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1 Prostitution was held to be a plague by Victorian Britain and came to the fore in the 1880s with the publication of a sensational series of articles by the celebrated journalist W. T. Stead published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, where he investigated the White Slave Traffic. He claimed that women were selling their daughters for £3, and that a ring existed throughout Europe extending from Ostende to Vienna and Brussels. Though it turned out to be a sham, this report caused worry and anxiety in British well-to-do circles. It showed that prostitution was a spreading threat and affected all layers of society. It also showed that the slave-mongers and prostitutes themselves could thrive, challenging the prevailing fictional view phrased by Nina Auerbach in *Woman and the Daemon. The Life of a Victorian Myth*, that “generally the fallen woman must die at the end of her story” (Auerbach 161).

2 This challenge to a Victorian delusion had already been initiated in social sciences by William Acton with *Prostitution Considered in its Moral and Sanitary Aspects* (1870), or Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1893), reformers who claimed that grounds for prostitution lay in harsh economic circumstances rather than moral corruption. Nevertheless, misconceptions and myths about the harlot lived on in people’s minds and literature, most perceptibly in Arthur Wing Pinero’s play, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893), where a woman with a past ends up committing suicide. After attending the first performance of the play, Shaw set out to tackle the issue from the socialist standpoint by drafting another play, *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, in 1893, with the thesis that capitalism was the root of the evil, compelling proletarian women to sell themselves to earn a living. His purpose was to subvert the hitherto widespread view that individual villains were the
sole culprits of abuses and to incriminate Victorian middle-classes as partaking of the evil: the very existence of capital meant that their comfort was closely linked with the plight of the masses.

3 The unpleasantness of such a view went hand in hand with Shaw’s criticism of the popular genre of melodrama and of the pleasure inherent in this form of entertainment. In this respect, the writing of Mrs Warren’s Profession was also prompted by a wish to subvert the moralizing conception of prostitution and poetic justice after he had read an adaptation of Maupassant’s short story, Yvette (1884), by the actress Janet Achurch, Mrs. Daintry’s Daughter. About the plot, where a young woman finds out that her mother is a prostitute and ends up committing suicide, Shaw claimed: “[it] was ultra-romantic. I said, ‘I will work out the truth about the matter some day’” (Mitchenson 30). Unlike Pinero’s or Achurch’s works, Shaw’s play pits the socialist paradigm against the melodramatic view of prostitution. The heroine, Vivie Warren, has come to visit her mother about whom she knows very little and wants to learn about her past. She encounters embarrassed silences before the conflict between the two comes to a head, Mrs. Warren revealing that the dire poverty of her youth left her no alternative but to become a prostitute. Vivie sympathizes with her mother’s tale and a reconciliation occurs, but Mrs Warren’s sinister business partner Sir Crofts blurs out in the following act that they now run a dozen brothels all over Europe and that Vivie’s studies and her mother’s wealth were and still are derived from this profitable business. The heroine’s illusions collapse and she runs away to London where she decides to earn her own living rather than depend on her mother’s tainted income.

4 The stage appears as an ideal means to bring to light the guilt of the so-called respectable middle classes, to make ideology visible, that process that distorts facts, in Paul Ricoeur’s words: “l’idéeologie désigne au départ un processus de distorsion ou de dissimulation par lequel un individu ou un groupe exprime sa situation, mais sans la connaître ou la reconnaître” (Ricoeur 17). The audience is confronted with Victorian escapism, characters seeking to conceal Mrs Warren’s unmentionable profession. The play also persuades the audience to embrace the socialist interpretation of prostitution. Ideology is finally exposed through a destruction of dramatic illusion.

**Ideology as a Distortion of Reality**

5 Mrs Warren’s Profession is a play where strategies are continuously deployed to conceal facts and where relations between characters are obfuscated by secrets and lies. The plot itself revolves around prostitution as a taboo subject. Mrs Warren and her friend and business partner are well considered members of their local community, both enjoying wealth that has allowed Vivie to graduate at university. This clashes with the offensive, objectionable history of the eponymous character. Nowhere is the former profession of the protagonist named as such—it remains unmentionable to the very end of the play, when Vivie seeks to reveal the truth to her former fiancé Frank and the aesthete Præd by scribbling on a piece of paper the outrageous words, referring to the nature of Mrs Warren’s past. Even this paper is not read aloud, and ends up being torn to bits without the characters knowing for certain who Vivie’s mother was. In the same way, Mrs Warren’s sinister partner, Sir Crofts, owns the brothels that she manages throughout Europe in Ostende and Brussels, yet never does he say outright what the business consists in:
But you see you can’t mention such things in society. Once let out the word hotel and everybody thinks you keep a public-house. You wouldn’t like people to say that of your mother, would you? That’s why we’re so reserved about it. By the way, you’ll keep it to yourself, won’t you? Since it’s been a secret so long, it had better remain so. (329)

There is permanent mistrust between the two associates as well, since Crofts is all too keen to be introduced to Mrs Warren’s daughter. It soon becomes clear that his questions about her age and who her father is are prompted by lust. Distrust comes to a head when he contemplates marrying her, vaunting his fortune as compensation for his age. The old friendship between Mrs Warren and he is thus undermined by resentment and hatred:

Crofts. Well, I’m not fifty yet; and my property is as good as it ever was—
Mrs Warren [interrupting him] Yes; because you’re as stingy as you’re vicious. (302)

Nor does Frank’s father, now a seemingly respectable clergyman, present, exhibit a smooth character. His riotous youth and his affair with a disreputable woman who blackmailed him are facts that he does his best to conceal, Frank’s cheeky allusions causing the reverend to assert his authority pitifully, “silence, sir”, is the only way he finds to keep the secret.

Shaw’s play therefore seeks to uncover a hidden network of meaning through the socialist prism. The secrets and lies pervading it call for an unveiling of truth, much in the same way as Shaw opened his article in 1912, “The Root of the White Slave Traffic” by asserting the need for “securing to every respectable woman a sufficient wage for a decent life with reasonable hours of labor” (Weintrab 255). Merely condemning the whore-mongers amounts to self-deception, precisely what the play exposes by staging deceitful characters.

All the scheming and falsehood is not only found in the villains of the play: apart from the heroine, all the characters adopt attitudes of denial and deceit towards prostitution as a social plague. Frank for instance, rather than dwell on the feeling of suspicion and disgust towards Mrs Warren and Crofts, prefers to lapse into sterile flirtation with Vivie: “[babyishly, lulling her and making love to her with his voice]” (324). Love appears as a way of evading facts, much as a child would. Frank is eager to identify Vivie and him with the characters of “Babes in the Wood”, “let’s go and get covered up with leaves—[rhythmically, rocking him like a nurse] Fast asleep, hand in hand, under the trees” (ibid.). It seems more convenient for him to close his eyes on who Mrs Warren really is, on the unpleasantness of her company—as is shown by Vivie’s cue: “little girl wants to forget all about her mother” (325). In the same way, as an proponent of art for art’s sake, the righteous Præd has always sought to turn a blind eye to Mrs Warren’s past and remains elusive throughout the play, for instance when Crofts tries to find out about who is Vivie’s father:

I have nothing to do with that side of Mrs Warren’s life, and never had. She has never spoken to me about it; and of course I have never spoken to her about it. Your delicacy will tell you that a handsome woman needs some friends who are not—well, not on that footing with her. The effect of her own beauty would become a torment to her if she could not escape from it occasionally. (285)

Præd’s refusal to broach unpleasant or repulsive subjects derives from a platonistic view of morality linked with beauty. His keenness on elegance and art clashes with the search for truth, which is summed up in his surprise at Vivie’s Fabian-like interest in work and learning: “Are you to have no romance, no beauty in your life?” (277). In other words, Præd’s stance, like Frank’s, intertwines with the negation of prostitution as an economic
phenomenon: cultivating romance amounts to dismissing the social plague as merely moral and based on individual choices rather than seeing it as a necessity prompted by starving wages.

Conversely, Shaw’s view is that drama should serve to explain the workings of the world and stimulate thought, shaking off the harness of custom and undeserved wealth. Hence the need to write “plays unpleasant”, the title given to the printed volume that included Mrs Warren’s Profession in 1898. In the preface, Shaw asserts the need to make the Victorian public face facts:

the average homebred Englishman, however honorable and goodnatured he may be in his private capacity, is, as a citizen, a wretched creature who, whilst clamoring for a gratuitous millenium, will shut his eyes to the most villainous abuses if the remedy threatens to add another penny in the pound to the rates and taxes which he has to be half cheated, half coerced into paying. (32–33)

Sentimentalism, the chief ingredient of romance, is, in essence, what severs prostitution from the specifically socialist remedy that lays the blame on society as a whole. Such is the case at the end of Act II when Mrs Warren tells Vivie her story. She was not dragged into prostitution through moral weakness but because of the dire poverty she lived in:

“It’s not work that any woman would do for pleasure, goodness knows; though to hear the pious people talk you would suppose it was a bed of roses” (313). While she was initially suspicious of her mother’s secretive behaviour, this tale arouses Vivie’s sympathy, who is “more and more deeply moved” (314), “fascinated, gazing at her” (315).

Yet in the following act, it turns out that Mrs Warren is not merely the victim of the evil: though she is now wealthy, she continues to draw her fortune from the white slave traffic. Thus the empathy experienced by Vivie goes hand in hand with the melodramatic view of prostitution which tends to isolate it from a comprehensive economic framework: sentimentalism comes as a deceptive means to absolve the well-to-do middle-classes of capitalist Britain. Conversely, the play enables the unpleasantness of this guilt to surface. This is what the stage directions repeatedly pinpoint when specifying that Mrs Warren’s is supposed to overact, playing the part of a supposedly loving mother, “Mrs Warren looks round at Vivie and says, with her affectation of maternal patronage even more forced than usual” (303), or in Act IV, seeking to win back her daughter’s affection after she has found out that she is a pimp: “She has done her best to make herself matronly and dignified. The brilliant hat is replaced by a sober bonnet, and the gay blouse covered by a costly black silk mantle. She is pitifully anxious and ill at ease: evidently panic-stricken” (346). The character appears inconsistent in the eyes of the audience, at complete variance with the explosion of Act II when she was found out by Vivie: “She suddenly breaks out vehemently in her natural tongue—the dialect of a woman of the people—with all her affectations of maternal authority and conventional manners gone, and an overwhelming inspiration of true conviction and scorn in her” (309). Thus the character comes across as a cheap actor, jarring with the public’s lust for beauty and smoothness. The play being in essence a form of entertainment, the unpleasant resurgence of politics goes alongside the attack on the audience itself and on the lure of emotion. Cheap dramatic conventions, acting and plots, are likened to the myths of capitalism: central to the debunking of ideological distortions is the exposure of sentimental artifice, in the art of acting most notably. As a character, Mrs Warren epitomizes a set of outworn dramatic conventions that perpetuate a form of shallow drama and conservative views, pointless and empty entertainment. Mrs Warren’s Profession therefore reproduces the flaws of Pinero’s technical drama, riddled with stereotypes, as Shaw describes it in his criticism of
The Second Mrs Tanqueray published in the *Saturday Review* in 1895: “mastery of stage craft is recklessness in the substitution of dead machinery and lay figures for vital action and real characters” (Constable 47–48). Thus *Mrs Warren’s Profession* is not only about showing misbehaviour or self-deception: it also makes the audience experience them by staging ideology as partaking of outworn dramatic codes.

**Staging the Resurgence of Ideology**

13 Prostitution is politicized by the stage through splitting language. Thus in Act IV, when Mrs Warren comes to visit her daughter, her words take on a double meaning:

> Vivie: do you know how rich I am? (...) You don’t know all that that means: you’re too young. It 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; it means the choicest of eating and drinking; it means everything you like, everything you want, everything you can think of. (350)

14 At a first level, taken out of the overall context and thesis of the play, we might say, the character’s speech fits in perfectly with the attempts to bring her daughter back to her: quite aptly, Mrs Warren stresses that Vivie has grown up in wealth and that her choice to earn her own living, namely, experience a fall in standards, amounts to nothing less than a reckless move. Yet in the light of the previous revelations about Mrs Warren’s and Crofts’ business, the character’s discourse takes on quite another meaning, that of the pimp trying to entice inexperienced girls into a life of wickedness, an easy life of pleasure and luxury, quite at odds with the ideal of an economically fairer society put forward in *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1893): “wages should be forced up to the level of the standard of comfort of the worker” (Booth 4, 321). In the play, the twofold meaning of words serves to expose the hypocritical denial of capitalist abuses, a sham which is voiced by Vivie’s reply: “So that’s how it’s done, is it? You must have said all that to many a woman, mother, to have it so pat” (281). At the same time, the socialist analysis of prostitution is taken a step further than that of progressive writers such as August Bebel who, in his work on the condition of women that Shaw had come across, *Women in the Past, Present, and Future* (1891), assumed that young girls were tempted into a life of depravation because of poverty: “Qu’on se représente seulement le misérable salaire qui vient en partage à la majeure partie des ouvrières, salaire qui ne leur permet pas de vivre et qui les pousse à chercher des gains accessoires dans la prostitution” (Bebel 143–144). In Shaw’s play, on the other hand, prostitution is not merely an individual moral issue but involves the whole of society, the real vice being capitalism.

15 This twofold meaning of words interacts with what we see and the actual unravelling of the plot, so as to place the audience in a position of knowledge, quite similarly to the critical outlook that the socialist playwright claimed for his art. The play therefore unfolds a strategy of revelation by giving the audience the impression that they can see things that are hidden from the characters themselves. Along the various scenes, the play scatters information to the audience that builds up the knowledge of the public about the white-slave traffic, with cues serving as clues in the socialist investigation of the matter. Thus the names of Ostende and Brussels are mentioned on various occasions as the places where the brothels are located—Crofts had precisely explained where Mrs Warren’s hotels were situated, “We’ve got two in Brussels, one in Ostend, one in Vienna, and two in Budapest” (329). This knowledge stands in sharp contrast with the ignorance of Præd,
who, in Act IV, advises Vivie to forget about her mother, “saturate yourself with beauty and romance, of course” (340) and travel all over Europe in cities like Ostend and Brussels. The dramatic irony of the cue turns the audience into critical witnesses of the self-deception that allows prostitution to thrive. Præd’s escapism is entrenched in the very fabric of the play: while the names of the towns are just examples from his point of view, they take on a specific meaning for the spectator: mentioning them amounts to thrusting unpleasant facts at him, the resurfacing of hidden, crude knowledge, echoed by Vivie’s physical aversion to Præd’s words: “[springing up with an exclamation of loathing] Agh!” (341). The audience is therefore in the position of Acton’s reader when he set out to deconstruct “three vulgar errors: 1. That once a harlot, always a harlot. 2. That there is no possible advance, moral or physical, in the condition of the actual prostitute. 3. That the harlot’s progress is short and rapid” (Acton 27). Dramatic irony fulfils the function of teaching the audience, as does the sociologist’s attempt to remove false ideas about prostitution. The play weaves logical connections that create a form of discourse similar to Acton’s reinterpretation of reality.

In this sense, the resurgence of facts is also staged by playing with the audience’s perception of time. The time of the play tends to mingle with that of the audience so as to create a sense of reality. This strategy is at work in act I, when the details of the reverend’s past are brought up with the entry of Mrs Warren on the stage. Indeed during the dialogue between Samuel and Frank Gardner, the spectator learnt about the reverend’s fiery youth, his committing follies, some twenty years before, and his involvement with a woman to whom he wrote compromising letters. When Mrs Warren arrives and encounters the reverend, her exclamations show that she is the very woman: “Dont you remember me? (...) Of course you do. Why, I have a whole album of your letters still” (291). Just as Gardner remembers Mrs Warren as he sees her on stage, so the words of Mrs Warren recall his own to the audience. There is therefore a convergence between the time of the character, or dramatic time—his past is brought back to the present—and scenic time—the public is made to remember what they heard a few lines above. What makes us laugh is not only the irony of the dramatic situation, but also the coincidence of our perception of time and the character’s. In short, the hidden truth is unveiled by blowing up theatrical codes. This dramatization of facts resembles precisely Stead’s pseudo-investigation and his alleged discovery of a ring of prostitution throughout Europe. By merging drama and journalism, Shaw’s play dispels the very illusion inherent in theatre and explodes the basis of dramatic illusion.

**Dramatic Illusion as a Resurgence of Ideology**

Instead of evading reality through the stage, the audience is made to face it by the destruction of dramatic illusion. This is most apparent in the break-up of the plot, foreshadowing Brechtian epic drama. Indeed, Shaw’s play substitutes a continuous unravelling of the plot with an erratic succession of denouements. The first one is of course when Vivie learns about her mother’s past. But Act III presents us with a second unexpected change, when Crofts reveals that Mrs Warren’s is carrying on her business. The dramatic tension and relief are therefore exploded by this second peripeteia. This coincides with Shaw’s criticism of the well-made play’s organisation of the plot. With the plays of Eugène Scribe, the order of events, traditionally exposition, complication and denouement, was easily anticipated by the audience. Thus there was something deeply
conservative about it, in that the public came to attend what it wished to hear, and the playwright dished out plots that would satisfy the largest numbers according to a commercially successful recipe. In *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, on the contrary, the disorder, the explosion of the plot meets the playwright’s intention to dash commonplace expectations and cant about prostitution. Thus the commercial pleasure inherent in dramatic illusion, and the comfort of recognizing an expected pattern are replaced by the harshness of facts, echoing Vivie’s intention to earn her own living rather than depend on undeserved money. In this sense, *Mrs Warren’s Profession* stands as the antithesis of Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, where the well-made-play structure went hand in hand with the unavoidable tragic ending: the woman with a past committing suicide. Conversely, in Shaw’s play, the survival of the heroine, embodying life, Vivie, matches the death of melodramatic theatre that excludes politics from the stage.

Shaw’s play seeks to blast the stereotyped outlook on prostitution by presenting the audience with the numerous strategies of the Victorian middle-class to sever the issue from socialist politics. This exposure is intricately linked with a dramatization of facts such as the reformist perceived them. The stage therefore constitutes a type of platform from which the audience may be persuaded to embrace the socialist stance. It weaves a web of correspondence and echoes that establishes a form of truth, dismantling the biased conceptions voiced by the characters. The very structure of *Mrs Warren’s Profession* breaks apart the conservative pattern of the well-made-play, the vehicle of middle-class ideology based on melodramatic morals rather than on politics. It is noteworthy, however, that Shaw’s socialist outlook itself is conditioned by that same prejudice: both prostitution and capitalism amount to a form of temptation. A nineteenth-century Fabian, Shaw valued renunciation to pleasure as a prerequisite for economic change. Perhaps this asceticism is, after all, not that remote from the Victorian moral outrage over the white slave traffic.

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ABSTRACTS

In the last of his Plays Unpleasant, Shaw delves into the economic roots of prostitution, deconstructing the woman-with-a-past sham and its underlying conservative ideology. The socialist playwright and theorist seeks to lay the blame on the capitalist system and on a middle-class public all too eager to ascribe prostitution to merely individual villainy. Echoing the standpoint of Victorian social reformers, Mrs Warren’s Profession explodes the well-made play pattern to shatter commonsplaces and pave the way to a drama of ideas. Yet this aesthetics also points to the Fabian paradox of moral conversion as a prerequisite to action.

AUTHOR

STÉPHANE GUY

Université de Bordeaux III