’m resolved Gad, to beat the rascal, and bring off Chrisante” (*Ranter* 307). Ranter realizes that sighing and waiting for Daring to take note of her as would be appropriately womanly has gotten her no where, she dons the guise of a man, which enables Ranter to take action as a woman cannot. She uses her wit to trick Daring into bringing her into Chrisante’s presence and letting Chrisante choose between Daring and the “male” Ranter (308). Ranter is aware that Chrisante has no feelings for Daring, her role as woman granting Ranter at least that intimate knowledge, and she uses it to her advantage to force Daring to yield in his pursuit of Chrisante (309). However, Ranter’s ruse is soon discovered, and when told he should marry Ranter, Daring jests,

Ranter – gad, I’d sooner marry a she bear, unless for a penance for some horrid sin; we should be eternally challenging one another to the field, and ten to one she beats me there; or if I should escape

there, she would kill me with drinking. . . . Then such a tongue – she'll rail and smoke till she choke again, then six gallons of punch hardly recovers her, and never but then is she good-natured. (309 – 310)

Daring picks out all of Ranter's masculine characteristics that are unseemly in a woman and even at times make her more manly than he is (believing she could beat him in the field). Admiring the "pains" Ranter took to acquire Daring's love, he decides to marry her (310). However, he insists that Ranter remain in the garb of a man: "Nay, prithee, take me in the humour, while thy breeches are on – for I never liked thee half so well in petticoats" (310). While humorous, Daring's request suggests that Ranter is preferable as a man. Ranter achieves her goal of marriage through cross-dressing, because the guise of masculinity puts her unfeminine character traits in a more appropriate context.

However, as I have stated, Hellena and Ranter's agency through self-determination is not without complication. In a discussion of literary cross-dressing in her book *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women*, Catherine Craft-Fairchild claims that "at most, transvestite masquerade offers a temporary escape" for the characters in the role of the breeches part (172). This is certainly the case for Hellena, who alters her femininity in order to achieve her goal of securing a husband. Once she is engaged to Willmore, cross-dressing is no longer necessary for Hellena; she has achieved her goal on her terms and can now return to being a woman. Moreover, as soon as Hellena is officially engaged to Willmore, she becomes an

attainable object for his desire because she will soon no longer deny him sexual gratification. Craft-Fairchild asserts that once a woman “becomes a spectacle or fetish for the man’s pleasure, masquerade does not alter women’s status – it leaves them inscribed in the dominant economy as objects of male vision and masculine desire” (53). Hellena has become subject to Willmore’s desire for her and so the identity shielding aspect of disguise is shattered, mitigating the need for Hellena to retain her masculine disguise. This merely means that Hellena is likely to set aside her masculine attire; she still used cross-dressing to escape from norms of femininity and attain her goal. It is simply that, having acquired her goal, Hellena no longer has a need for cross-dressing. Ultimately, Hellena uses her agency only to negotiate its loss through marriage, in which she will be the subject of her husband.

For Ranter, on the other hand, there is some doubt of the temporality of her cross-dressing. Transvestism has resolved her character flaws, making them more appropriate, and her husband does not prefer her “in petticoats.” She spends nearly all the remainder of the play in male garb, and her dress in the concluding scene remains ambiguous. The stage direction indicates that Ranter enters as “as before” (*Ranter* 322). However, there is some question as to what before indicates. “Before” could refer to the previous scenes in which case Ranter is in male garb, but it could also indicate her female dress prior to the cross-dressing. Also, she does not seem to be much of an object of desire for her husband; there is little to no sexual connotation to their dialogue as there is between Hellena and Willmore, so Craft-Fairchild’s protests are moot here. For

Ranter, the change may allow her to escape female gender expectations more permanently. Nevertheless, like Hellena, Ranter has negotiated for the loss of her agency through marriage.

While Hellena seems to intentionally depart from traditional norms of femininity in order to oppose the patriarchal control the men in her life hold over her, Ranter's transgression seems more unintentional, pushing away men and repulsing the patriarchy with her wildly inappropriate behavior. For Hellena, the breeches part is an escalation in her violation of expected behavior in women, but for Ranter cross-dressing resolves her pre-existing breach of femininity. Nevertheless, both women are able to disguise themselves as men and successfully obtain the object of their desire in marriage, contrary to what the patriarchal structures in either play would dictate to them as appropriate. The breeches part allows Hellena and the Widow Ranter to stray from the appropriate models of feminine behavior in a socially acceptable way. The breeches part itself (as well as the masculinity it allows) helps the characters achieve this acceptability; the breeches part is just that, a *part*, which implies that the role was a common and accepted convention of theater. Thus, Hellena and Ranter are able to be outspoken and pursue their desires and goals openly without risk of social censure – a luxury Behn herself might have liked to enjoy.

For both characters we see the development of their respective agencies. Hellena begins by removing herself from the authority of her brother and insisting on her own independence and her right to choose her own path in life. She realizes this desire for self-determination through the freedom of movement,

voice and behavior that masculine part of cross-dressing permits. She develops this over the course of the play until she is finally able attain her goal of negotiating her own marriage. Meanwhile, Widow Ranter begins with some of the aspects of agency that Hellena gains: freedom of movement, voice, and behavior. And while she enjoys these abilities, they also prohibit her from exercising her own will and thus from further developing her version of agency. This leads her to transvestism, which makes her behavior more appropriate and allows her to also marry. In the following chapter we will see the sense of feminine agency develop still further, building on some of the above aspects while altering others. For Mrs. Warren and Vivie, the need for self-determination grows stronger as does freedom of voice. However, rather than using the ability to exercise will to negotiate for marriage and thus loss of agency, Mrs. Warren and Vivie develop a control of their sexuality that enhances their agency. The economic independence of Widow Ranter will become an even more important part of both Mrs. Warren's and Vivie's versions of agency, but rather than holding them back as it initially does Ranter, it only empowers Mrs. Warren and Vivie. Despite some of the similarities in method, Mrs. Warren and Vivie will arrive at agencies that differ drastically from Hellena and Ranter as well as from one another.

Chapter 2: Developing Agency in George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, George Bernard Shaw constructs a critique of British society for the conditions it supports that allow and encourage prostitution, and in the process, according to Peter Raby, "Shaw incriminates the whole of society in the business of prostitution" (200). The play explores this issue through two heroines, Mrs. Warren and Vivie, and their relationship as mother and daughter. While Mrs. Warren in her role as prostitute and madam is the vehicle for Shaw's representation of prostitution, Shaw presents her in a sympathetic light, refusing to demonize and "condemn Mrs. Warren or her (off-stage) sister Liz for escaping from penury and exploitation by taking control of their only assets, their bodies" (Raby 200). Vivie, meanwhile, contrasts Mrs. Warren's forwardness with her sense of moral propriety. Interestingly, despite this obvious contrast in characters, Mrs. Warren and Vivie share some striking similarities: both women are bold in their individual manners and both pursue careers. As a result, Mrs. Warren and Vivie are able to gain agency by stepping outside of traditional Victorian femininity and encroaching on the masculine. Ultimately, observing these two characters reveals, not some single definition of agency being achieved, but the fluidity of female agency, which we see as it develops for these two women. Drawing on some of the same aspects of agency

as Behn's characters (self-determination, voice), Mrs. Warren and Vivie pair them with different methods to different effect. Instead of the use of the masculine through cross-dressing, Mrs. Warren and Vivie intrude further on a more established masculine public sphere through professionalism. Ultimately they gain agencies that are more lasting and extensive than those of Hellena and Ranter, which are negotiated away.

Before continuing, I would like to establish a picture of the typical role for women from which Mrs. Warren and Vivie depart. In her book, *Silent Sisterhood*, Patricia Branca studies the life of the middle-class Victorian woman. Branca focuses on married women in particular because, as she argues, "marriage provided the most typical role for the middle-class woman in the nineteenth century" (2). Branca begins by recounting the typical depiction of Victorian women as providers of "the proper environment of respectability" for their husbands, a duty which required them to be "righteous, gentle, sympathetic, and most of all submissive" (7). Branca also notes certain laws that placed Victorian women at a disadvantage compared to their husbands by granting them "no existence in common law apart from the husband" (7). Women's wages and ability to own property were turned over to their husbands, divorce for women was nearly impossible, and women had no right to their children (7-8). Such laws were later reformed with the Matrimonial Causes Acts of 1857 and 1878 as well as additional legislation in the latter half of the century (8-9). While women were largely dependent on their husbands, Branca argues that our view of the Victorian woman has been distorted by over-focusing on negatives. She

proposes that middle-class Victorian women played vital, highly involved roles in the domestic sphere of their households and families and that women had power in their occupation as directors of their households, controlling such aspects as the household budget (22). As a result, Branca asserts that “the middle-class housewife was thus an active agent in the family” (22).

More recently, Lyn Pykett has similarly defined “the feminine norm [as] . . . the middle-class wife and mother” (12); however, unlike Branca, Pykett’s study focuses on the women who have deviated from that norm, such as the New Woman. Pykett argues that the debate over the Woman Question “was waged on the site of the dominant definition of the ‘proper feminine’ – the ideal of the domestic ideology, according to which woman was defined primarily in terms of her reproductive and domestic functions with the developing bourgeois family” (12). Drawing from Coventry Patmore’s widely popularized ideal of the ‘Angel in the House,’ Pykett notes that women were the “guardian[s] of the newly moralized and privatized domestic haven” that was kept at a remove from the public sphere in which men were immersed (12). Victorian society subscribed to an “ideology of the separate spheres” in which women ideally reigned over the domestic, while men “exercised [their] power in the hazardous, hostile, public domain” (12-13). This Victorian ideology operates interestingly in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* when Vivie rejects the domestic in favor of a more welcoming public sphere and Mrs. Warren does not simply deviate from normative social spheres, but instead collapses them.

Along with Branca and Pykett, Mary Poovey places the typical role of the Victorian middle-class woman within the domestic. In *Uneven Developments*, Poovey offers perhaps the best definition of this Victorian domestic ideal of women who were “represented as protecting and, increasingly, incarnating virtue” following the mid-century (10). This creates the middle class ideology that informs the characters of Mrs. Warren and Vivie, whose versions of agency deviate from the norm. Poovey accounts for this development when she claims that

The middle class ideology we most often associate with the Victorian period was both contested and always under construction; because it was always in the making it was always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formulations. (3)

As a result, this constant shifting allows *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* to illustrate a sense of female agency that is continuously developing rather than remaining static.

Branca, Pykett, and Poovey position the typical Victorian woman in the domestic sphere where women are gentle, passive and dependent. While a certain amount of power is available for such women, it exists principally in the private sphere. Here women have authority over the household, controlling aspects such as servants and budgeting. However, this empowerment was restricted to the private sphere, and as a result women often lacked independent

thought, mobility, and self-determination.¹⁰ Shaw strays from this version of the middle-class female and develops a picture of women as *public* agents, first with Mrs. Warren who has a foot in both the private and public spheres and then with Vivie who rejects the private in favor of the public.¹¹

Much like Mrs. Warren and Vivie, Victorian actresses were women able to gain agency by escaping the bounds of society's expectations of femininity that remains in the private sphere. Thus, by playing the parts of characters like Mrs. Warren and Vivie actresses take on dual positions: at once allowing the play to exist as an archive of social change through the actresses' representation of female characters gaining agency and also engaging in and enacting social change through their careers as actresses.¹² Kerry Powell's monograph *Women and Victorian Theatre* focuses on the challenge women, both actresses and playwrights, faced in the male-dominated world of the Victorian theatre. While Powell specifically focuses on women in theatrical professions, his book also

¹⁰ In *Cassandra*, Florence Nightengale's narrator confronts the state of idleness enforced by women's restriction to the private, domestic sphere: "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity – these three – and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised" (25). She bemoans the fact that women have "nothing to do," repeating the phrase until it drones much like these women's lives must (32, 34, 36) and equates the state with death (38, 41). John Stuart Mill is also opposed to the norms faced by Victorian women and likens the state of women to slavery (223 – 233). Moreover, according to Mill, society has carefully nurtured slavish submission in women: "All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others" (232).

¹¹ This framework of public versus private agency is a new development not found in Behn, primarily due to the fact that the separate spheres were a distinctly Victorian concept. However, we could view Behn's work as oddly straddling the public and private, precursory to the more developed Victorian ideals. The ladies of *The Rover* walk the streets in masquerade, and the Widow Ranter traipses around a battlefield (public), whereas both women's agencies are very wrapped up in marriage (private).

¹² Similar, in a way, to their Restoration forbearers, who themselves enacted social change by opening the stage and thus a profession to women.

provides useful insight into the condition of the Victorian woman in general. In one such instance, Powell claims that

For women throughout the Victorian period the stage possessed a unique allure. It afforded the active, disciplined life and potentially the financial rewards of a profession, one of few then accessible to women. Even more importantly in some cases, a life in the theatre offered women a voice - the ability to speak compellingly while others, including men, sat in enforced silence . . . Actresses could be intoxicated by their control over audiences, and in particular over men, who in most other situations reserved power for themselves and compelled women to silence. (3)

Powell's statement explores the benefits of becoming an actress and reveals by contrast what Victorian women could typically expect from their roles in society: silence, passivity, and dependence on men. The middle class Victorian woman was restricted by the prominent "angel in the house" ideal and thus confined to what Powell labels "the narrow domesticity which ordinarily defined femininity" (13). The typical Victorian middle class woman, with little voice and hope of financial security independent of men, lacked the agency to exert much power or a will of her own. However, becoming an actress was not without risk. The fact that such a career allowed actresses to differ from the typical Victorian woman also worked against them since the opposite of the ideal domestic angel was a whore. Actresses found themselves caught in this dichotomy and were forced to face the loss of respectability that could accompany their profession.

Nevertheless, a career as an actress enabled women to possess a public voice and the hope of financial self-sufficiency, and thus actresses were able to achieve agency outside of the domestic sphere. Similarly, Mrs. Warren and Vivie are able to gain agency by moving away from Victorian feminine norms while negotiating the risks of such a deviation.

Like the actresses that play their characters, Mrs. Warren and Vivie find agency through the pursuit of a profession. For the Victorian middle class, work was principally the province of men, and women were relegated to the domestic sphere of the household. With few exceptions, women who pursued professional lives infringed on the male sphere. Powell notes this sentiment in the fears that the actress raised for Victorian men: “This medley of fear and admiration was rooted in a nervous perception that the exceptional actress could and sometimes did work free of the constraints of her gender, trespassing on the territory of men” (14). Work generated financial independence, which in turn allowed Victorian women to exercise their own will, but the woman who was capable of asserting herself and claiming authority was viewed as having stepped outside the bounds of femininity, even to the point of being found masculine. As American theatre critic William Winter cautions his audience, “you might resent [the actress’s] dominance, and shrink from it, calling it ‘masculine’” (qtd. in Powell 14). Actresses, having gained self-sufficiency through profession and strong voice through performance, could be viewed as a threat by men. As Winter’s statement indicates, it is then tempting for the masculine audience to alter the actress’s femininity by labeling her masculine in an attempt to reconcile the

female's intrusion into the masculine public sphere. Similarly, it is this gender-mined field which Mrs. Warren and Vivie necessarily tread as they attempt agency through careerism and the complications of dipping into the masculine taint their success. According to Michael Holroyd, "From *Mrs. Warren's Profession* onwards, Shaw campaigned in the theatre for the economic independence of women which would give them the individual choice as to the direction they wished to go" (19). Thus, in his play, Shaw offers to paths toward financial freedom for women, developing for Vivie a better professional option than was available to her mother, though for both women financial success enhances their personal agency.

Mrs. Warren gains her agency off stage, so that by the time the audience first becomes acquainted with her, she has already established her power and the audience is left to simply observe its application. This creates an interesting situation within the play since it is Vivie whose journey we truly follow despite Mrs. Warren being the titular character. This not only allows us to observe agency across a generation (from Mrs. Warren to Vivie), but Mrs. Warren's development off-stage allows her the additional authority of telling her own story thus becoming self-authoring. In investigating the ideological work of gender difference, Mary Poovey finds that because it fixed males' identity as superior, "the binary opposition between the sexes was more important than any other kinds of difference that real women might experience. And this depended, among other things, on limiting women's right to define or describe themselves" (80). Shaw neatly circumvents this limitation by focusing his play on Vivie's

development, which in turn allows Mrs. Warren to tell the audience her story in her own words because she is the only one with knowledge of her background. Mrs. Warren uses that power of knowledge to define herself not as a fallen woman but as a woman who has risen: as she tells Vivie her story, Mrs. Warren makes it clear that she elevated herself to a higher position through her career choice. Had the action of the play followed Mrs. Warren's story, this would not have been possible; Victorian social prejudice would have seen little more than a prostitute. However, by claiming authorship of her story, Mrs. Warren gains agency through voice.¹³

Off stage, Mrs. Warren initially gains power through her profession, which is never much of a mystery, even from the beginning of the play when Vivie and Praed's conversation hints at Mrs. Warren's prostitution. In modern society, it would be easy to see prostitution as a position lacking in power and agency. However, as Deborah Anna Logan notes in her book, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing*, most Victorian prostitutes actively choose their profession (66). Logan principally focuses on working class women and further observes "the disturbing fact that . . . many women had no other options from which to choose" (66). Mrs. Warren's frustrated explanation to Vivie of her choice in profession supports Logan's assertions:

Two of us were sisters: that was me and Liz; and we were both
good-looking and well made The other two were only half

¹³ This is reminiscent of the use of disguise by Hellena and the Widow Ranter, who author themselves through appearance by choosing the way they are presented to the public (in cross-dress), an appearance that allows them to exercise voice to become even more self-determining.

sisters . . . They were the respectable ones. Well, what did they get by their respectability? I'll tell you. One of them worked in a whitelead factory twelve hours a day for nine shillings a week until she died of lead poisoning. She only expected to get her hands a little paralyzed; but she died. The other was always held up to us as a model because she married a Government laborer . . . and kept his room and the three children neat and tidy on eighteen shillings a week – until he took to drink. That was worth being respectable for wasn't it? (Shaw 61)

Mrs. Warren illustrates for her daughter the options available to working class women: work or marriage. Neither option offers a favorable outcome; female factory workers were worked to death, and marriage rendered women too dependent on their husbands. As Sos Eltis explains, Mrs. Warren's situation "is not . . . a question of sexual morality but of simple economics; society left her with the immoral choice between starvation and slow death working in a white-lead factory, or prostitution" (229). Thus, Mrs. Warren and her sister elected an option that could provide them with better lives.¹⁴ Prostitution allowed Mrs. Warren the power brought by being financially independent which in turn afforded

¹⁴ The presentation of prostitution as a better option for working-class girls is by no means unique to Shaw. Consider, for example, Thomas Hardy's "The Ruined Maid" published a few decades earlier in 1866. The poem is a dialogue between two girls, with the first speaker cataloging the changes in Melia since last they met: Melia's "tatters" have changed to "gay bracelets and bright feathers" (5-8), pawlike hands and a sickly complexion to gloves and the healthy blush of a "delicate cheek" (13-16), etc. She concludes with the observation that Melia's previous life, which was "a hag-ridden dream" has become full of prosperity free of ills (17-20). To all of these remarks, Melia replies that that is simply the way life is "when ruined" (20). This highlights the contrast between ideology and reality; society dictates that a fall results in the ruination of a woman, but "ruin" has only brought Melia a better life, much like it does for Mrs. Warren.

her agency through the freedom to do as she willed. Moreover, Mrs. Warren values this agency because it allows her to economically transcend her class to enjoy the wealthy middle-class lifestyle we see in the play, although, as I will show later in this chapter, the role social mobility plays in Mrs. Warren's life complicates her agency more than adds to it.

However, Mrs. Warren does not stop with a simple career as a prostitute; instead she develops her career into a thriving business. While prostitution is one of the few professions available to women, work, as part of the public sphere, was typically the domain of men. A businesswoman was certainly not the Victorian norm, and through this career path, Mrs. Warren trod on territory that usually belonged to men. As Crofts describes Mrs. Warren to Vivie, she “has a genius for managing “ and acts as the “managing director” for their business enterprises, not positions or abilities Victorian women were usually thought to possess (76). Men who operate in the public sphere and work earn their money through business and investment, but for a woman to do so is certainly unconventional. And yet, Mrs. Warren has created a thriving empire of whores and brothels across Europe with Crofts, running an internationally based business. It is this path that allows Mrs. Warren to exercise her agency; her business savvy elevates her lifestyle through the resulting economic gain. Keeping up her business also allows Mrs. Warren to exercise her own will; as she admits to her daughter, she enjoys her business, rather than desiring what society expects of women (to retire into “good society” like her sister) (95). Having become independently wealthy through business, Mrs. Warren prefers to

remain there rather than retiring to the more appropriately feminine private sphere. When Vivie criticizes her mother for remaining in a disreputable business despite being wealthy enough to retire, Mrs. Warren defends herself: “I must have work and excitement, or I should go melancholy mad. And what else is there for me to do? The life suits me: I’m fit for it and not for anything else. . . . And then it brings in money; and I like making money” (95). Ultimately, Mrs. Warren prefers work, a characteristic Victorian society ascribes to middle class men not women. By insisting on remaining in business, Mrs. Warren exercises the agency she has achieved by asserting her own will and right of self-determination. Furthermore, it is the empowerment that comes with financial success that enables Mrs. Warren to exercise that agency in the first place, and her “masculine” desire to work and remain in the public sphere allows her to preserve that.

From this atypical careerism, Mrs. Warren further strays from society’s expectations of women. Mrs. Warren’s control over her sexuality empowers her in a way that traditional femininity cannot, since sexually active women are typically either married and thus subject to their husbands’ rule or socially outcaste. She wields this control as a powerful tool – most obviously by using her sexuality to establish her business. Moreover, she builds her business into an empire by expanding her control to the sexuality of other women, extending her power over others. Lastly, in a culture where “maternity was the most highly valued of women’s abilities” (Logan 7), Mrs. Warren experiences motherhood while deviating from the social norm. Yet, similar to the use of her background

as a story of rising rather than falling, Mrs. Warren is able to use the illegitimacy of her child to her benefit. She has never revealed her child's parentage, and thus uses the identity of Vivie's father as a means of asserting her control.

Logan claims that "by the late Victorian period, the 'Woman Question' acquired yet another aspect as debates raged over the New Women's desires to exercise control over their sexuality and reproduction" (190). In Mrs. Warren, we find a precursor to this aspect of the New Woman that will be further developed in the next generation, Vivie. By controlling and utilizing her sexuality for her own ends, Mrs. Warren claims authority over her body and agency for herself.

However, the definition of agency for Mrs. Warren is not static and simply based on her actions prior to the play and her retelling of them. Instead Mrs. Warren adds to our concept of agency so that it encompasses her sense of self-respect. When Vivie questions whether or not her mother would advise her to work or marry honestly were they in a similar situation to the one Mrs. Warren faced when young, Mrs. Warren negates the idea and explains why:

Of course not. What sort of mother do you take me for! How could you keep your self-respect in such starvation and slavery? And what's a woman worth? what's life worth? without self-respect! Why am I independent and able to give my daughter a first-rate education, when other women that had just as good opportunities are in the gutter? Because I always knew how to respect myself and control myself. (Shaw 64.)

For Mrs. Warren, self-respect is essential for a woman's life to be worthwhile, and she gained this through prostitution, which Eltis claims was "the only profession which paid enough to maintain one's self-respect" (229). With her exclamation, Mrs. Warren asserts that her self-respect is what allowed her to gain independence, which is in turn part of her agency. As a result, Mrs. Warren has inextricably tied self-respect to her manifestation of female agency. And Mrs. Warren certainly seems to have that self-respect; when Vivie asks her if she feels shame, Mrs. Warren ultimately concludes, "I never was a bit ashamed really. I consider that I had a right to be proud that we managed everything so respectably, and never had a word against us, and that the girls were so well taken care of" (65). Rather than shame, Mrs. Warren professes a pride in her work indicative of the self-respect she insists on, a self-respect that ultimately leads her to refuse to give up her work even when faced with Vivie's shaming and condemnation of it (95).

Nevertheless, it is the notion of shame that complicates Mrs. Warren's agency. Peter Raby asserts that Shaw "sketches with deft economy a society that both permits, even promotes, prostitution and yet claims that it does not exist" (200). Mrs. Warren's conflictedness is a symptom of that hypocrisy as she both revels in her profession and seeks to hide it away. Mrs. Warren's speech from above is full of such contradictions. Mrs. Warren initially answers Vivie's question with, "Well, of course, dearie, it's only good manners to be ashamed of it, it's expected from a woman" (Shaw 65). This sense of shame in her career path would seem to negate the idea that Mrs. Warren respects herself, and yet

Mrs. Warren quickly reverses this shame, claiming that “women have to pretend to feel a great deal that they don’t feel” (65) This implies that the shame she initially professes is a mere pretence for society’s sake. Yet, later even as she claims to not be ashamed at all, Mrs. Warren concludes her speech by hushing herself: “But of course now I daren’t talk about such things: whatever would they think of us!” (65). Is Mrs. Warren a hypocrite claiming self respect while actually feeling shame? Instead, I would argue that Mrs. Warren’s apparent hypocrisy is simply a symptom of her need to balance the complications her agency has brought about. On the one hand, she values and takes pride in her profession as the means of her independence. On the other, that independence has elevated her station in society to that of the upper-middle class, a position Mrs. Warren also values and fears to lose. Thus, we find this strange combination of shamed and unashamed in her character. In order to maintain her position in society, Mrs. Warren must be both at once. She needs to maintain a ladylike appearance of shame, hiding away her true nature lest she lose her standing and, as a result, her pride in her achievements. Vivie points this contradiction out to Mrs. Warren during their argument in the final act: “If I had been you, mother, I might have done as you did; but I should not have lived one life and believed in another. You are a conventional woman at heart” (97). Mrs. Warren claims self-respect as a part of agency but must hide away what she is out of shame and fear of losing her position in society; thus, even as her agency seems to allow her to escape the restrictions Victorian society places on females, Mrs. Warren finds herself still bound.

This need to maintain upper-middle class status through the appearance of respectability also influences Mrs. Warren's relationship with her daughter. Mrs. Warren very deliberately instilled conventional values in Vivie by having her raised and educated away from the daily workings of her mother's business life. As J. Ellen Gainor notes, "Mrs. Warren has also been operating under the assumption that Vivie will conform to 'her ideal' of conventional womanhood by marrying and experiencing an adulthood quite different from her own. . . . Mrs. Warren wants Vivie to be her opposite" (36). However, this goes beyond Mrs. Warren's desire for her daughter to live a better life, since it is important to Mrs. Warren that Vivie maintains her own respectability, because her daughter's actions affect Mrs. Warren's standing in the upper echelons of society. Mrs. Warren fears the signs of unconventionality that she witnesses in her daughter and seeks to rein her in, declaring, "Your way of life will be what I please, so it will" (58). However, Vivie defies her mother's will in favor of her own. Unlike Mrs. Warren, Vivie does not seek to impose her will on others, claiming that she "shall always respect [Mrs. Warren's] right to [her] own opinions and [her] own way of life" (60). Mrs. Warren does not share Vivie's respect for others' abilities to be self-determining, and she is horrified when she realizes that her daughter is diverging from the careful shaping Mrs. Warren has provided:

Haven't I told you that I want you to be respectable? Haven't I brought you up to be respectable? And how can you keep it up without my money and my influence and Lizzie's friends? Can't you

see that you're cutting your own throat as well as breaking my heart
in turning your back on me? (94)

Mrs. Warren fears that Vivie's rejection of the private sphere, family, and her upbringing in favor of a public profession will mean the loss of Vivie's respectability. More importantly, Mrs. Warren recognizes that Vivie's actions will affect society's perceptions not just of Vivie but also of Mrs. Warren. It is dangerous for Vivie to pursue an alternate lifestyle because it could damage her mother's social standing.¹⁵ This concern negatively impacts Mrs. Warren's power of self-determination, because it reveals that the social standing (through which she maintains her agency) is actually determined by other people.

Mrs. Warren's agency faces further complications from the method she employs to obtain it. She claims that her profession has allowed her to become independent, but there is a dependency to prostitution that belies this aspect of Mrs. Warren's agency. While any business is reliant on the patronage of its customers, prostitution puts those it employs in a more precarious position, since their lack of respectability prevents them from finding other means of supporting themselves should their business fail. There is also some lack of agency in Mrs. Warren's choice of profession in that there was no true choice at all: prostitution was the only option Mrs. Warren found viable. Furthermore, agency is to some degree dependent on one's position in society; in order to exercise independence

¹⁵ Although Mrs. Warren fears the loss of respectability an unmarried, working woman might attract, her solution for Vivie, marriage, is not much better than the path Mrs. Warren herself follows. Gainor notes that the irony of Mrs. Warren's desire for Vivie to marry lies in its frequent parallel to prostitution; In Mrs. Warren's notion of marriage, Vivie would essentially sell herself to a husband in exchange for being supported – no different than prostitution (37).

and free will a person must be around other people – impossible if outcaste by society. This is why it becomes important for Mrs. Warren to maintain her unique position of being able to hide her profession while moving in respectable circles of society – her agency would be of little use if she was shunned by society and unable to exercise it. After all, the brand of agency being examined in this thesis is women’s public agency, but if a woman is not part of the public, what’s the point? Ultimately, prostitution is not an acceptable method toward female agency since the risks outweigh the rewards. I imagine few are capable of achieving status like Mrs. Warren, and those that do are left with a complicated balancing act to maintain themselves and their ability to exercise agency. Mrs. Warren claims that “the only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her” (Shaw 64), but marriage denies women public voice while prostitution risks that public independence by creating women unable to exist acceptably in either the public or private spheres. The solution perhaps is to find a means toward agency that exists outside the traditionally feminine path rather than the careful balancing act of Mrs. Warren.

It is just such a path that Vivie takes in her journey shown throughout the play. For two women who are so completely sundered from each other by the end of the play, Vivie and her mother are remarkably similar. Like her mother, Vivie’s agency is a combination of her freedom of voice, self-sufficient financial independence and freedom of will, self-respect, and sexual control. As Eltis notes, “Both women are independent, energetic, determined and in possession of an excellent head for business. The very same qualities that made Mrs.

Warren a 'bad' woman make Vivie a 'good' one. . . . It is circumstance not character which determines their individual fates" (229). Circumstance allows Vivie, unlike her mother, to be raised as an upper middle class woman with the corresponding notions of respectability and to receive an education. As such, it would seem that Vivie has more options available to her than her mother's working class upbringing allowed. Yet, if Vivie wishes to remain respectable and to fulfill her mother's designs, her options are actually restricted to a domestic lifestyle society deems appropriate for middle class women. The education afforded by Mrs. Warren's success allows Vivie to pursue an alternate path in life, quite different than her mother's, but in order to have a career Vivie must diverge from her conventional upbringing. This deviation and Vivie's insistence on living in the public sphere ultimately lead her to be able to take the same elements of agency found in Mrs. Warren and further develop them into her own version of agency.

Vivie is, as Mr. Praed notes in the opening scene, very much a "modern young [lady]" (Shaw 33).¹⁶ From the outset, Vivie defies traditional notions of femininity (what Praed calls "maidenly reserve") and is instead a "vigorous" "businesslike" woman whose words are almost always sharp and direct (33, 31). Despite her own business savvy, Mrs. Warren frequently fails to understand that this is an essential part of Vivie's nature. Instead Mrs. Warren appeals to her daughter to be more typically feminine because this is what she needs Vivie to

¹⁶ J. Ellen Gainor claims that Vivie's characterization can likely be attributed to Shaw's friend, Beatrice Webb, whom he admired for her "commitment to her work and to the Fabian cause, as well as her lack of 'sexual sentimentality'" (33).

be. When she attempts to sway Vivie to her side once more, Mrs. Warren tempts Vivie with promises: “[my money] means a new dress every day; it means theatres and balls every night; it means having the pick of all the gentlemen in Europe at your feet; it means a lovely house and plenty of servants I know what young girls are” (93). Even as Mrs. Warren rejects this conventional version of middle-class womanhood for herself by refusing to retire into respectability, she tries to insist upon convention for Vivie. But Mrs. Warren’s self-interest blinds her to the reality of Vivie’s character, and her promises reveal how little she knows her daughter. Her promises would appeal to a traditionally feminine young woman, but Vivie falls into the category of New Woman and values the public life of work and business rather than idle pleasures and the private sphere.

Mrs. Warren’s Profession was written in 1893, and, as Sally Ledger notes, the term “New Woman” was coined the following year (9), a timeline that positions Vivie within the emerging category.¹⁷ Although initially conceptualized as a means of ridiculing women who diverged from the middle class norm, the application of the term “unwittingly prised open a discursive space for” women fitting the description of New Woman (9). The depiction of the New Woman varied greatly, for example one might be “a champion of free love” while another is “more sexually circumspect” (11). Those who defended the New Woman believed that there should be more available to women than marriage and

¹⁷ Though written in 1893, the play was only performed eight years following due to moral protests and censorship.

motherhood and advocated the opening of professions to women (11-12). The New Woman was frequently cast as “opposed to marriage” and sexually licentious (12); while only the former might apply to Vivie, it is the fear of the loss of respectability brought by being associated with such an image that drives Mrs. Warren’s anxiety. Ledger also notes that “elsewhere she figured in discourse as a ‘mannish,’ asexual biological ‘type,’ taking on such behaviors as “wearing college ties, and smoking” (16). Detractors saw the development of the New Woman as a threat, one often blamed on education (17), while supporters saw the New Woman as a natural evolution to be desired (23), and the New Woman became a prominent part of early feminism in late Victorian England. Vivie, as Eltis notes, “with her firm handshake, mathematics degree and cigarette-smoking, whisky-drinking habits” encompasses many of the traits of New Woman (230), but I argue that she exhibits them in such a way as to neither condemn nor advocate the role of New Woman, creating an interestingly neutral character. Thus, Vivie’s escape from traditional femininity into the “modern” role of New Woman is what gives Vivie’s character much of its strength as well as some of her flaws.

In her own declaration of agency, Vivie tells her mother, “I shall always respect your right to your own opinions and your own way of life” (Shaw 60). These words do not simply apply to Mrs. Warren, but as Vivie has previously claimed her own “way of life,” these are rights that Vivie also claims for herself. Agency for Vivie is freedom of voice and will. She relentlessly employs her voice to gain her own way against her mother, countering her mother’s will and

assertion of motherly rights and coldly arguing for her own right to live as she desires and not under her mother's whims. Moreover, she is able to use her logic to penetrate her mother's self-invention, overpowering her mother's use of voice as agency with her own. For instance, following Mrs. Warren's speech entreating Vivie to accept her money, Vivie responds, "You must have said all that to many a woman, mother, to have it so pat" (93). She calls her mother on her lack of depth and acting, thus gaining the upper hand, which allows Vivie to gain her own way and split from her mother in the end. Moreover, Vivie makes herself heard publically by forthrightly voicing her own thoughts and opinions with near strangers like Praed and Crofts. This trait is evident in Vivie from the opening scene, when she plainly states her thoughts on schooling and her mother (30 – 37). Her forwardness startles Praed, who perhaps expects her to be more conventionally demure, and also begins to establish her as a New Woman. New Women were often criticized for their ability to be forward in conversation with men (Ledger 13), but rather than acting to her detriment this trait grants her voice in the public arena and thus strengthens her agency.

Vivie's agency through voice is tied to her insistence on her own will or her "way of life." Her will is her desire to pursue a career and thus enable herself to become financially self-sufficient. While she is dependent on others for monetary support, Vivie's ability to exert her will is limited, but a profession provides the means for independence. By the end of the play, Vivie has settled into a career as an accountant, claiming that "in the future [she] shall support [her]self" (Shaw 92). Being financially self-sufficient allows Vivie the agency to assert her own

will, permitting her to “go [her] *own* way in [her] *own* business and among [her] *own* friends” (92, emphasis mine). Through business Vivie is able to become her own person free of her mother’s support and thus of her mother’s control. But Vivie is not entirely free of her mother’s influence, and she admits that in her pursuit of business she is “her mother’s daughter,” saying “I am like you: I must have work, and must make more money than I spend. But my work is not your work, and my way not your way” (95). Even as she recognizes their similarities, however, Vivie insists on her own will, an act she is capable of because of the independence her career affords her. Gainor also notes the similarity in career path between Mrs. Warren and Vivie, pointing out that both women enter their professions through “partnership with another woman already established in the business, who showed them the desirability, profitability, and suitability for themselves of the field” (38). Vivie’s partnership with Honoria mirrors her mother’s partnership with her sister Liz. Vivie creates an odd tension by insisting that she is both like and unlike her mother that Gainor sees as having potentially negative consequences through the “subtle connections of mother and daughter, Fallen Woman and New Woman” (39). However, I would argue that rather than negatively linking the New Woman back to the Fallen Woman, Vivie takes the older model for feminine agency and improves upon it. Rather than diverging from her mother’s path, Vivie builds upon it, making her desire for work into a profession that can more respectably exist in the middle class. Economic independence allows these women to have agency, and we see how this aspect develops from a form that must be precariously hidden to one that is stronger

because can exist in the public eye. With this process a new version of feminine agency emerges in Vivie.

Vivie's career, as well as providing her with agency by itself, is also tied to her agency through her need for self-respect. Building from her mother's insistence on it, self-respect drives Vivie to seek her independence through professionalism, thus tying it to her agency. She seeks financial independence in part due to the nature of her mother's money, which Vivie finds tainted by her mother's lack of respectability. But also Vivie attaches self-respect to the need to work, as evidenced early on when she expresses her abhorrence of her mother and mother's friends to her beau, Frank:

If I thought that / was like that – that I was going to be a waster, shifting along from one meal to another with no purpose, and no character, and no grit in me, I'd open an artery and bleed to death without one moment's hesitation. (Shaw 53).

For Vivie to value herself she must not live a life of idleness, pleasure and excess, but instead one of purpose – one of work. As soon as she begins her career Vivie claims, "These two days have given me back all my strength and self-possession. I will never take a holiday again as long as I live" (82). Vivie regains her sense of self-worth as soon as she begins working. For this reason, when Mrs. Warren offers Vivie an idle lifestyle of pleasure, Vivie refuses and explains that "[she doesn't] want to be worthless" and instead insists that "[she] must have work" (95). Vivie can only respect herself as long as she is working and earning her own way; only then can she have her version of agency.

The final piece to Vivie's agency is her developing control of her sexuality. Like the New Woman, Vivie rejects marriage, but Shaw keeps her neutral since she does not appear to actually oppose marriage on a larger scale. She begins in a sickening relationship with Frank, in which both take on childlike roles. This farce of a romance masks Franks true intentions to rely on Vivie as a source of money (Shaw 44), a potential pitfall for Vivie were she not already aware of it (57). As the play continues, Vivie rejects Crofts as a potential suitor. He offers her money and position along with the promise to die within a reasonable amount of time, leaving everything to her. However, this mercenary motivation for marriage is merely a slightly more socially acceptable form of prostitution, and Vivie summarily refuses him (75). Later, after coming to the realization that she cares little for Frank sexually, Vivie goes about extricating herself from that relationship as well. When Frank begins to express his desire to maintain their relationship, Vivie completely desexualizes it by claiming that "brother and sister would be a very suitable relation for [them]" (84). Vivie's rejection of her mother is also a way for Vivie to exert control of her sexuality, in this case not her own but its mere presence in her life. She began this process earlier during her argument with Crofts:

I hardly find you worth thinking about at all now. When I think of the society that tolerates you, and the laws that protect you – when I think of how helpless nine out of ten young girls would be in the hands of you and my mother – the unmentionable woman and her capitalist bully – . . . I feel among the damned already. (78-79)

By rejecting the society that allows prostitution, Vivie also renounces her mother indirectly. When Vivie later insists that she and her mother part ways, Vivie expunges the element of unrespectable sexuality in her life. It is especially important that Vivie do so, since Vivie is choosing the route of celibacy and redundant women were often “linked with fallenness” (Logan 190). Any association with a disreputable woman could cause Vivie to fall in society’s estimation as well. As the play draws to its close, Vivie says goodbye to her mother and to Frank – the only two potential sources of sexuality in her life. Logan notes that while “some associate celibacy with disempowerment” some women are able to use it to “[assume] sexual agency in a culture wherein reproductive autonomy is aggressively obstructed” (57). Like the New Women she is modeled on, Vivie controls her sexuality as a means of agency and essentially renders herself asexual to do so.

Both Mrs. Warren and Vivie gain agency; however, as they develop in the play, a problem arises for viewers. Shaw has constructed two models for female agency, but neither seem to present a viable option for women to follow. This is, in part, because they rely upon perpetually needing to negotiate opposing desires and forces. Mrs. Warren’s agency is gained at the cost of respectability and creates a constant tension between her secret and society. Also, Mrs. Warren is probably the exception rather than the norm; it is highly unlikely that many women would be able to achieve what she has through prostitution. Vivie is a similarly undesirable model, again preventing us from pinpointing a definition of feminine agency that can be applied generally for women. Gainor argues that

Vivie “is a prototypical ‘modern young woman’ who chooses to remain unmarried at the play’s conclusion, yet suffers no ill effects for her decision” (32). While this is certainly the case, I would argue that the prototype still needs improvement. Although, Vivie has gained agency, her character is hardly something women would aspire to. Her treatment of her mother, complete rejection of culture and romance, and undivided attention to her career shape Vivie into a sort of automaton. Early in the play her mother exclaims, “My God, what sort of woman are you?” (Shaw 59); while Vivie encroaches on the masculine with her forward behavior and love of work, by the end of the play she hardly seems human, much less a particular sex. Powell notes,

The Victorian period was able to tolerate the actress . . . by confining her within the rhetorical structures of madness, disease, prostitution, deformation, and inhumanity. Seen as sick, depraved, and exotic these independent women could not easily present a serious threat to the social order which in normal circumstances would have rendered them, as women, idle and silent. (47)

Perhaps Vivie’s depiction is a symptom of this anxiety toward women with agency. Regardless, by Vivie’s example, it would seem that women’s agency can only be gained by stripping oneself of all gender and humanity to become coldly mechanical, hardly a reasonable exemplar to follow. In the end, the play leaves us with no working model – frustrating but representative of the fluid nature of female agency.

Thus, with *Votes for Women!* we will see agency develop along a different trajectory. The framework of public and private spheres remains, but this will exist more in the background and a new frame is added, that will emphasize concepts of individual and group agency. Many of the markers for agency in Mrs. Warren and Vivie are carried over to Vida Levering and Jean Dunbarton: voice, economic independence, self-determination, control of sexuality. The intrusion on the masculine through the public sphere also remains as a method toward agency, but in *Votes for Women!* this will take the form of charity work and the campaign for suffrage rather than a profession. This process also reflects the shift in emphasis to purely individual agency (as with Mrs. Warren and Vivie) to a dual focus on the individual agencies of Miss Levering and Jean and the extension of a broader feminine agency in the form of suffrage. Just as Mrs. Warren and Vivie deviated from Behn's characters, Miss Levering and Jean arrive at distinctly different versions of agency than Shaw's characters.

Chapter 3: Agency through Suffrage in Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women*

Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women!* was initially performed in 1906 at the Royal Court Theatre¹⁸ (Chothia 136), timing which positions the play within movement for women's suffrage in Great Britain, and it has only recently begun to enjoy greater attention in scholarship. Elizabeth Robins was a well-known and strong advocate of women's voting rights, a theme that acts as the focus of the plot of *Votes for Women*. The play centers on two heroines: Miss Vida Levering, an experienced and increasingly active campaigner for women's rights, and Jean Dunbarton, a young, naïve and newly engaged upper-middle class lady. Though not as literal as the mother-daughter relationship of Mrs. Warren and Vivie, *Votes for Women* illustrates a similar generational development of agency. Miss Levering begins the play already exercising individual agency operating in the public sphere and is therefore actively seeking a broader female agency in the form of suffrage. Jean, on the other hand, has led the sheltered life of a proper young lady, and the play follows Jean's journey of awakening to the idea of women having and exercising their own will. Miss Levering acts as a catalyst for this journey, and for her Jean represents the next generation of female activists.

¹⁸ The Royal Court Theatre was an independent company and, interestingly, also helped George Bernard Shaw attain recognition as a "major dramatist" (Chothia 285 n. Cast Page).

Using these two characters, *Votes for Women!* does important work with developing female agency by extending the quest beyond individual women and seeking a broader agency for all women. This differs most drastically the agency Behn's characters arrive at, moving from the cautiously acceptable breeches part that gains a small amount of temporary agency to a play that begins with an independent woman and seeks to rewrite laws regarding women and extend at least one version of agency (suffrage) to all women permanently. This is even a leap from Mrs. Warren and Vivie, who only focus on individual rather than this play's eventual aim of group agency.

Elizabeth Robins herself provides an excellent example of women's struggle for public agency, both personally and in the larger sense by seeking the vote. Like Shaw's Mrs. Warren and Vivie, Robins pursues a profession. Robins was, from a young age, determined to become an actress, shocking her father since "going on the stage professionally was quite . . . anathema to a family which saw itself as part of the gentry" (John 19). However, Robins resisted her father's attempts to persuade her away from the stage and eventually moved to Boston to pursue her chosen career (30).¹⁹ It was here that she met actor George Parks, her future husband; however, neither she nor her family approved of George Parks, and she only married him after his stubborn refusal to give her up and threats of suicide (31-35). It was during her marriage that Robins encountered some of the strongest opposition to her profession. As Kerry Powell explains, Parks could not tolerate Robins's acting, which was still a career

¹⁹ For more on this early period of Robins's life, see John 19-23.

associated with prostitution (John 19), and disliked that his wife strayed from the domestic sphere that marriage should have confined her in once more (Powell 19). When Robins refused to quit the stage, Parks “hurled himself into the Charles river, weighed down by a suit of armor from the Boston Museum acting company” (Powell 19). Powell notes this as an extreme result of the expectations actresses faced. For a middle class Victorian woman, like Robins, her profession was “dividing her irremediably from domestic femininity” and thus from Victorian expectations and ideals (19). Actresses, “once married or betrothed . . . [were] expected to subjugate themselves to a man and give up their professional lives” (18). According to Powell, a “fear and admiration was rooted in a nervous perception that the exceptional actress could and sometimes did work free of the constraints of her gender, trespassing on the territory of men” (14), a fact which Robins’s refusal give up acting made intolerable for Parks. Following her husband’s death, Robins moved to London to continue her acting (John 46). It was here that she became more heavily involved in the campaign for suffrage, and in 1907, Robins joined the Women’s social and Political Union.²⁰ Over the years, Robins became a staunch supporter for women’s rights, penning twenty-nine works defending suffrage from 1906 to 1921 (246-247). Her first major work on the subject was the play, *Votes for Women!*

Of all the characters in the play, Vida Levering is the most determined to expand women’s rights. Many of the women in the play are dedicated to

²⁰ The same women’s Union referred to in the text of *Votes for Women!* (Chothia 295 n.576)

advancing women's situation: Lady John and Mrs. Heriot focus on philanthropic efforts; Mrs. Freddy petitions for suffrage. Yet, these women are restricted to "ladylike" actions by the traditional views of their husbands. Lady John, whose husband clearly views women voting as ridiculous, sticks to the charity work considered appropriate in upper-class women. Mrs. Freddy is very careful to maintain a respectable appearance, distancing herself from the "disorderly women" and "Suffragette methods" (Robins 1.1.783-804). Despite her support for suffrage, stage direction indicates that Mrs. Freddy carefully avoids displeasing her husband when she "Catches her husband's eye, and instantly checks her flow of words" (Robins 1.1.812).²¹ Throughout much of the play, women repeatedly face the derision of men for seeking voting rights, a behavior which is seen as counter to traditional norms for Victorian women. Marriage restricts these women to operating in the private sphere according to their husband's beliefs.

However, Miss Levering faces no such restrictions, which enables her to better confront and defuse male protests. She uses her voice freely and publicly, which contributes to her individual agency (a version unique to herself as opposed to suffrage, which would apply to many), and it is this characteristic that enables her to counteract masculine detractors of the women's movement. This is evident from Miss Levering's first introduction in the play as she deals with the preposterous Mr. Greatorex, who is laughably frightened of women who seek

²¹ This is an interesting moment in a play that advocates women's public voice through suffrage and serves to highlight Robins's aim by contrast. With the vote, women would have a public voice separate from their husbands' and would not be forced to check their own opinions and beliefs in deference to those of their husbands.

power and operate outside of the traditionally appropriate domestic sphere.²²

Robins's portrayal of Greatorex satirizes men who are threatened by independent women because of their perceived intrusion into the sphere of men. Robins faced similar fear as a result of her profession; as Powell notes the Victorians were only

able to tolerate the actress, with her unique powers of speech and action, by confining her within rhetorical structures of madness, disease, prostitution, deformation, and inhumanity. Seen as sick, depraved, and exotic, these independent women could not easily present a serious threat to the social order which in normal circumstances would have rendered them, as women, idle and silent. (46)

I would argue that men are threatened by more than actresses like Robins, and are also fearful of independent women generally. Greatorex fears the Suffragettes, and so he shoves them into the category of "disorderly women" (1.1.791), which allows him mitigate their potential threat. Furthermore, in order to prevent Miss Levering's independence, whom he desires, he attempts to keep her well within the sphere of domestic femininity and enters the first act protesting to Miss Levering against her discussing sanitation: "I protest! Good

²² Greatorex often fearfully avoids being too close to such women. For example, upon finding himself too close to Mrs. Freddy, he exclaims "Lord! The perils that beset the feet of man" and comically pulls away (Robins 1.1.851-852). See also stage directions 1.1.774: "Enter Greatorex, sidling in with an air of giving Mrs. Freddy a wide berth." His avoidance of strong women as if they were contagious or might bite is comically ridiculous, thereby making his extreme insistence on women remaining in the private sphere and maintaining traditional female behavior seem ridiculous.

Lord! what are the women of this country coming to? I *protest* against Miss Levering being carried off to discuss anything so revolting. Bless my soul! what can a woman like you *know* about it?" (1.1.277-281). Greatorex cannot believe that a respectable middle class woman (like Miss Levering) could possibly have knowledge of such a public (and thus outside her sphere) subject. Miss Levering largely ignores him, but Greatorex persists in his patronizing: "And to be haled out to talk about Public *Sanitation* forsooth! . . . Why, God bless my soul, do you realize that's *drains*?" (1.1.288-290). The obviousness of his question reveals how little he estimates female intelligence; by his reckoning no respectable Victorian woman could possibly be interested in the inappropriately dirty subject of drains if she truly understood what it entailed. Miss Levering sarcastically replies, "I'm dreadfully afraid it is!" – the mockery of her words drawing attention to his foolishness (1.1.291) as well as refusing to leave an opening for further protest.

In Act 2, Miss Levering's use of voice moves from a weekend party to an even more public venue: a protest at Trafalgar Square. She had never before addressed a crowd publically before (2.1.392-394), but has come to realize the need for an increasingly public display for suffrage. Before leaving Lady John's manor, Miss Levering discusses the uproar being caused by the Suffragettes. She argues that since "politely petitioning Parliament" (1.1.930) has failed more publically noticeable action is required: "It does rather look to the outsider as if the well-behaved women had worked for forty years and made less impression on the world than those fiery young women made in five minutes" (1.1.975-977).

The women confined to appropriate behavior and the domestic sphere (like Mrs. Freddy) have been unable to attain suffrage, and Miss Levering believes that public voice will meet with better success. She puts this into practice by facing a crowd to advocate giving women the vote, and she argues well, addressing her audience's protests with reasoned responses (2.1.465-490) and pointing out that women are neglected by a government that refuses aid to suffering women and denies them fair trial by *peers* (2.1.490-567). This scene represents a moment of growth in Miss Levering's personal agency because she begins to exercise voice publically in an effort to achieve agency on a broader scale for all women.

Miss Levering maintains this agency of voice by remaining unmarried, a state to which the play continually draws attention. In the first act, Lord John comments Miss Levering is "a *nice* creature; all she needs is to get some 'nice' fella to marry her" (1.1.263-264). He repeatedly returns to this sentiment: "a nice creature! All she needs –" (1.1.276-277, 421). The assumption being made here is that because Miss Levering is an attractive woman she must require a husband, or according to Mrs. Freddy, a man to act as her "balance wheel" (1.1.266). Furthermore, by repeatedly referring to Miss Levering as a "*nice creature*," Lord John creates the idea that women are somehow subhuman and that their husbands are their keepers. However, as Jean Chothia notes, Lord John's insistence "becomes ridiculous by virtue of its increasingly inappropriate repetition" (289 *n.*421). Each of Lord John's utterances follows a moment that reveals Miss Levering as capable and independent, such as her going to town for business (Robins 1.1.266-275) or her ability to raise money for charity (1.1.410-

420). Miss Levering's public independence prompts Lord John to attempt to herd her back into the domestic sphere under the watchful eye of a husband, but the context preceding his statements makes it very clear that she *needs* nothing of the sort, making his exclamations ridiculous. Being married would not aid Miss Levering and would instead restrict her independence and her ability to help her cause, placing her in a position similar to that of Lady John or Mrs. Freddy. Thus, it is imperative the Miss Levering remain unattached and the very opposite of the controlled wife Lord John would like to see her as.

As the play progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Miss Levering deliberately intends to avoid marriage, practicing a control over her sexuality that leads to agency (much like Shaw's Mrs. Warren or Vivie). Miss Levering had a previous relationship with Geoffrey Stonor, Jean's fiancé, and is using Jean's knowledge of this past affair to manipulate Stonor into supporting suffrage. When Lady John confronts Miss Levering about this, Miss Levering's thoughts regarding marriage become clear:

LADY JOHN I see. It's just that you wish to marry somebody –

MISS LEVERING Oh, Lady John, there are no men listening.

LJ. (*surprised*) No, I didn't suppose there were.

ML. Then why keep up that old pretence?

LJ. What pre –

ML. That to marry *at all costs* is every woman's dearest ambition till the grave closes over her. You and I *know* it isn't true. (3.1.340-

346)

Miss Levering's frank words dismiss the value of marriage for women and imply that it is not her "ambition." Her words also imply that women's need for marriage is a fiction to be kept up in public but recognized as false in private, at least by the likes of respectably married women like Lady John. Again this emphasizes the restrictions of voice faced by married women and Miss Levering's place outside of them. However, Lady John, who is still firmly entrenched in the domestic sphere, proves unable to grasp the idea when Mr. Trent, the chairman of the women's Union arrives. She sees that he is in love with Miss Levering and rebukes her for being cruel to him. Yet this should not surprise Lady John given Miss Levering's previous declaration:

– who is there who will resist the temptation to say, Poor Vida Levering! What a pity she hasn't got a husband and a baby to keep her quiet'? . . . But I tell you the only difference between me and thousands of women with husbands and babies is that I'm free to say what I think. *They aren't.* (3.1.419-427).

As she imagines what others might say, Miss Levering's sarcastic portrayal of what marriage is to a woman reveals her contempt for the institution and her intention to maintain her independence from it. Moreover, the latter half of her declaration demonstrates that Miss Levering is well aware of the freedom of voice and agency her conscious refusal of marriage grants her.

But not only does Miss Levering control her sexuality by avoiding marriage, she also wields her sexuality as a weapon, using it to gain the potential of further agency, not simply for herself, but women in general. As a young

woman, Miss Levering had an affair with Stonor that resulted in a child.²³ Jean discovers this after watching Stonor's reaction to Miss Levering speech at the end of Act 2 and attempts to force Stonor to make the amends she believes necessary. While this is not solicited by Miss Levering, she takes advantage of the situation, using Jean to bring Stonor's political force to the aid of women's suffrage:

You can't bring him back. . . . But there's something you *can* do – . . .
. . . Bring him to the point where he recognizes that he's in our debt. .
. . . In debt to women. He can't repay the one he robbed – . . . No,
he can't repay the dead. But there are the living. There are the
thousands with hope still in their hearts and youth in their blood.
Let him help *them*. Let him be a Friend to Women. (3.1.295-307)

Just as Miss Levering is not content to stop with her own personal agency, she is also unsatisfied by Stonor's private and individual regret. Instead, like the play itself, she calls for greater public action and reparation to all the women previously victimized by women's place in society through Stonor's support of suffrage. Miss Levering recognizes that in order to pass women's suffrage through Parliament women need an ally within the government and seeks to make Stonor that ally. She begins with blackmail, threatening to keep Jean away

²³ The text is somewhat vague on the actual fate of the child. Though certainly dead, it is unclear whether this was the actually the result of abortion as the text implies on 1.1.635-670. This uncertainty is a sharp contrast to Shaw's Mrs. Warren who has a living child out of wedlock, which contributes to her exercise of her independence and control of her sexuality. Miss Levering's child, however, only brings her fall from grace, rendering her one of the women whose "helplessness" she now seeks to alleviate (1.1.446). And yet, in a way quite different than Mrs. Warren's, Miss Levering's child also helps her on her quest for agency by adding to her persuasion of Mr. Stonor.

from him and recruit her to the cause of women unless he supports the cause himself (3.1.619-725). When she sees that coercion will only make him balk, Miss Levering softens her approach, reassuring him that she has no intention of parting Stonor from Jean (3.1.725-743). He offers her help, and she convinces him that her true desire is to prevent women from suffering as she did (3.1.744-786). The play closes as Miss Levering departs successful; Stonor gives her the telegraph he had earlier penned in support of suffrage, and “she goes out silently with the ‘political dynamite’ in her hand” (3.1.800). She has used her sexual history to achieve the support necessary to advance agency for all women. Looking back, this is quite the reverse of what previous characters have believed to be the effects of illegitimate children. Hellena saw the fate of a mother of such a child as having “a cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of repentance at [her] back” with no chance at marriage (*Rover* 242). Mrs. Warren, who, though she uses the identity of Vivie’s father as a tool, also fears the revelation of her daughter’s illegitimacy (hence her insistence on being a Mrs.) But, Miss Levering, though regretful of her past, does not desire marriage or repent having her child (as Hellena might expect) nor does she fear other’s having knowledge of her past fall (as Mrs. Warren does), instead she uses her fate as a tool for good. Thus, Miss Levering gains the means of potentially extending agency to more women and achieves a new concept of feminine agency for a group not previously seen in the other plays.

An inextricable part of Miss Levering and her agency is her relation to the New Woman figure, also making her comparable to Shaw’s Vivie. However, I

would argue that Miss Levering is less a New Woman and more a reaction to the figure. Levering is the “emancipated woman” that develops out of the New Woman characters of the 1890’s, like Vivie (Chothia 288 *n.277*). Unlike Vivie, whose boyish manners and rejection of sexuality represent the “ ‘mannish’, asexual biological ‘type’” often associated with the New Woman (Ledger 16), Miss Levering is firmly in touch with femininity. Stage directions emphasize this aspect of Miss Levering, describing her as “an attractive, essentially feminine, and rather ‘smart’ woman of thirty-two” (Robins 1.1.277). In fact, Miss Levering mocks the concept that women who seek independence are “unsexed creatures” as she pokes fun at Mr. Greatorex for fearing such women (1.1.329-30). Later, she angrily confronts the “ ‘Mad.’ ‘Unsexed’” version of the New Woman as the stereotype for “the woman who served no man’s bed or board” (3.1.661-663). And, though an opponent to marriage, Miss Levering cannot be thrown to the opposite side of the New Woman spectrum and classed as a “sexual decadent” (Ledger 12). Victorian critiques of the New Woman feared her as a proponent of “free love” (Ledger 12-15), yet Miss Levering resists such invitations from Mr. Greatorex:

MISS LEVERING You see, you call it rot. We couldn’t have got £8,000 out of *you*.²⁴

GREATOREX If I gave you that much – for your little projects – what would you give me?

²⁴ This conversation stems from the group’s early discussion of the fact that Miss Levering had gotten Mr. Soper to donate money to charity.

ML. Soper didn't ask that. (Robins 1.1.427-432)

Miss Levering rebuffs Greatorex and makes it clear that the money she obtained for charity was gotten honestly and that she will not engage in sexually licentious behavior. While Miss Levering avoids some fears about the New Woman, she evokes others through her hatred of men. As Ledger shows, the new woman was often perceived as a threat – to marriage, to reproduction, to economics, to politics. Hating men can only position Miss Levering as a similarly dangerous threat, especially given her opposition to marriage. Miss Levering implies her hatred at the end of her speech in Trafalgar square, warning “For I know as well as any man could tell me, it would be a bad day for England if all women felt about all men *as I do*” (2.1.584-585). Like the New Woman’s opposition to marriage, this hatred would be feared for its potential to affect maternity, a valued aspect of Victorian society (Ledger 24-26). However, the play is saved from condemnation by the fact that Miss Levering was a mother and valued the experience. Her love for her child and grief at its loss inspires her to fight for her cause (Robins 3.1.750-785) and reveals her own maternal instinct when she claims “it was the weakest – the little, little arms that subdues the fiercest of us” (3.1.789-790). This again contrasts with the characterization of motherhood found in Mrs. Warren, who desires to control her child and denies Vivie a will outside of her mother (Shaw 58) whereas Miss Levering learns from and is subdued by her child. This is especially useful, since in a society that values marriage and maternity as the most important roles for women, Miss Levering’s hatred of men would inspire fear were it not the fact that she exhibits such strong

maternal feeling. Ultimately, Miss Levering is able to take the beneficial characteristics of the New Woman as an independent agent without the negative consequences Vivie might face, making her a slightly better (though not unflawed) example of a type of female agency.

Miss Levering does stand as an example for future generations, acting as a catalyst for Jean's awakening. Jean begins the play as an innocent girl looking forward to starting her life as a wife. However, hints of her journey begin before she even meets Miss Levering. Her uncle assures her, "we expect now that you'll begin to think *like* Geoffrey Stonor, and to feel *like* Geoffrey Stonor, and to talk *like* Geoffrey Stonor" (1.1.223-225, emphasis mine), to which she responds, "Well, if I do think *with* my husband and feel *with* him" (1.1.226). Jean unthinkingly changes her uncle's language from "like," which assumes submission to her husband's thoughts, to the more equalizing "with."²⁵ Once she meets Miss Levering, Jean quickly progresses from naively laughing at the idea of being respected (1.1.394-404). Miss Levering's conversation makes Jean aware of what Miss Levering deems "the helplessness of women," a phrase which freezes Jean once uttered (1.1.446). The process of Jean's becoming more aware is continued as she hears Miss Levering tell of her past, and Miss Levering concludes her tale with the assertion, "My body wasn't born weak, and my spirit wasn't broken by the *habit* of slavery" (1.1.586-587).²⁶ The effects of this

²⁵ Chothia notes this as dramatic irony, since Jean has yet to awaken to the idea "that she has a mind and opinions of her own" (288 n.226-7)

²⁶ Robins's use of language here that describes the state of women as one of slavery is reminiscent of Mill's in "The Subjection of Women." Robins would have been very familiar with

conversation are seen shortly after when Jean begins her first step towards awareness and acknowledges her innocence to Miss Levering: “I want to begin to understand something of – I’m horribly ignorant” (1.1.602-603). From this moment, Jean begins to question women’s position in society. Soon after she tells her aunt, Mrs. Heriot, “[Miss Levering] seems to go everywhere. And why shouldn’t she?” (1.1.629), already questioning the restriction of women’s mobility. Soon Jean begins to seek out additional knowledge and, having learned about the Suffragettes, decides to visit their rally at Trafalgar Square (1.1.1086-1087). Initially Jean’s interest is in spectacle, but after hearing Miss Levering speak, Jean begins to identify with the cause. Miss Levering enjoins the women listening to contribute money to the cause or labor if they cannot afford to give money (2.1.561-567). Jean rejoices, much to Lady John’s shock:

JEAN (*low to Lady John*) Oh, I’m glad I’ve got power!

LADY JOHN (*bewildered*) Power! – *you?*

J. Yes, all that money – (2.1.572-574)

Jean begins to realize that her economic independence²⁷ allows her the power to support causes she herself chooses. This in turn causes Jean to find agency in the ability to exercise her own will and be self-determining:

STONOR You’re going the wrong way.

JEAN *This* is the way I must go.

S. You can get out quicker on this side.

Mill’s work, as her later reference to him reveals (2.1.110), given its importance as a “feminist text” “following his attempt to extend franchise” (Chothia 293 n. 110).

²⁷ Jean’s economic standing is the result of a sizable inheritance. See 1.1.177-180.

J. I don't *want* to get out.

S. What! Where are you going?

J. To ask that woman to let me have the honour of working with her. (2.1.588-593)

Jean insists on her own will rather than conforming to the desires of others, and in doing so she takes her first step toward becoming a free agent.

Interestingly, Jean does not conclude the play as a fully developed character with a complete sense of agency (as, perhaps, Vivie did). Instead we are left with a great sense of potential where Jean is concerned. Miss Levering explains this to Stonor, insisting that Jean it is not simply she who has “hold of Jean Dunbarton” and that the “New Spirit that’s abroad” has Jean as well (3.1.638, 640). In other words, the women’s cause has entered Jean in a way Miss Levering finds irrevocable. Miss Levering finds in Jean a hope for the future:

[Jean] sees for herself we’ve come to a place where we find there’s a value in women apart from the value men see in them. You teach us not to look to you for some of the things we need most. If women must be freed by women, we have need of such as – (*her eyes go to Jean’s door*) – who knows? She may be the new Joan of Arc. (3.1.665-669)

Miss Levering believes that Jean will be able to pick up the cause of women’s rights, leaving us with the sense that Jean may continue developing, even in

marriage growing an agency beyond what has heretofore been available to women and truly achieve a voice for women in government.

Like other instances of women's agency, *Votes for Women!* encounters complications: despite Miss Levering's repeated insistence that women must help women, the fact remains that in order to gain widespread agency via suffrage, women need the support of men. The male Parliament must pass the Bill for women's suffrage. Miss Levering rejects men as potential leaders in the women's movement; for example, she dismisses Trent as chairman of the women's Union, arguing that "the first battles of this new campaign must be fought by women alone" (3.1.456-457). Stonor eventually confronts Levering with the fact she is all too aware of: "Can't you see that this crazed campaign . . . even if it's successful, it can only be so through the help of men?" (3.1.675-676). Essentially women can only gain the broader agency of the vote if men allow them to have, which would seem to belie the idea of female agency entirely. However, I would argue that this is not a negative complication like, say, Mrs. Warren's self-conflictedness. While it would seem that men have the agency here, the term "agent" can also describe a person "who acts for another" ("agent"), thus placing agency in the hands of those directing the actions of the agent. In this case, Mr. Stonor has been positioned as the agent, and agency remains with women. Moreover, the women seeking suffrage are using every ounce of agency so far available to them, and once obtained their voting rights would be out of the hands of men. Thus, the conflict here is more of a temporary obstacle to overcome rather than an ongoing complication.

Votes for Women! presents an interesting version of female agency not found in the plays so far. Miss Levering and Jean possess and develop individual agency much like Shaw's Mrs. Warren and Vivie or on a lesser scale Behn's Hellena and Widow Ranter. However, the heroines' primary goal is an agency that extends to beyond the individual experience to all women. Suffrage would allow all women the ability to influence government and through that power the agency to govern themselves. We also find the development of individual female agency, allowing for more acceptable models in the form of Miss Levering and Jean. Miss Levering does not face the complications of Mrs. Warren's fear of the loss of status, allowing her to advocate for her beliefs more publically, and she appears to be a much better, more human alternative to Vivie's inhuman version of public agency. Also, unlike Mrs. Warren, who only fosters rebellion, or Vivie, whose inhumanity repulses, Miss Levering is able to successfully mentor the next generation. This allows for healthy development of agency and the potential of an even better model in Jean.

Conclusion

Each four plays discussed in this thesis feature heroines on a path toward agency. By examining the plays in sequence we can find a clearer picture of what female agency entails, revealing that this is not an easily definable, finite concept. Instead, agency is a fluid, growing theory that develops over the course of each play, expanding and changing the conceptualization of agency and the methods women use to obtain it.

This process begins most simply in the works of Behn's *The Rover* and *The Widow Ranter*. Both Hellena and Ranter desire to marry on their own terms and set out to choose and negotiate their own marriages. However, feminine norms of the period prevent the freedom of voice and mobility necessary to achieve this goal. The women are not free to operate in the public sphere as this would be inappropriate and, given Florinda's near rape, hazardous. It is necessary, nonetheless, for Hellena and Ranter to move in this sphere in order to achieve their goals. Hellena must be able to navigate the streets of Venice and Willmore's presence safely and freely, while Ranter faces similar obstacles on a battlefield. To meet this need, both women resort to the breeches part, disguising themselves as men. As men, they have the freedom to speak their minds and take action that is denied to them as women, allowing them to eventually arrange their own marriages. In doing so, Hellena and Ranter gain

the agency that comes with self-determination, but this ability is fleeting since, once married, they will lose their selves to become the subjects of their husbands.

From this rather small step toward female agency, we move to the end of the nineteenth century. Like the Restoration and its fluctuating sense of femininity, the late Victorian period is in a state of transition, with the Woman Question growing increasingly important and complex. In Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, we find his heroines developing a more extensive sense of female agency. It begins with Mrs. Warren, whose profession allows her to develop economic independence, which in turn gives her the power to move freely in society and exercise her own will. Her ultimate position of agency is determined by her possessing voice, economic independence, free will, self-respect, and control of her own sexuality. However, her situation is complicated by her need to maintain respectability, without which she would lose her standing in society and her mobility. In order to remain respectable, Mrs. Warren must strike a delicate balance between the public and private spheres. It is from this complication that we see agency develop still further with Vivie. She possesses all the same elements of agency that her mother does. She uses her voice to insist on her ability to exercise her own will, a practice that she supports through the economic independence afforded by her profession as a clerk. She insists on upholding her self-respect by cutting herself off from her mother and her mother's money, and she achieves sexual control by withdrawing from all possibility of marriage or romantic entanglement. However, unlike her mother,

Vivie's agency exists entirely in the public sphere, avoiding the complication Mrs. Warren faces. However, Vivie is also flawed as a potential model for female agency: as the play concludes, Vivie appears as an almost inhuman automaton, entirely sexless – hardly a model for feminine agency.

Votes for Women! develops agency still further by seeking to apply it to all women. We see individual agency like that of Mrs. Warren or Vivie again in Vida Levering, who employs her voice publically and exercises free will and control of her sexuality. She puts this to use to help the cause of women's suffrage, which would grant agency to women in a more widespread manner. Also, unlike the heroines from the previous plays, Miss Levering provides a better model for an independent woman, since she neither loses her agency once obtained (like Hellena and Ranter) nor possesses flaws which contradict her agency (like Mrs. Warren and Vivie). Moreover the play shows Miss Levering as an active model for the next generation of female agents. She inspires Jean Dunbarton to open her eyes to the idea of women's suffrage and female independence, and in Jean we find the potential for another generation that will develop and improve women's agency still further.

With each play, the definition of agency expands, moving from the small moments of independence found in Hellena and Ranter, to the individual agency of Mrs. Warren and Vivie, to the application of agency to all women. The methods used to obtain agency also evolve, increasingly encroaching on territory typically belonging to men. This process starts small, with Hellena and Ranter's temporary entrance into the masculine by dressing as men. It progresses, with

Mrs. Warren, whose pursuit of a profession deviates from women's place in the domestic sphere; this evolves still further with Vivie's choice of profession that places her entirely within the public sphere. Finally, the push for women's voting in *Votes for Women!* invades the male public sphere still more since voting and voice in government has hitherto been entirely the province of men. The fluidity of female agency demonstrated by these plays leaves room for further expansion of the definition which could be explored in later, modern or contemporary works, as well as the possibility that the concept is still developing today.

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