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**THE CAT AND MOUSE ACT: WOMEN'S  
ORIGINAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEATRE**

**STEPHEN MURRAY KIERNAN**

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**The Cat and Mouse Act**  
**Women's Original Social and Political Theatre**  
**Stephen Murray Kiernan**

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## The Cat and Mouse Act: Women's Original Social and Political Theatre

Convicts and Women kindly note,  
Are not allowed to have the vote;  
The difference between the two  
I will now indicate to you.

When once the harmful man of crime,  
In Wormwood Scrubs has done his time,  
He at the poll can have his say,  
The harmless woman *never* may.

C. H. (Cicely Hamilton)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

By the end of the nineteenth century, the nearest approach made by a male-dominated theatre to put true-to-life women on the stage took the form of the 'Problem Play', a version of characteristically English moral drama modified by diluted elements of Ibsen and certain other continental realist playwrights. The new female character was termed the New Woman,<sup>2</sup> but in an area of the arts where men dominated, the embodiment of women and even of this revised conception of her were shaped by the male dramatists' view of femininity in a patriarchal society.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a postcard in the Fawcett Library.

<sup>2</sup> The designation, 'New Woman', probably originates from its use in an article by Sarah Grand, the radical novelist, in the May 1894 issue of the *North American Review*.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw was of the opinion that "woman is a stage invention" (quoted by Michael Holroyd in his article, "Women and the Body Politic," in *The Genius of Shaw: A Symposium*, edited by Michael Holroyd, pp. 167-183; quote, p. 170). Catherine Wiley explained that whereas for women in Victorian times "social acceptance was only guaranteed by the sincere performance of conventional femininity," the New Woman was conversely "a reaction against this performative aspect of women's lives, but when the New Woman herself became the object of performance, she fared no better than any woman imagined by conventional men" ("The Matter with Manners: the New Woman and the Problem Play," in *Women in Theatre*, p. 109). See also the remembrances of Elizabeth Robins of the inferior position of actresses in the theatre

Thus, even the relatively more liberated female characters on the stage did not genuinely express their own mind – the charged, individual feelings of an emancipated person – but, on the contrary, the attention of the audience was largely directed at the opinions of characters surrounding her, and the ones among these who mattered were male. It was not the statements of the New Woman which were important but how the men surrounding her (and perhaps the more conservative female characters) understood and responded to what she said and did. Arthur Wing Pinero's *Paula Tanqueray*,<sup>4</sup> Henry Arthur Jones' *Mrs. Dane*, and, to a lesser extent, Oscar Wilde's *Mrs. Erlynne* are all at the mercy of the moral vengeance of a society whose principles were chosen and sustained by men. Female emancipation, as much as the changes desired by socialists, was feared by a large section of English society.

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at the turn of the century in her *Theatre and Friendship*, pp. 29-30; and the recollection by Cecily Hamilton that a one-act play of hers had been treated harshly by a number of critics because they had taken her sex into account, in *Life Errant*, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Pinero secured a high reputation for his female characterisation after his *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* was produced in 1893; see the comments of Wilbur Dwight Dunkel in his *Sir Arthur Wing Pinero*, p. 40. Shaw, however, among others, was critical of the stage women of Pinero and Jones; see his review of *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, in *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, I, pp. 63-69. By contrast, a piece like Elizabeth Robins' full-length *Votes for Women* (1907) represents a reworking of the woman-with-a-past type of drama, which Pinero epitomised, but in this case essentially in the woman's favour.



Memorial edition of *The Suffragette* newspaper of June 1913 dedicated to Emily Davison, who had killed herself that month by walking in front of the king's horse at the Epsom Derby (copyright of the Lordprice Collection)

However, if anything, the stage in England was actually behind the times in terms of its depiction of contemporary life. It is this distance between the less chauvinistic political and ethical standards of society<sup>5</sup> and the stalled conventions of the theatre which register the anachronistic nature of the drama of the time. But certain factors, such as the influence of Ibsen, the rise of progressive theatre groups like the Independent Theatre in 1891 and the Stage Society in 1899, and the greater clamour of

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<sup>5</sup> These developments in the moral standards of society did not go unchallenged: there were many groups fighting to reintroduce a stringent moral code and practice, such as the National Social Purity Crusade, established in April 1908. See the *Times*, April 4, 1908.

the women's suffrage movement,<sup>6</sup> would bring the question of the significance and role of women in an industrial, educated and prosperous society to the fore. One should not forget that the rise of dramatic realism was in large measure due to the emergence of a keen interest in social matters abetted by a similarly vigorous interest in the status of women in society. In the long-term, dramatists and especially women dramatists would concern themselves with these issues in an often visionary way which would allow their female characters to act as autonomous and forward-thinking women. They would be seen as victorious over men (and other recalcitrant women) in argument and be rewarded with the support of these men. With such a change in dramatic thinking, female characters would often quite naturally assume a more egalitarian position on the stage: as ends in themselves, not objects of observation present to be judged according to an out-dated dramatic ethic.

Women writers turned to the short story in the 1890s and the one-act play in the first years of this century to record and sometimes to push their case for freedom from social and sexual regulation, choosing these forms in part because they allowed them to bring together "greater artistic stringency, and a broader moral permissiveness",<sup>7</sup> avoiding as they do the stricter moral context that is typically present in the broader social panorama of the novel and the full-length play. The one-act play, like the short story, is susceptible to a distinctive ideology, in that it can telescope the process of resolving disharmony

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<sup>6</sup> The enormous increase in the number of working middle-class women played probably the most decisive part in fermenting this discontent; see David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> *Short Stories of the Nineties*, edited by Derek Stanford, p. 13.



within the structure of the form – in the clarity of its own condensing formal workings – and in its championing of personal individuality, which facilitates the insertion of a principle of equality. Both of these forms have been the means of expression of the internal exile, the spiritually displaced in a certain land: Clare Hanson, for instance, has noted that the short story has frequently been the vehicle of an “excentric, alienated vision of women”.<sup>8</sup>

Monologues and one-act plays of various descriptions have a number of advantages in putting across a message as clearly and memorably as possible. Firstly, the very fact that they are short means that they highlight certain elements which, in the larger scale of discussion and action of a full-length play, would be far less obvious. Secondly, one-act drama is generally of a deterministic character: simply put, certain reasons are given for the current state of affairs presented at the start of the piece; there then follows a heightened argument and the character who supports women’s suffrage wins the debate.

Thus, these short dramatic pieces are plays of discussion and persuasion, producing a highly refined didactic theatre, rather than character-studies or plays of an elaborate and interesting plot.<sup>9</sup> E. F. Spence wrote in 1910 that “it is the woman rather than the man dramatist who appreciates the utility of the stage

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<sup>8</sup> Introduction to *Re-reading the Short Story*, edited by Clare Hanson, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Dinah Luise Leavitt is of the opinion that the feminist theatre possesses a rare communal element: “It is communal because it is live, is dedicated to an ideology that fosters sisterhood and is alert to the value of audience-performer interaction.” *Feminist Theatre Groups*, p. 100.

as a means of seeking reform.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the prevalence of short or one-act drama on the bills of the Actresses’ Franchise League, in particular, can be seen as indicating the pressures of full-time stage commitments on its members rather than inexperience or a lack of skill in the mounting of plays, as might be the case for in other part-time play-producing societies. In addition, most of the plays were written for gatherings where again a play of an hour or more would be inappropriate. The situations these plays depict were usually quite familiar to the audience, so that narrative elaboration was unnecessary, and the fact that their purpose was prescriptive made the benefits of intensity and impressionism found in the one-act form very attractive.

### **Section One: The Actresses’ Franchise League**

The most important of the early feminist theatre groups was the Actresses’ Franchise League (the A.F.L.), founded on 17 December 1908, six months after the Women Writers’ Suffrage League (the W.W.S.L.) was formed. It was a product of the increased agitation of suffrage groups occasioned by the setting-up of the Women’s Social and Political Union (the W.S.P.U.) in Manchester in October 1903. For this reason, one

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<sup>10</sup> E. F. Spence, *Our Stage and Its Critics*, p. 115. H. G. Wells discerned in the 1890s “a rebel undertow of earnest and aggressive writing and preaching, supported chiefly by women and supplied very largely by women ...” *Henry James and H. G. Wells: A Record of their Friendship*, edited by Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray, p. 134.

should not be surprised to discover a rather strong socialist element in some of the plays of the A.F.L.<sup>11</sup>



A meeting of the WSPU: (left to right) Christabel Pankhurst, Jessie Kenney, Nellie Martel, Emmeline Pankhurst and Charlotte Despard (Spartacus)

These 'suffragettes' pursued a policy of aggressive protest in contrast to the 'suffragists', made up primarily of members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (the N.U.W.S.S.). The A.F.L. itself provided the first large-scale attempt to allow playwrights, actresses, designers and producers to orientate their activities towards a feminist point of view. The A.F.L. established its own play department, under the Australian Inez Bensusan's supervision, and the first plays to be produced from this source appeared in 1909. It was Bensusan's brief to procure purpose-written suffrage plays, organise a full-time company of actresses ready to go on tour, and raise funds.

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<sup>11</sup> The strong socialist philosophy of the W.S.P.U. and, subsequently, of its off-shoot groups, came about initially through the influence of Keir Hardie. The original name of the Union was the Women's Labour Representation Committee and it was intended to function as a women's support group for the Labour Party in much the same way as the Women's Liberal Federation supported the Liberal Party and the Primrose League the Conservatives. However, its final direct link to the Labour Movement was severed in 1912, when the Pethick-Lawrence left the W.S.P.U.

The members of the League agreed from the beginning to support all suffrage societies so as not to fragment their organisation: a row over H. V. Esmond's *Her Vote* in mid-1909, which was only resolved with difficulty by Inez Bensusan, began the practice of the society being as non-partisan as possible in its choice of feminist political plays.<sup>12</sup> However, they did have certain definite political objectives. The A.F.L., wrote Claire Hirschfield,

was to serve three major functions. First it aimed to educate members of the theatrical profession to the necessity of female enfranchisement. Secondly, the A.F.L. would take part in suffrage demonstrations and processions as a way of convincing the general public of the justice of the cause. Finally, the League would make the services of its members available to other suffrage societies for fund raising or propaganda purposes, through the staging of plays and entertainments.<sup>13</sup>

One has only to look at the key words of this statement – “educate”, “necessity”, “convincing”, “justice” and “propaganda” – to recognise the far from passive or conventional philosophy

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<sup>12</sup> Most members of the A.F.L. were already members of either the W.S.P.U. or the N.U.W.S.S. The number of members from the straight theatre was indeed very large, totaling 901 in 1913, the same year that a men's group was established (the male counterpart to the W.S.P.U. was called the Men's Political Union for Women's Suffrage and had been formed by Victor Duval in 1909). The actress Jane Comfort recalled, “The League grew and grew until nearly every actress in the business joined” (interview with Julie Holledge, in *Innocent Flowers*, p. 50.) Many suffragists, however, detested the practices of the W.S.P.U. For instance, in May 1906, a number of member societies of the N.U.W.S.S. refused to join a deputation to see the Prime Minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, if the W.S.P.U. was represented. The A.F.L. itself was represented at the head of the victory procession after the release of Mrs. Pethick-Lawrence from prison in April 1909 and, inevitably, a number of members did resign for what they considered to be biased support for the W.S.P.U.

<sup>13</sup> See Claire Hirschfield, “The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1908-1914,” in *Theatre Research International*, 10 (1989), pp. 129-153.

the League would abide by or prefer in the plays it chose to produce. When an off-shoot of the A.F.L., the Women's Theatre, was established by the head of the League's play department, Inez Bensusan, its aims were also undeniably feministic. To give two of them:

The [sic] present plays, written either by men or women, which shew the woman's point of view.

To help and forward the Women's movement to enfranchisement, and to promote the unification of all suffrage and feminist societies.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, from its very beginning and right up to its dissolution because of hostilities in 1914, the dominant concern of the A.F.L. was with pursuing the cause of votes for women and improving the status of women in society. The narrow thematic and character range of the plays it presented testifies to the fact that the League gave priority to these principles. A reviewer in the suffragette newspaper *Votes or Women* commented on the plays of the A.F.L.: "from different points of view they all tell the same story, and all point to the same moral ... they are propagandist in their nature ..."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Souvenir Programme, Women's Theatre Inaugural Week, Enthoven Collection, Victor and Albert Museum.

<sup>15</sup> *Votes for Women*, 28 May 1909.



“Votes for Women” poster by Hilda Dallas, 1909 (private collection)

It also meant that its audiences would always be small and made up overwhelmingly of the converted (somewhat defeating its propagandist objective), that its capacity to experiment or expand its repertoire was very restrained, and that its reason for existence would vanish if women were given the vote. In contrast to this, the Pioneer Players, another pro-woman theatre group, founded in 1911, went beyond the exclusory feminist political theatre of the A.F.L. to produce dramas most notably dealing with social problems experienced by women or seen from a woman’s perspective, as well as a number of plays written by male and also foreign dramatists such as Maupassant, Evreinov and Paul Claudel, thus avoiding the trap of alienating a section of their audience while maintaining a feminist clientele. Revealingly, the only two major play-

producing groups based in London to survive through the war were the Stage Society and the Pioneer Players.

## **Section Two: Feminist Political Drama**

Edwardian women generally had little or no experience of speaking in public, with the exception of those women engaged in the trade union movement. The A.F.L. offered the services of its actress-members to speak and perhaps to recite a poem; later, there resulted a type of one-woman political theatre which were largely character monologues. These began in the spring of 1909. These monologues take the form of an anecdote about real life concerning the persuasion of an initially unconvinced character to support the feminist cause, and are perhaps the nearest form to a platform lecture without at the same time forfeiting a dramatic presentation. They tell how a woman attempts to persuade her husband or friends to the cause of female suffrage.

What is interesting in terms of the social status of the character recounting the story is that most monologues are spoken by working-class women. This is the case in Evelyn Glover's *Showin' Samyel*, for example, where the speaker is a charwoman; *The Mother's Meeting* by Mrs. Harlow Phibbs in which the speaker is a lower-class woman with all the worldly-wisdom gained by having eight children; and *Jim's Leg* by L. S. Phibbs. In this last monologue, the husband of the title is at the beginning virulently against women acquiring the vote, but after

losing a leg when a bus runs over him and exchanging with his wife his job of bottle-washer for the role of housewife, he is a changed man. After the comically irreverent opening remark (“The best thing as ever happened to me was when my Jim lost ‘is leg” (169)), we hear of his prejudice before the accident: “Why according to ‘im, women ‘ardly deserved to be let live, and men only let ‘im because of cooking dinners, and mending clothes and the like.” (169) Then he lost his leg and experiences how tough the work of a housewife is for the first time: “The ‘ouse looked as if all the monkeys out of the Zoo ‘ad bin turned loose in it” (170), as his wife recalls. Inevitably, he is won over to giving women the vote for the customary reason in these plays, that he did not know the hardships endured by those without his privileges.

‘Esther,’ says ‘e, ‘I’m a goin’ to be a Suffragette myself ... One ‘as to be an ‘ole man to be up to them women, and you did ought to ‘ave a vote, Esther,’ says he, ‘Bottle washin’ is play to by mindin’ and ‘ome work what aint never over ...’ (171)

The depiction of working-class women in these monologues and in certain of the one-act pieces is a curious phenomenon in a theatre group controlled by middle-class feminists, whose playwrights came from anything but a working-class background. Because of this, the dialogue is often more in the tradition of one of the favourites of the feminist movement, Bernard Shaw, than a true-life rendering of attitude and speech. One would have naturally assumed that the pieces would invariably deal with the type of materially secure middle-class context and characters, as, for instance, those found in H. V.



Esmond's *Her Vote* (Terry's, 13/5/1909, mat.) and Magdalen Ponsonby's *Idle Women* (1914, P.P.).

However, feminist drama of this time, of whatever degree of political and social persuasion, is remarkable for its propensity to focus on members of the lower classes, along with those of a higher position in society, and, furthermore, to depict them in a comparatively realistic and often favourable way. This dates at least from Elizabeth Robins' full-length *Votes for Women* (Court, 9/4/1907, mat.), the model 'dramatic tract' of the Edwardian feminist theatre, which, partly by portraying working-class people in a generally sympathetic light, shows up the complacent thinking of the wealthier characters. Indeed, it is because this type of character would be more outspoken, unencumbered by the prescribed vocabulary and manners of a woman placed higher in society, that these characters were used by middle-class propagandists. Moreover, as in the case of the character Mrs. Chicky, the charwoman in the one-act *A Chat with Mrs. Chicky* (Rehearsal, 20/2/1912), working-class women were held to have a wide experience of life and accordingly to be knowledgeable about social issues to a degree which a wealthier woman would be sheltered from.<sup>16</sup>

As a contrast, take the depiction of the rather dim Miss De Lacey in H. M. Paull's monologue *The Other Side* which describes the first and last meeting of the Little Pendleton Anti-Suffrage Society:

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<sup>16</sup> The A.F.L. even went so far as to set up a special fund in 1911 to finance meetings for poor women.

None of the ladies would speak, they thought it would be unladylike, so Lady Bellamy said that they must appoint a secretary and to my horror she proposed me, and so Mama accepted for me; I couldn't speak, I was blushing so.<sup>17</sup>

(This standard of what is 'ladylike' and what is not appears in many of the plays, a critical reference to prescriptions manufactured by society on female behaviour.) Indeed, the middle-class female characters are often shown as naïve and rather self-satisfied people, but the lesson of the stupidity of their opposition to or non-involvement in the campaign is always made clear and frequently contrasted with the energetic support for change of working-class women. In Ponsonby's satirical *Idle Women* (Little, 21/6/1914, PP.), pointedly subtitled *A Study in Futility*, to the question put by Mr. Bartlett, a government official, "I wonder you don't take an interest in the Suffrage – you seem so full of suppressed energy," Lady Diteham responds: "Yes, I should rather like to smash a window. It would be such a satisfaction to smash something, but I don't believe in anything, that's why I can't join the Suffrage, it is too real." (23) In short, there is a sense that the egalitarian principles at the centre of the suffrage cause strengthened the general egalitarian element between the classes which characterises most feminist drama.

The one-act suffrage plays dramatise at least the later events which are described in anecdotal form in the monologues. One must keep in mind that most of these plays are essentially

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Holledge, p. 62. *The Other Side* was written as an indictment of the Anti-Suffrage Society of Women, established in 1908.

duologues. Accordingly, they have the effect of a strong sense of one-to-one dramatic communication with members of the audience, thus assisting in their aim of propaganda: in the psychology of dramatic communication, the use of the first and second person singular, with all the directness and intimacy inherent in this approach, is a good didactic device. This is oppositional drama of character versus character or, more correctly, argument versus argument. One character, who might be a man or a woman, is at first against extending the franchise. Another character, who is invariably a woman, endeavours to persuade her companion of the rightness and benefits of female suffrage, all of which usually ends in an enlightened awareness. Unlike several of the plays mounted by the Pioneer Players, this exemplary woman typically does not go through a crisis of identity and doubt: there is normally a clarity of self-confident political opinion about this character which is part of the unity of theme of the play.

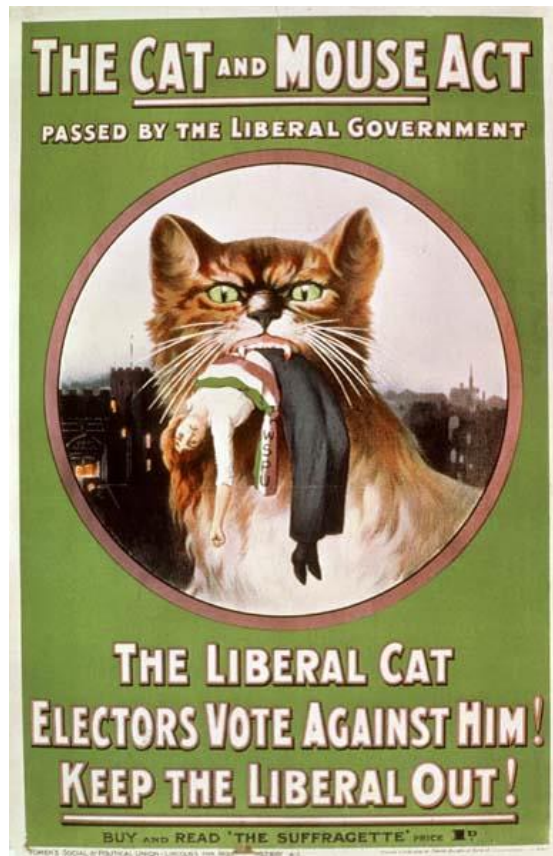
There were three ways of winning the argument. The first was by demonstrating the sheer incontrovertible nature of points in favour of female suffrage. The second was highlighting the indefensibility of opinions denying women the right to vote. The third was by coercion, the least reasonable a method. If one understands that the chief criterion for judging these plays is persuasiveness, then this last method is flawed since the anti-suffrage character in the play is not recognised to have been convinced of the need to grant women if the vote but rather is blackmailed to give in to their demands.

This is what happens in what was, with the symbolic *A Pageant of Great Women* by Cicely Hamilton,<sup>18</sup> the most popular play produced by the A.F.L., *How the Vote was Won* (Caxton Hall, 13/4/1909) by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St. John. The play originated in a pamphlet written by Cicely Hamilton and published in 1908 (by the W.W.S.L.), employing an economic argument for giving women the vote. Hamilton was, however, to admit very adamantly in her memoirs, “My personal revolt was feminist rather than suffragist,”<sup>19</sup> which is why the play is quite soberly underpinned by an incontrovertible economic argument in favour of extending women’s right and uses rather than a call to arms to avail of violent means to change the voting system.

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<sup>18</sup> This piece derives from the practice among participants in suffrage marches of dressing up as famous women of the past, an activity prevalent especially during the six-month period of abstention from violent protest observed by the W.S.P.U. in 1910.

<sup>19</sup> *Life Errant*, p. 65



“Cat and Mouse Act” poster, 1914, produced by the Women’s Social and Political Union – WSPU (Museum of London)

This argument was retained from the pamphlet, and was already employed as the basis of her most successful dramatic piece, the full-length *Diana of Dabson’s* (1908, and pursued in her later full-length play *Just to Get Married* (1910)) – it was certainly a theme that rather obsessed her at this time: the fullest expression of the economic argument in favour of female enfranchisement is contained in her book *Marriage as a Trade* (1909). Winifred and her sister Ethel, in *How the Vote Was Won*,<sup>20</sup> are discussing how women might gain the vote. Winifred

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<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that the verb in the title is in the past tense, signifying a *fait accompli* and thus that the cause is winnable.

has revealed the plan which she feels sure will result in this aim; "... when his [Ethel's husband, Horace's] female relations invade his house – all with the same story, 'I've come to be supported' – he may think it excruciatingly funny" (23). This is the economic force which will gain them the support of the men. All women will stop working – be they housewives, servants or whatever – and go either to their nearest male relative or, if they don't have one, to the workhouse where they can still live off the rates paid by men (Winifred says on this point: "This is perhaps the most important part of the strike. By this we shall hit men as ratepayers even when they have escaped us as relatives" (24)).

More economic arguments are used later in the play, as the female relatives begin arriving. These are the words of Horace's sister Agatha: "Either my place is the home – the home provided for me by some dear father, brother, husband or uncle – or I am a self-supporting member of the State, who ought not to be shut out from the rights of citizenship." (27) Though Horace is scandalised that all these relatives are intent on living off him, he is certain "that whatever is going on the men will know what to do, and will do it with dignity and firmness." (30) Then we hear of men resorting to taking the positions once filled by women: "Messrs Lyons and Co. announce that by special arrangement with the War Office the places of their defaulting waitresses will be filled by the non-commissioned officers and men of the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards." (31) By the close, even Horace is persuaded that for the good of the country, and for his own comfort, women should get the vote.

However, this is a course of action he is being compelled to take.

As one can see from his final remark, he has not lost his sexism: “You may depend on me – all of you – to see justice done. When you want a thing done, get a man to do it! Votes for Women!” (33) The *Era* critic felt that men would probably choose the option presented in the play but still questioned whether they would prefer to support their women rather than be ruled by them:

How much probability there is in the piece it is difficult to say; but it certainly seems likely to have the effect intended, though whether the men would not prefer to be deserted by the fair sex than be governed by them is a problem yet to be considered.<sup>21</sup>

The play refines the theme of determinism found in many one-act plays by having the manipulation of events controlled by certain characters of the piece, and by presenting Horace as an isolated representative of the nationwide protest by the use of inductive suggestion.

Joan Dugdale’s *10 Clowning Street* (1913) has a similar theme of coercion. It is reminiscent of Shaw’s 1909 one-act *Press Cuttings*, in which the British Prime Minister is called Balsquith (a combination of Balfour and Asquith) and his chief of staff is Mitchener (from Kitchener). In Dugdale’s play, the daughters of the Prime Minister, Anthony Foljambe, return in quick succession through the police guard to their father’s study worn

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<sup>21</sup> *The Era*, April 17 1909, p. 21.

out after a week working in a laundry, as a house servant and a shop assistant respectively. (Coincidentally, Shaw wrote *The Fascinating Founding*, a one-act comedy dealing in part with the cause of women's suffrage, for the Prime Minister's daughter, Elizabeth Asquith, in August 1909.)



Vera Wentworth and Jessie Kenney of the WSPU attacking Herbert Asquith in September 1909 (Spartacus)

They are, however, full of admiration for the women who have to work in these jobs. Judith says: "I'm thankful I've had my week's misery. It's opened my eyes; taught me what women have to go through when they are not sheltered behind padded front doors like ours." (182) In contrast to the husband in *Jim's Leg* and the men of Britain in *How the Vote was Won*, it is the upper-class women who have on this occasion experienced the hard life of working women and seen the limitations on the rights of all women. They tell their father that they will campaign



for female suffrage and cause him deep embarrassment if he does not push a Woman Suffrage Bill through parliament. The play ends:

**P.M.:** (*Seeing his foundations crumbling*) You've forced me to it. I give in; but remember, you have brought your father's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave and shamed me to the world.

**Isabella:** (*Laughing*) Nothing of the sort. Mr. Marchmount [a leading newspaper proprietor who is present in the room] won't tell, and the policemen outside had better have a bribe out of the Treasury! Let's have it drawn up formally. (187)

The end of the play might leave one with misgivings since there is no guarantee that Foljambe will be supported by his government. There is no denying, however, that in these two one-act plays which have been examined, there is a keen sense of satisfaction that the men have been outwitted and their version of society proved so vulnerable to the wiles of the female half of society.

A play which employs the device of showing how untenable are the arguments against female suffrage is *Mrs. Appleyard's Awakening* (Rehearsal, 20/6/1911, mat.) by Evelyn Glover. The character of the title tells her parlour-maid Morton that she has been out canvassing against the enfranchisement of women. Her friend Mrs. Crabtree, an anti-suffragist who is entirely against women involving themselves in politics in any way (she feels that it was a "mistake" to grant women even the municipal vote), tells Appleyard that there is a woman in their Anti-Suffrage Society (A.S.S. for short) who has been seen

canvassing. These women, explains Crabtree, “subscribe – openly – to the tenet that woman is incapable of forming a political opinion, and they not only form one for themselves but they go about trying to influence those of men!” (195) After listening to Crabtree’s arguments in favour of a complete political sterility, Appleyard turns against a position she had never held as firmly as her friend. Crabtree explains that the “qualities that unfit a woman for [the vote]” are “Hasty generalisations – vague and undisciplined sympathies – extreme sentimentality”, and adds: “Men are political by nature – women are not. If women got the vote they would have so much to learn that they’d never have time for anything else.” (197)

But it is this very belief that women are politically under-educated and incompetent, that their true sphere is the home, and that they should remain “decent-minded” (another ‘ladylike’ trait) and refrain from any involvement in politics, that appals Appleyard. Crabtree’s argument rests on the premise that man can be defined as a political animal and woman as apolitical.

**Crabtree** (*Solemnly and loudly*). Man is Man and Woman is Woman!

**Appleyard** (*With a twinkle in her eye*). Oh I’m quite prepared to concede that.

**Crabtree**. And conceding it, you actually think that a woman ought to meddle with politics?

**Appleyard**. Meddle? How can any intelligent woman help taking an interest in the affairs of her country?

**Crabtree**. Her country? It’s the country of the men who fight for it!

**Appleyard.** You mean that only soldiers and sailors should be politicians? (199)

The persuasiveness of the play resides in the fact that Appleyard, at first against the suffrage, has come to her conclusion that women should get the vote through her own evaluation of Crabtree's chauvinistic arguments, a conclusion which coincides with the views of the Suffrage Societies, none of whose literature she has read. There is a sense of inevitability here as well as in the other women's political plays because the anti-suffrage characters, at least, personify biased views relatively purged of realistic character detail – Crabtree is really a caricature of a woman with an extreme prejudice against giving women the vote. Since the message is of paramount concern, the characters are formed according to the demands of putting across that message: characterisation subserves the unity of thematic emphasis.

A similar technique of dramatising the lack of logic in anti-suffrage stances is used in other plays, like the novelist Beatrice Harraden's *Lady Geraldine's Speech* (Guildhall School of Music, 15/7/1909, amats.) and H. M. Paull's monologue *An Anti-suffragist*. A variation of this is the theme of a woman stifling the women's cause, which began with Elizabeth Robins' full-length *Votes for Women* (1907), in which the feminist member of the Wynnstay House social circle, Vida Levering (who was modelled on Sylvia Pankhurst), declares that those most deserving of condemnation are not the men who oppress women but those women who acquiesce in the state of

inequality because it gives them security.<sup>22</sup> The flirtatious Aline Perry in *A Woman's Influence* (published in 1913) by Gertrude Jennings is an example of this sort of woman.

Finally, there is that body of plays in which the points in favour of extending the suffrage to women are propounded by a certain character. An example of this is Evelyn Glover's *A Chat with Mrs. Chicky* (1912). Mrs. Holbrook is in conversation with her brother's charlady, Mrs. Chicky. There are similarities to *Mrs. Appleyard's Awakening* (1911) in that the socially better-placed Mrs. Holbrook is condescending to a servant she assumes to require political guidance. Her reasoning is questionable because it is based on a very poor view of the average intelligence of women. To give an example:

If women had the brains to understand the things men settle in Parliament it might be different, but they haven't. They're clever in another way. You can't combine politics and domestic matters. (106)

What we have here in this drama of opposing beliefs are the opinions of a woman, Mrs. Holbrook, who, divorced from a large section of society, reads about the difficulties endured by women with less advantages than her (she interrupts Mrs. Chicky at one point: "But where have you read all this? I'm quite sure it's nonsense!" (107)); and a woman of less quarantined

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<sup>22</sup> Robins was a member of the A.F.L. and, from 1907 to 1912, a member of the board of the W.S.P.U. She too was another suffrage campaigner who converted certain of her feminist writings from one literary form to another: in this case, she rendered *Votes for Women* as a novel, *The Convert* (1907), just as, for example, Cicely Hamilton and Margaret Wynn Nevinson were to convert pamphlets into one-act stage pieces in an effort to bring their arguments home forcefully and to more people.

circumstances who has been disqualified from the council vote because her deceased husband was French and who has lived a life of hardship, surrounded by the disadvantaged. Thus her words possess credibility.

Bless your 'eart, 'M., women like us don't 'ave to read about the lor like you ladies! We're too busy knockin' up against it, as you might say. I don't suppose any o' your lady friends comes before the Magistrit onst in a lifetime ... (107)

She is impressed by a suffrage campaigner because "She ain't sat in no drorin'-room an' read about us" (112). The opposition between the two women is one of class as much as political belief and it parallels the demarcation between the enfranchised men and the politically impoverished women. Many of these plays are punctuated by what are effectively monologues pretty much in the best traditions of platform oratory, and this play offers a good example of this.<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Chicky has a long speech near the end in which she lays out her political views.

I believe same as you that the men want to do what's best for us, but – you 'ave to be a woman yourself to know where thing's 'ur women! It's Gawd's truth, that is, an' I say Gawd bless the ladies 'oo are 'elpin' us by stickin' out for it! (113)

By the close of the play, Mrs. Holbrook stubbornly refuses to be persuaded to join the suffrage camp but it is obvious that Chicky has won the argument and is secure in the knowledge that her opinion is the right one. This final flourish, however, probably

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<sup>23</sup> Many of the more socialist male dramatists, like Shaw, Granville Barker and Miles Malleon, were as prone in their one-act drama to include soliloquies encapsulating their social message.

takes away from the dramatic tightness of the preceding dialogue; however, this only confirms that we are in the realm of propaganda and not of a more impartial form of drama. The *Times* critic felt that it was “a female suffrage tract, but a tract with more fun and actuality than most”,<sup>24</sup> but other critics disliked the formulaic nature of the play. The *Era* reviewer commented with some impatience, “Little more than a waste of words was presented in the duologue, in which a charwoman demolishes her inquisitor by the stock arguments in favour of the ‘cause’.”<sup>25</sup> The play was, however, the most popular piece in the repertoire of the A.F.L. between 1912 and 1914.

The plays which have been examined are mostly of a radical but not harsh, sometimes even comic, character, written in ways in which the transmission of the single political message is self-evidently of primary concern. However, it is very significant to recognise the general avoidance of principles kept by certain suffrage groups but not by others which stopped the A.F.L. from becoming a divisive force among groups of different persuasions.<sup>26</sup> Inez Bensusan even made sure that certain plays which had militant elements were performed for the W.S.P.U. but not for the N.U.W.S.S., for example. Of course, some of the characteristic ingredients of W.S.P.U. writings such as jingoism, a certain disciplined hierarchical structure, and religious and military symbolism are present in some of these plays, although usually in a toned-down form.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Times*, 24 June 1912, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> *The Era*, 29 June 1912, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> A vice-president of the A.F.L., Eva Moore, wrote about the philosophy of the League: “It was non-party and non-political. Though it did not advocate extreme measures, it did not condemn them, its policy was ‘the aim is everything’.” *Exits and Entrances*, p. 94.

The militarism of many feminist campaigners was satirised in the character of Margery Willis in Malleston's *Black 'Ell* (written 1916).<sup>27</sup> These plays also contrast quite remarkably, in characterisation, tone and degree of didactic vigour, with the more realist and vitriolic one-act drama about woman's place in society which were written at about the same time, many of which were produced by the Pioneer Players. What is present in these two groups of plays, perhaps for the first time, are female characters who have their own political volition in tandem with an increasing degree of personal and social independence.

Since the political plays composed a drama whose characterisation was built principally on political rather than emotional motivations, the aim was not to shame audiences into political action by depicting certain characters as victims of injustice, but to suggest (or often declare) ways of remedying this injustice. In terms of its involvement in dramatic production, feminist theatre predates and is arguably a precursor to the various socialist agitational theatre groups which sprang up between the wars; the dramatic corps of the Independent Labour Party, the Workers' Theatre Movement, the Unity Theatre, the Rebel Players, the Left Book Club Theatre, and others.

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<sup>27</sup> See chapter 5. During the First World War, the A.F.L. organised war relief in the form of charity matinées in London and variety programmes for the troops in France, under the title of the Women's Theatre Camps Entertainment. The Pioneer Players also changed direction but, in contrast, modified its repertoire, replacing some naturalist drama with non-naturalist fare.

## The Pioneer Players

The implication of the A.F.L. repertoire was that the primary remedy to the poor status of women was the winning of the vote. The plays of the Pioneer Players were not so exclusive in their themes because it was recognised that the problems confronting women were not to be solved merely by women establishing a direct political influence. Edith Craig, the founder and director of the Pioneer Players, although not averse to the political empowerment of women,<sup>28</sup> made certain that the plays the group produced expressed the circumstances of women in the home, at work and elsewhere, even in one case a brothel, conditioned as these conditions were by the forces of social convention, poverty, legal obligations and the general notion of inferiority attached to women.



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<sup>28</sup> Craig had been the original producer of both *How the Vote was Won* and *A Pageant of Great Women* for the A.F.L.



Edith Craig, daughter of the great actress Ellen Terry and founder of the Pioneer Players in 1911; the group operated until 1925.

However, this examination of current social conditions was characteristically agitational, in the general stance or solutions (implied or actually given) informing the drama, and in the resulting choice of character, situation, and thematic and structural emphases.<sup>29</sup> This preoccupation with social inequalities also meant that the Pioneer Players would occasionally relinquish its feminist principles and produce a play performed mostly by men and having a distinctly non-feminist theme, such as Cecil Fisher's all-male *The Great Day* (Little, 18/5/1913), which deals with the exploitation of non-unionised labour, and Hermann Heijermans' full-length *The Good Hope* (1912). The goals of the Pioneer Players were stated at the close of their first season, at an annual general meeting held on 21 June 1912:

It [the Pioneer Players] was, briefly, to present the type of play which, for want of a better definition, is known as the 'play of ideas', and particularly that variety which deals with current ideas, social, political and moral.

It has more than once been suggested in the Press that we are a Society formed for the purpose of suffragist propaganda only; but this suggestion is a misleading one. It is obviously quite impossible nowadays to produce thoughtful plays written by thoughtful people which do not bear some traces of the influence of the feminist movement – an influence which no

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<sup>29</sup> One goal of the group was: "To assist Propaganda Societies (and others) throughout the country by providing them with such plays [that is, plays dealing with 'contemporary ideas'], both for purposes of propaganda and as a means of raising funds; and to undertake, when desired, the organisation of performances by professional or amateur players." *The Era*, 4 May 1911, p. 18.

modern writer, however much he may wish it, can entirely escape.<sup>30</sup>

This defence that the Pioneer Players was just one among the general fraternity of theatre groups and writers interested in the 'feminist movement' is quite true: the Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, for instance, would produce drama manifestly supporting the betterment of women's position in society, as in Gilbert Cannan's pageant of mothers of past generations, *Everybody's Husband* (14/4/ 1917),<sup>31</sup> and the Play Actors would also pursue the same theme in pieces such as Inez Bensusan's *The Apple* (Court, 14/3/1909, P.A.). The Little Theatre, under the proprietorship of Gertrude Kingston, and the Kingsway Theatre, under Lena Ashwell, along with the Rehearsal Theatre, were the chief venues in London for the professional mounting of plays with feminist sympathies and insights, and both were to play host to a number of the single matinées presented by the Pioneer Players. The Pioneer Players were financed by subscriptions and performed their plays as private Sunday matinée presentations, thus evading the possible wrath of the Lord Chamberlain.

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<sup>30</sup> "Pioneer Players Annual Report, 1911-1912 Season," pp. 7-8, at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum, Smallhythe Place, England.

<sup>31</sup> Though it would not now be called a good play, the dramatist and poet John Drinkwater so liked Cannan's play that he described it as "one of the best short plays of our time" ("A personal Note," in Bache Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, p. 177). The Pioneer Players presented a one-act play structured along similar lines: Christopher St. John's *The First Actress* (Kingsway, 8/5/1911, mat.) has a series of famous actresses of different periods instilling fortitude into the first of their modern line in the English theatre, Margaret Hughes, to take to the stage after the Restoration. St. John's play was, of course, in its turn modelled after Cicely Hamilton's *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909).

But what this admission in the 1912 annual report also makes clear is that the organisers of the Pioneer Players felt that the main purpose of the group was to present dramas dealing with the special difficulties of women in the society of that time. When one considers the pro-woman short plays of even Bernard Shaw and J. M. Barrie, they are not entirely effective as drama reflecting the plight of the contemporary woman, because their perspective, reflected in the comic mode of these plays, is both patronising and to some degree non-committal. Cicely Hamilton's *Jack and Jill and a Friend* (Kingsway, 8/5/1911) is remarkably similar to Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look* (Duke of York's, 1/3/1910). The initial situation is as unequal as that of Harry Sims and his wife in the latter play. Jill tells Jack,

you don't like to think I can stand on my own feet ... The wife of a successful man – that's what you want me to be – but not a successful woman. (18)

But, instructively, Hamilton has the wife beat her husband in a novel-writing competition and eventually presents him as admitting his own arrogance and agreeing to her equality to him. This play epitomises the difference in standpoint: both plays initially focus on the position of women in terms of her subservience to her husband. However, Barrie's play primarily uses the two women, the previous and current wives, to build up the satirical picture of self-centeredness in Harry Sims; though it is a feminist piece, the focus is still on the man, not, as it might have been, on the free volition of the woman.



Cicely Hamilton (photographer and date unknown; Spartacus)

The plays of the Pioneer Players, up to the war, constitute a very significant section of that drama which sought to deal truthfully and sympathetically with the real-life circumstances of women, a genre dating, in Britain, perhaps from a full-length play produced during the heyday of the 'Problem Play', *Alan's Wife* (Terry's, 28/4/1893, I.T.) by Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell. A sizeable number of the plays were based on the actual experiences of the authors, such as the unmarried mother Jess Dorynne's *The Surprise of His Life* (1912), or on subjects with which the author was intimately acquainted, as in the Poor Law Guardian Margaret Wynn Nevinson's *In the Workhouse* (1911). And, as with many of the feminist political dramas of this time, many of these dramatists conducted studies of contemporary conditions and in this way found much material for plays as well

as books.<sup>32</sup> The repertoire of the group for its first five years is remarkable for the high proportion of women dramatists who contributed (as many as a half of all plays up to 1915 were by women). The change in the general character of the repertoire after the war began testifies both to the corresponding drop in the number of submissions by women and, of course, the change in theatrical and creative conditions and in priorities brought about by the hostilities.<sup>33</sup>

### Section Three: Feminist Social Drama

The theme of inequality between the sexes is broached in a number of one-act plays of this time. It is an interesting field because it often involves women characters in assessments of their own self-worth, affected as it is by the values the current social structure allots them. This frequently takes the form of abruptly introduced and concise revelations which stress the principal idea behind the play and distinguish the proponents and opponents of this idea very clearly. Thus, the very capable Helen in Inez Bensusan's *The Apple* (Court, 14/3/1909, P.A.) defines the central conflict of the drama by declaring in no uncertain terms: "I've awakened to a sense of the injustice of it all. I'm going to rebel. I'm going to fight for my rights, your rights, equal rights for us all" (144).

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<sup>32</sup> Women dramatists who wrote studies of social conditions of women and the poor include Florence Bell (*At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1907)) and Elizabeth Robins (*Ancilla's Share: An Indictment of Sex Antagonism* (1924)).

<sup>33</sup> The Pioneer Players presented their first non-naturalistic play, Nicolai Evreinov's one-act *The Theatre of the Soul*, in a translation by Marie Potapenko and Christopher St. John, at the Little Theatre on 7 March 1915, an event which marked a broadening of dramatic tastes in the group.

The piece does not deviate from the elaboration, testing and then failure of this programme of self-improvement. It brings in such matters as sexual harassment in the work-place (“It’s your own fault,” explains Mr. Dean, her boss and a friend of the family, after kissing her, “you’re too good looking” (153)) and the favouritism of a son over a daughter, to help explain Helen’s desire to emigrate to Canada and then her being blackmailed by Mr. Dean to remain at home. The play has a simplicity and directness of dialogue which would not go amiss in the most ardently feminist repertoire. Helen and her brother are in conversation.

**Cyril.** Girls don’t want chances. They only want husbands. If you’d stay at home like a decent young woman, some decent man might marry you, but while you prefer -

**Helen.** I don’t want your decent husband. I want a little pleasure, a glimpse of life, a taste of the joy of living, a few pence in my pocket, my right as an individual ... (151)

The ironic tension in the piece lies in the opposition between the right and prospects of Helen to self-determination and the forces which deny her the opportunity to realise this goal. The blunt moral of the play is brought home when she is prevented from going to Canada, in contrast to the care which is taken to assist her brother, Cyril.

Another play with a similar story-line and theme is Edith Lyttelton’s *The Thumbscrew* (Little, 5/12/ 1912, mat.), a very powerful attack on the practice of ‘sweating’ or the exploitation

of labour for maximum profits. It has the character Joe Selden enraged that his fiancée feels that she must remain with her family carding hooks and eyes after they are forced to take a cut in wages.

You 'aven't got a bit of spunk in you, any of you women! You don't deserve the vote, nor nothin' else. I've never seen such a poor-spirited lot in my life. I thought Bernice was a cut above this, but she's as bad as the rest. (959)

What Joe's attitude indicates is the greater freedom of a man to depart to places like Canada, relative to the obligations and narrower opportunities open to a woman. As it happens, his bitter attack throws the closing scene of the family carding together into almost tragic relief. The closing image captures intensively the hopeless fate of the family and magnifies the sympathy one might have for Bernice in recognition of the extent of her sacrifice.

The same topic of familial duty, employed as the central standard of behaviour, is found in Cosmo Hamilton's *A Soldier's Daughters* (Kingsway, 14/5/1909, mat.) and H. M. Harwood's *Honour Thy Father* (Little, 15/12/1912, mat.). Hamilton even goes so far as to render the pressure of filial responsibility as a tangible symbol, the father's sword (as one sister reminds the other, "It has never had a stain on it that could not be rubbed away" (19)). His two daughters are all that remain of a proud military family, but the sense of family tradition and the pride which characterises it act as a background and a pressure to their actions. The girls are not, however, capable of continuing

the tradition which has been the source of family esteem because it involves a male-only profession, as the incongruous use of 'his' in this piece of dialogue suggests.

**Pamela.** A Meredith never breaks his word.

**Helen.** Not those who can boast of Meredith of Plassey, Meredith of Waterloo and Meredith whose sword is a beacon in our lives. (12)

In reduced circumstances, one girl, Pamela Meredith, is an actress, the other, Helen, a typist. Having both worked very hard for a little income, Pamela tells her sister that she has been offered an engagement for £30 a week but she honourably admits that this will entail becoming the mistress of a man whose wife has been placed in a house for drunkards. Out of contempt for Helen's privations, she is willing to become a kept woman. Appalled by this account, Helen rather cynically suggests that they move to a new flat near Regent's Street, since "Most of us go there under these conditions" (17), but she rejects the idea that they bring their father's sword with them. With some amount of histrionics, she challenges her sister to persevere with conditions as they stand.

**Helen.** ... We are women, but we have kept you bright, old sword (*she kisses it*), because you were our father's, and we are our father's daughters, soldier's daughters, fighters too. (*Turning up.*)

**Pamela** (*with a cry*). Don't put that back.

**Helen** (*facing Pamela eagerly*). Do we go on? Do we remain fighters? Do we keep this blade bright?

**Pamela.** Yes, oh yes!



**Helen.** Thank God. (*They embrace.*) (19)

In effect, the play declares the merits of self-respect in overcoming adversity, though it is unusual in that it concerns working women under this duress, not working men. As such, it introduces the special temptations and torments confronting women, yet all the time in a way which is respectful to conventional bourgeois domestic allegiances. These guarantee that the moral will be edifying while avoiding a more open analysis of the girls' situation. In many ways, then, the piece is compact precisely because of this evasion of stronger issues, leaving both characterisation and situation unexplored; and this is so because of the emphasis on the unifying subject of family pride lying at the basis of individual self-esteem.

Harwood's *Honour Thy Father* (Little, 15/12/1912, mat.) is a more bitter portrait of the duties expected of a daughter in her relationship with her father, but in renouncing these obligations, the play transcends the question of the bonds between father and daughter to explore the economic issue of what exactly a woman is to do if she has not found a partner or does not wish to marry. It was a theme which had become highly prevalent in drama by about 1910 (though, of course, its realistic presentation in dramatic form dates at least as far back as *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw's banned full-length play which the Pioneer Players were to produce in private performances on 16 and 18 June 1912<sup>34</sup>). Cicely Hamilton, for example, had

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<sup>34</sup> Another full-length play presented by the Pioneer Players, *The Daughters of Ishmael* by Richard Wright Kauffman, produced in March 1914, also deals with this theme.

addressed the question in her full-length play *Just to Get Married*, produced at the Little Theatre two years before the production of Harwood's play there. Harwood's Georgiana Vicary, a "redundant woman", is aggrieved that her only way of surviving, since she has not been trained to be employable, is to marry.

I'm a perfectly useless woman. And what is a perfectly useless woman to do but marry? Even when she does not care for the man who asks her. Every woman is expected to get herself a husband, somehow or another, and is looked on as a miserable failure if she doesn't. (Act 2)

The same question animates such full-length plays as Elizabeth Baker's *Chains* (1909, Play Actors) and Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (1912).

Harwood's play in part seems to say that middle-class prescripts are highly restrictive to personal freedom, but also that they are especially ridiculous when they are maintained as the last vestiges of middle-class living by people who have long since lost the wealth and standing which allowed them this style and philosophy of life. Edward Morgan reminds his daughter: "One owes something to one's family – we may be poor, but you might remember, Claire, that you come of a family of gentle folk." (37) In contrast to *A Soldier's Daughters*, the tone here is somewhat critical rather than approving of this delusionary but defensive perspective. Honour here is not a chivalric code but a self-protective regulation of thought and behaviour maintained by a family whose sole way of staying in contact with a happier

bourgeois past and to screen themselves from a less genteel present is to subscribe to it. This ultimately sham form of honour exists as a leitmotif in the play, beginning with its first mention by the father Edward Morgan (“Debts of honour, however small, should be paid at once. I’ve always stuck to that” (30)), before he instructs his wife to pay the amount owed.

The eldest daughter, Claire, is working in London and her family, now living in Bruges, is sent money by her. Morgan is annoyed that his wife has been selected as custodian of this income but when he asks her why he is not suited to taking care of the money, she answers that women “know what it means to be without it.” (34) Morgan, a chauvinist at heart, is still not appeased. There are early signals after Claire’s arrival that she is liberal enough to countenance jobs which her parents would think shameful.

**Claire:** My dear father, very few ways of making money are decent or lady-like.

**Morgan:** I don’t think I need telling that for a woman – of our class – to be mixed up in money making of any kind is extremely regrettable and unfortunate ... Still, in some cases it becomes inevitable, but even then there are some things that cannot be done. (36-37)

Then, quite neatly, Claire is recognised as a prostitute by Richard Steam, a visitor to the Morgan household, a revelation which he suggests sharply: “Why, yes, there’s the little mark on your neck.” (41) In return for his complicity, and as a substitute for “a perfectly penitential evening” (42), he asks her to

entertain him that night. She refuses and strikes the amorous Steam just as Morgan re-enters. Coming quickly to a tentative assumption of Claire's actual profession in London, Morgan berates his visitor not for his tawdry behaviour with his daughter but for abusing the conventional rules of respect for one's host. "I don't want teaching manners," returns Stearn, "by any down-at-elbows bankrupt" (44), and informs them that their daughter works on "the streets" and is thus not worthy of being called "a respectable woman." (45) Ashamed that Mrs. Morgan has heard his outburst, he leaves.

Claire is not, however, cowed by her unmasking. She is too realistic and practical a woman to feel that she must apologise for what she does. But more than this, she is very sure that she is not to blame for the position she has found herself in. After her father refused to have her trained, and then went bankrupt,

I had to find something to do. And I knew nothing – I was utterly ignorant – and utterly useless. I could play 'rather nicely', I could paint rather 'pretty water-colours' and I knew all the parlour tricks of polite society. (48)

All this explains why she is paying for her sister to be taught a practical skill. Unfitted by her upbringing to do any job requiring some degree of expertise, she quickly began "to sell myself ... frankly – and get the best price." (49) Morgan looks for a sense of shame but she is contemptuous of his "petty pride" (51), just as Janet Rutherford is of her father's values in *Rutherford and Son* (1912). He threatens to ostracise her but she retaliates by suggesting that she would cease sending him money should

this happen. At this, Morgan is momentarily uncertain of his scruples and descends from “*the moral plane*” (53). Eventually, he gives in. However, his final hypocritical act – taking the change from the rent money Claire had just handed over – condemns the principles he professes to abide by as shallow and disposable, a duplicity made all the more striking by the pitiful sight of Mrs. Morgan crying quietly and alone as the curtain comes down.

The play deals economically with the subjects of middle-class values and how these have become out-dated, and the uselessness of the genteel feminine life-style in the modern world. For its time, *Honour Thy Father* is quite a bold document on prostitution and the absurdity of retaining a middle-class morality when the income and status which supports it have vanished. The audience was said to have been shocked by its “very ugly theme” and its “brutal frankness”,<sup>35</sup> but, overall, critics could not deny that it was a “depressing if powerful, and tellingly written play.”<sup>36</sup> One of the more interesting points made in the play is an explanation of why in reality women become prostitutes. Harwood, through Claire, puts this in a way which unequivocally attacks the romanticised notion of a fallen woman. Claire tells her parents, “... everybody thinks that when a girl does what I have done there is always a romantic history of love and betrayal” (46), whereas in actual fact the reality is very different.

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<sup>35</sup> *Votes for Women*, 20 December 1912.

<sup>36</sup> *The Era*, 21 December 1912, p. 15.

Mother thinks it's men who make girls go wrong – but if it wasn't for tired feet and aching backs the men would have a very poor show. (50)

It is this forwardness and honesty of revelation in the play, more than any other element, which probably won the piece the charge of “ugliness”. In contrast, another drama dealing with prostitution presented by the Pioneer Players, Antonia Williams' full-length *The Street* (Little, 30/11/1913, mat.; originally produced, 1907), uses the old melodramatic device of having the fallen woman saved by the goodness of man and God. Interestingly, as in *The Apple* and *A Soldier's Daughters*, among others, the relationship looked at in *Honour Thy Father* is that between a daughter and her father, not her mother. Whether their authors considered that, in a patriarchal society, a piece involving a mother-daughter relationship was relatively undramatic – or they felt that, in the interest of creating the optimum feminist context, the best foil for a young female character was an older conservative man – this was largely the case, just as it was the convention to have the wife conducting an adulterous relationship, not the husband, in romantic melodrama at the time.

Other plays, like Jess Dorynne's *The Surprise of His Life* (King's Hall, 21/4/1912, mat.) and J. Sackville Martin's *Nellie Lambert* (King's Hall, 5/5/1912, mat.), also dwell on this theme of the refusal of a woman to choose the option of marriage and to seek instead an alternative which would satisfy her own volition. Dorynne's play again shows a daughter at odds with the wishes of her father. Emily Jenkins, a pregnant but unmarried young

woman, is told by her father to marry the father of the child. This upsets her greatly, because it shows her father turning against his normal paternal affections and forcing her to marry the wholly unworthy Alfred. “Ow can a liar and a coward make an honest woman?,” she asks. “Seems to me ‘e’d better begin on ‘imself first” (7). But even her aunt Eliza, who also became pregnant while she was still unmarried, at first appears to suggest to her that the best course to take, given the circumstances, is to marry.

... ‘ow’s one to get a livin’ with a infant in one’s arms an’ no character? No, love, when a woman’s not got a penny o’ money, nor a friend, and she ‘as an encumbrance to gettin’ and doin’ any work – that sinks ‘er — it’s the street or the river. (6-7)

However, by the time her father has persuaded Alfred to marry Emily with promises of a job and some money, she has resolved, with the connivance of her suffragette friend, Mrs. Wilson, to refuse Alfred’s offer of marriage. She recalls to him the condescending way he himself had earlier turned down her appeal to marry. She is bitter herself now and her recollection proves that she has every right to be.

A wife an’ family was a burden on a young man, yer said, an’ Lloyd George was a bringin’ in a bill to maintain mothers of illegitimate children, which yer thought very sensible of ‘im. It took so much moral responsibility orf you young fellers! (15-16)

The very caustic reversal of thinking in itself pays tribute to the courage of the woman not to take the conventional exit from such a situation – especially as it would save her from the

possibility of the workhouse or a life as a prostitute, and also legitimise her child – and agreeably punishes the character who is undoubtedly the self-serving villain of the piece. The fact that she contrasts simultaneously her old view with her more confident current one enlivens the dramatic interest of the situation and shows her as recognising her own free will. Without indicating that there will be a tangible reward for her action (indeed, it suggests a rather bleak future for Emily), the play does insist on the greater value of personal integrity over a socially more acceptable course of action. It proposes that even marriage might bring its own life-long torments: Eliza confides in Emily that her punishment went on during her marriage.

From the day 'e married me, George never ceased to fling it in me face that 'e 'ad made me an honest woman. 'E didn't spare ter call me such names either as if I'd been a regular bad lot on the streets, an' ter shime me all 'e could. (19)

In this way, it gives priority to the individual over the forces which under the normal state of acquiescence would manipulate Emily's actions, a disposition which runs vigorously through most of these feminist plays.

For the reason that Alfred is made to be such a blackguard and the author obviously approved of the decision Emily makes, it is not surprising that critics described it as a "rather partisan piece".<sup>37</sup> It is prejudiced for the personal reason that Dorynne had been abandoned, while pregnant, by Edith Craig's brother, Gordon, the famous stage theorist (it is not certain whether

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<sup>37</sup> *The Stage*, 25 April, 1912, p. 23.



Edith knew of this background to the play). However, this does not discount the power of the drama as a social profile and the elevation of Emily, even in such humble circumstances, to a genuinely heroic stature (there is some truth in the notion that, conversely, the rise of feminism made the heroic male character in drama obsolete<sup>38</sup>). In the play, Dorynne has introduced the same theme of refusal to marry that is found in Maggie's stand in Elizabeth Baker's full-length *Chains* (1909), but Dorynne has gone beyond Baker's treatment of the theme to add the highly emotive and controversial element of pregnancy outside marriage as the central complicating factor of the play. The characterisation of Emily and the play in general are dominated by this single moral question which finds its dramatic energy in the clash of public and private morality. And while its partisanship may, on the one hand, have created its emotional didactic character, the play (along with others by women playwrights) compares favourably with the one-act drama of even such advanced dramatists as Chapin and Houghton in its introduction of new subject-matter, a genuineness of female characterisation, and the non-observance of certain stifling dramatic conventions.

Another play which contains references to topical affairs pertinent to women is Margaret Wynne Nevinson's *In the Workhouse* (Kingsway, 8/5/1911, mat.), Nevinson herself served for a quarter of a century on various education committees and for thirteen years (1909-1922) as Poor Law

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<sup>38</sup> See Archibald Henderson, *The Changing Drama*, pp. 271-272.

Guardian for Hampstead.<sup>39</sup> She also spoke often in favour of women's suffrage. It was this background which gave her the material for the sketch 'Detained by Marital Authority' which, after being requested to do so by Edith Craig, she adapted for the stage as *In the Workhouse*. The focus of the play, so Nevinson stated, was on "the abominable slavery of wives and the advantages of vice under the law."<sup>40</sup>



Margaret Wynne Nevinson (photographer and date unknown;  
Spartacus)

The play divided the critics, one set condemning it as a pernicious piece dealing with a subject too awful to warrant attention by a playwright: for instance, the drama critic of the *Daily Mail* described it as "a medical pamphlet not a stage

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<sup>39</sup> She was made a Justice of the Peace in July 1920 and was the first woman to sit on the Criminal Bench in the county of London.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever*, p. 224.

play”<sup>41</sup> and the *Era* critic found it a “queer and very disagreeable play”, having already described the triple bill of which it formed part as “less significant as drama than stage-tract”;<sup>42</sup> and the other set welcoming it as a truthful portrait of a “generally unknown world”.<sup>43</sup> It was given much more attention when originally produced than the two other plays also receiving their first productions (*The First Actress* and *Jack and Jill and a Friend*) which, with it, made up the triple bill of the Pioneer Players’ first matinée in May 1911. Given the ingredients of its setting, an all-female cast, and the highly tendentious view expressed by these characters, it is not surprising that it should overshadow the two other plays.

The premise of the play suggests that, under the legal situation as it then stood, it was better for a woman to be an unmarried mother than a married one. Unmarried women were not subservient to a husband (which had been Eliza’s final moral in *The Surprise of His Life*), were looked after better by the municipal authorities, and, if they had children, were often given an allowance by the father (or, as is the case of one woman in the play, fathers) of these offspring. The play is basically structured in a series of edifying anecdotes and views. The rather naive young Cockney girl, Lily, hears the various stories of the forty-year-old Yorkshire woman Wilhelmina, the coarse Mrs. Jarvis, the “idiot girl” Monica, the refined but disgraced parlour-maid Ethel, the fat and respectable Mrs. Clearer, the young unmarried mother Penelope who uses the social system

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<sup>41</sup> *Daily Mail*, 9 May 1911.

<sup>42</sup> *The Era*, 4 May 1911, p.18

<sup>43</sup> A remark made by the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* critic, quoted in *Life’s Fitful Fever*, p. 225. See also *The Times*, 9 May 1911, p. 10.

unashamedly to her advantage, and the supposedly married Mrs. Kemp who, ordered to leave with her husband, confesses that they are not married and is permitted to stay in the workhouse.

The diversity of characterisation<sup>44</sup> serves in the elaboration of the single thesis Nevinson puts forward: it assists in presenting the many facets of the situation in as short, realistic and dramatically dynamic a way as possible. The action of the play takes place in the ward of a workhouse described as having yellow-stained walls and red covers on the beds and cots. The people are dressed in paupers' clothes, and there are consolatory messages on the walls, such as "In everything give thanks" and "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". The play opens with Lily comforting her baby and telling it that they will be leaving tomorrow so that she can marry its father. Wilhelmina is in no mood to see Lily deluded, as twenty years before she herself had been left standing in the church waiting for her man to appear. She also vents her anger at the widowed mother of twins, Mrs. Jarvis ("Seems cruel 'ard on a mother to bring forth a pair of superfluous twins and no father between 'em") and on the simpleton Monica ("Well, I ain't a saint myself, but I do think as the propagation of idiots ought to be stopped") (4). These outbursts give her character an authentic biographical element of ruthlessness and frustration, but still allow her to become sympathetic, as she does with the parlour-maid Ethel (who, being young, still attaches a high value to her sexual propriety and family honour) with some credibility.

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<sup>44</sup> See the *Era*, 4 May 1911, p. 18.

With the preliminary conditions in place, the play pays attention to the legal absurdities relevant to women in their position. A Mrs. Clearer, who had intended to discharge herself, cannot now do so because her husband refuses to leave and demands that she stay with him. “Well, ‘e’s kept ‘is word and got the law and right of England behind ‘im”; according to this law, the Coverture Act, “a ‘usband may detain ‘is wife in the work-house by his marital authority”(6). She continues:

Now I’ve got over my confinement and the child safe in ‘even after all the worrit and starvation, I thought I’d like to go and earn my own living ... The lady wot comes round Sundays told me I ain’t got no responsibilities for my children, being a married lady with the lines. (7)

Penelope, one of the unmarried mothers, replies that though women in her situation are looked down on by married women, they have the advantage of being free of just the sort of constraint which binds a wife to the vagaries of her husband. She has abstained from marriage both because her mother had been killed by her father and because the different fathers of her five children all obediently pay five shillings to her each week for their upbringing. Nevinson drives home her message by having Mrs. Clearer persuaded of the obvious disadvantage of her position when compared to that of the unmarried mothers: “If I’d my time over again I’d not marry, no I. The idea of keeping me ‘ere with that there drunkard when I knows a trade.” (10) After listening to the experiences and opinions of the women, and recognising the benefits of this sort of life to

someone like Penelope, a girl of about the same age as her, Lily confides to her baby that she will stay unmarried.

The interest of *In the Workhouse* is certainly not one involving sound dramatic qualities as such – it is too systematic in its ironic programme of refuting and proposing the married and unmarried courses, respectively. Nevinson, for instance, cannot refrain from having Penelope declare triumphantly at the close of the play, “The law is all on the side of us bad ‘uns” (12). It presents a more logical working-out of a view to instructive ends than the other plays in this section. It is of interest, however, chiefly in its unapologetic presentation of these courses, and in the biographical and psychological detail which gives the piece a certain veracity. Only in very few shorts theatre works, such as Shaw’s *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* (1909) and Chapin’s *It’s the Poor That ‘Elps the Por* (1913), are there such a large number of dramatis personae, but neither Shaw nor Chapin differentiate them as clearly and economically in the interests of the final effect as Nevinson does. In narrative terms, one can imagine it almost as the sequel to *The Surprise of His Life*. The two plays coincide in their equating of marriage with slavery; however, what Nevinson’s play condemns is not simply the institution of marriage but the workhouse system as well, just as H. M. Harwood had attacked the anti-woman bourgeois system for forcing Claire Morgan to prostitution, and, on a larger scale, Shaw had attacked the capitalist system for leading Kitty Warren to the same destination. It has, in this sense, a dual purpose, but this is only natural since the status of a woman in a workhouse is inseparable from the question of her being the

property of someone else (married) or free to do as she pleases (unmarried). As a stage-tract which a private theatrical society could produce without the threat of the censor's interference, it is another example of a one-act play dealing with revolutionary subject-matter.

## **Conclusion**

One-act feminist drama of this period found its dynamic in oppositions: of character against character, argument against argument, conventionalism against self-determination, father against daughter, the married against the unmarried. Those plays with a political purpose were constructed with the objective of female enfranchisement firmly in mind. Many of these produced by the Actresses' Franchise League followed the direct approach of the monologues they superseded by delineating the case in favour of votes for women by a logic of economics and political impotence which required an intellectual response from the audience. The persuasion could be fortified by an emotional appeal but the logic was the process that counted.

On the other hand, those with a quest to demonstrate the poor social conditions of women relied on a moving of the feelings for their impact; on the realistic presentation of a culminant scene showing the hardships a woman must endure. That these latter plays appeal to the emotional rather than the cognitive response of an audience is borne out most forcefully in the

power of the imagistic closing scenes of certain plays: Mrs. Morgan dejected and crying in *Honour Thy Father*, Bernice's family left to card hooks in *The Thumbscrew*. The plays as a whole are also interesting for the fact that quite a few present a revolt against the determinist forces which in many other one-act plays of the same era are allowed relatively free rein. The point of these dramas is often to show female characters recognising and using their strength of will-power. They imply that personal integrity can be gained by an independence of political view and social status, such that, as we have seen, a female character can attain a truly heroic stature by her affirmation of selfhood. This theme could be made the centre of attention by an economy and pointedness of narrative elaboration and characterisation which is found in the one-act play.

Given that they are the work of part-time playwrights, but women with keenly felt ideas concerning the injustices performed against their gender, the one-act play-form, being a lyrical form conducive to the embodiment of strongly felt ideas, was a natural choice for them.



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