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PROPAGANDA AND ART IN *MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION*

BY CHARLES A. BERST

Since *Mrs Warren's Profession* is one of the most openly didactic of Shaw's plays, an examination of its achievement as art should prove helpful in assessing the extent to which Shaw's role as a dramatic propagandist limits his accomplishment as an artist. Few critics nowadays would agree with Percival P. Howe that the preface to *Mrs Warren's Profession* renders the play unnecessary,¹ or would go so far as Alick West and analyze it in terms of a Marxist tract,² but there is a decided tendency, not unencouraged by Shaw, to generalize about his productions first in terms of their message and only second in terms of their esthetic texture. Such is certainly the case with this early play. Commentators have made three major points, all having to do with the play's message: (1) Shaw's intention is to reveal that the guilt for prostitution lies more upon society than upon immoral women; (2) Shaw's premise, that prostitutes are forced into their profession by social deprivation and not by natural inclination, is inaccurate; and (3) contrary to scandalized contemporary reaction, the play is highly moral.

The first of these points is clear and self-evident from the preface, the play, and Shaw's socialistic background. In the preface, Shaw emphasizes that Mrs. Warren's girlhood choice was between wretched poverty without prostitution or comfort and luxuries with it. The blame for the fact that she is offered such squalid alternatives falls squarely onto society: "Though it is quite natural and *right* for Mrs Warren to choose what is, according to her lights, the least immoral alternative, it is none the less infamous of society to offer such alternatives. For the alternatives offered are not morality and immorality, but two sorts of immorality."³ In the play, the society of Sir George Crofts is clearly

¹ *Bernard Shaw: A Critical Study* (New York, 1915), p. 114.

² *A Good Man Fallen among Fabians* (London, 1950), pp. 55-66.

³ *Mrs Warren's Profession, Bernard Shaw: Complete Plays with Prefaces* (New York, 1963), III, 23. Subsequent references to the preface and play from this edition will be in parentheses in the text.

the villain. It is the society of the well-to-do which derives its luxuries from the suppressed lower classes and maintains its self respect because it “doesn't ask any inconvenient questions” (p. 84). The cure is implicit and obvious: change the society, raise the standard of living of the lower classes to give them greater freedom and opportunity; in short, turn to socialism.

The second recurring critical point seeks to refute Shaw's central premise, not on grounds that society is uncorrupt, but that it is less responsible for prostitutes' corruption than the prostitutes themselves.⁴ Shaw boldly begins his preface with a statement of his intention: “MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION was written in 1894 to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together” (p. 3). Such an assertion, say the skeptics, simply is not true—prostitution has survived into relatively affluent times, indicating that the motive behind it is at least as much personal as it is economic.

The third point, that the play is highly moral, is no doubt a critical counter-reaction to the Victorian shock which greeted it in its early years. In Britain, censorship prevented its public performance for over three decades, and in New York the cast of the first production was arrested, the press describing the play in such colorful terms as “illuminated gangrene,” “gross sensation,” and “wholly immoral and degenerate.”⁵ The Victorian conscience had been thumped on two of its most delicate spots: its purity, and its sense of economic respectability. And so critics have gone out of their way to assert that the play is, to the contrary, quite moral, its motivation being to reform a blind and corrupt society.⁶

These three points are interesting but rather obvious, and though they contain elements of truth, they do not fully come to terms with the play. Shaw may be a propagandist, but in

⁴ See Maurice Colbourne, *The Real Bernard Shaw* (New York, 1949), p. 124; Joseph McCabe, *George Bernard Shaw: A Critical Study* (London, 1914), p. 175; and A. C. Ward, *Bernard Shaw* (London, 1951), pp. 59-60.

⁵ See George E. Wellwarth, “Mrs. Warren Comes to America; or, the Blue-Noses, the Politicians and the Procurers,” *Shaw Review*, II (May, 1959), 12.

⁶ See St. John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends* (New York, 1956), p. 253; also, Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* (Cincinnati, 1911), p. 308.

practice, if not always in admission, his emphasis in his plays is on fine art to achieve his ends, and certainly the complexity and ambiguity of fine art qualifies, modifies and even contradicts at times simple, over-arching propagandistic conclusions. An art form which grasps the vital realities of life has more potential as propaganda than a discourse which concentrates on intellectual verities. Thus Shaw remarks: "I am convinced that fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective instrument of moral propaganda in the world . . ." (p. 7). The propaganda which emerges from fine art, however, is certainly far different from propaganda of the journalistic variety which is too often glibly attributed to Shaw. Shaw comments: "Mrs Warren's Profession is an economic exposure of the White Slave traffic as well as a melodrama. . . . But would anyone but a baffleheaded idiot of a university professor, half crazy with correcting examination papers, infer that all my plays were written as economic essays, and not as plays of life, character, and human destiny like those of Shakespear or Euripedes?"⁷ So although it may appear in terms of the preface that Shaw puts the blame for prostitution on an economic basis, and though it may similarly seem that his motives are basically moral, as these attitudes are subjected to art they become qualified, and consequently considerably more real and effective. Thus in the play Mrs. Warren has an inner vitality and drive which keep her in the profession despite economic independence, and thus Shaw can throw back the question of morality with the remark: "It is a profoundly immoral play, exceedingly so; more so than many of the people who have written about it really imagine. . . . The play is a conscientiously immoral play."⁸

In sum, the preface is far less consequential regarding the play than critics have assumed it to be. It offers a fine display of Shavian style and conviction—it roundly blasts the censor, who actually had objected only to the suggestion of incestual interest between Vivie and Frank; it condemns society alone for prostitution, condemnation which the play reveals to be only half justified; and it comments on the irony of corrupt New York suppressing the play. But the real substance of the matter is left to the play itself, and here true dimension develops. The play evolves

⁷ *Sixteen Self Sketches* (New York, 1949), p. 143.

⁸ In Hesketh Pearson, *G. B. S.: A Full Length Portrait* (New York, 1942), p. 166.

on three levels with a high degree of success. First, moral allegory, with much of the archetypal energy of a morality play, polarizes around Vivie. Second, a firm realistic level, immersed deeply in the problem of the adjustment of the individual to society, polarizes around Mrs. Warren. Third, through the adventure of the morality play and beneath the tragedy of the realism, a deep-rooted comic-ironic perspective leavens the tragedy and puts it in greater touch with reality. The interpenetration of these levels gives cohesiveness and depth to the total effect.

As a moral allegory, the play might well have been entitled *The Battle for the Soul of Vivie Warren*. Throughout, as in the convention of the morality play, Vivie is confronted with successive temptations, to some of which she temporarily succumbs, but all of which she at last transcends, achieving ultimate salvation in the fervent pursuit of her particular religion. A correlation can be drawn between Vivie and Shaw: Vivie pursues independence of habit in her cigars and whiskey, as did Shaw in his teetotalism and vegetarianism; Vivie hates holidays and wasters precisely as did Shaw; Vivie has Shaw's boundless energy, vehemence, and almost ascetic dedication to work. Though it is not explicit in the play, Vivie has much of the character of a young Fabian socialist being tested by the vanities and vicissitudes of the wayward world. In fact, she had a Fabian counterpart, Arabella Susan Lawrence, a cigar-smoking, monacle-wearing graduate in mathematics from Cambridge who later was to become Chairman of the Labor Party.⁹ Vivie is not Everywoman, but she is probably Every Woman who tries to make her intellectual talents and instinct for independence meaningful and remunerative in a man's world. As such, she is set upon by forces which seek to push her back into the more conventional role of womanhood. Repressive elements of Victorian society test her one by one.

The temptations which beset Vivie, like those of a morality play, appeal to the most basic human desires, each symbolized by one figure. That this is to be no conventional morality, however, is established in the very beginning. The Reverend Samuel Gardner, as the voice of the Church, provides merely the plaintive bleat of atrophied religion, and is immediately and almost incidentally thrown over as being too petty and inconsequential for serious consideration. The divine goal of the play is obviously

⁹ See Geoffrey Bullough, "Literary Relations of Shaw's Mrs. Warren," *PQ*, XLI (January, 1962), 347.

not to be in terms of the Christian tradition. Vivie's rejection of it is implicit in Act I. The Church, in the image of Samuel Gardner, has surrendered itself to intellectual bankruptcy and social prestige. It has become a fit receptacle for the stupid sons of large families. Regarding Vivie, Frank remarks to his father: "Ever so intellectual. Took a higher degree than you did; so why should she go to hear you preach?" (p. 47). And Gardner's concern over social position indicates that the world is dragging the Church behind it, rather than the Church offering dynamic leadership. The modern woman, such as Vivie, has passed beyond the crustiness of conventional religion by the sheer power and advancement of her intellect. It is scarcely necessary to throw religion over since it tends to drop of its own dead weight. A final blow is delivered in Act II when Mrs. Warren tells of her church-school training. The foolish clergyman of the church school had predicted that sister Liz, lost in sin, would jump off Waterloo Bridge. Instead, Liz prospered in prostitution. Rather than having them attain a good living and a respectable retirement, the clergyman, in the name of Church and society, would have had the girls scrubbing floors for one and sixpence a day, coming to their end in a workhouse infirmary. As a vital temptation for a truly intelligent person in the modern age the Church is thus represented as a negligible factor, and this theme fades out in Act III with Vivie scarcely considering it at all.

Sir George Crofts offers Vivie a more tangible, generally far more popular temptation than religion. He offers her exalted social position, backed up by money. The price is also the reward—to become Lady Crofts. In a parody of Victorian commercial marriage transactions, he offers virtually to buy Vivie from Mrs. Warren, dangling not only money but his death and a wealthy widowhood as bait. As Gardner represents the emptiness, pompousness and hypocrisy of a Church incapacitated by its worldly representatives, Crofts represents the avariciousness, immorality and hypocrisy of a society which gilds its licentiousness, greed and corruption with money and social prestige. Thus Crofts may equate himself with the most elite—with a duke whose rents are earned in queer ways, with the Archbishop of Canterbury, or with his brother, an M. P. and factory owner who underpays his girl employees so that they are forced to supplement their income as best, or as questionably, as they can. All society, from top to bottom, is compromised in its unwillingness to ask embarrassing

questions about its economic base and in its persecution of those who do. Mrs. Warren recognizes that the transition from irresponsible, promiscuous gay young blade to lecherous, dirty old man is merely one of age. Vivie, with more clarity, sees that to sell her soul to conventional Victorian prestige and monetary respectability would be to sell it far too cheaply. It would be to sell oneself to the fundamental corruption of an entire social system.

Far more subtle is the temptation of Mr. Praed, who offers Vivie the allurements of travel and esthetics, or, as he specifically repeats, romance, beauty and art. The offer is made all the more tempting by the attractiveness of Praed's character, which is gentlemanly in its responses, gently modulated, courteous and perceptive. As with the other characters, and in true morality play fashion, he is the walking exemplification of the way of life he proposes. He is a believer in the eternal youth and creativity of art, feeling himself born a boy in contrast with Crofts, the manifestation of aging society, who was born old. But Vivie rejects this temptation as basically foreign to her character. Three days of art in London, of the National Gallery, the Opera and music hall were enough for her, causing her to fly to Honoria Fraser and actuarial calculations. A fundamental difference of temperament is involved. To Praed, esthetics are the true reality; to Vivie, as her eyes are opened to the corruption of the world, esthetics are merely a deceptive froth concealing the brothels of Ostend, Brussels and Vienna. Praed at last explains that his is the Gospel of Art and Vivie's is the Gospel of Getting On. The situation is a precursor of the argument in "Don Juan in Hell," with Vivie foreshadowing Don Juan's part, and Praed foreshadowing the Devil's. Vivie's character is one of action, of steering the ship, Praed's is one of inaction, of drifting; and as attractive as the romance and beauty of the latter may be, there is implicit self-deception in it so far as Vivie is concerned, a constant danger that the ship may end on the rocks. The temptation of art, of Praed and Italy is overshadowed by the reality of social hypocrisy, of Crofts and Brussels, and it is consequently rejected as insubstantial and ineffectual.

Love's young dream, conventionally the greatest temptation to an unmarried young woman of twenty-two, is offered Vivie in the person of Frank Gardner. An affair has apparently been going on for some time of which the jarring lover's baby-talk of Act III

is merely a retrogressive manifestation. Frank, however, has not the Gospel of Getting On. He is a drifter, consciously immersed in the waywardness of society, too lazy to come to terms with it in any positive way. Vivie recognizes early in the play that she will eventually have to get rid of him. Without a disposition to work, he is potentially a Crofts. Significantly, the possibility that he is her half-brother is less important to Vivie than that he is intrinsically worthless, and though feminine instinct momentarily causes her to relapse into lover's cooing, her dynamic mental discipline tells her that romantic love is an illusive puff. It will not get the world's business done.

Mrs. Warren tempts Vivie with a life of independent luxury, a fulfilment of all the material and social desires of a young woman. This offer has the prime advantage that it is not encumbered by a Sir George Crofts. All it calls for is a nominal amount of filial affection, or at least filial endurance. But Vivie is not willing to pay even this price. At first she is willing to grant filial fondness, even slipping toward sentimentality, when she learns of her mother's dynamic, albeit unorthodox rise to economic security. Her mother's story appeals to her own instincts of work and enterprise. But what would have been for Vivie a means to an end of greater freedom, has been for Mrs. Warren a fascinating occupation, an end in itself, and financial independence has led not to greater things but only to further involvement in the corruption of society. The staunchness and vision required for the struggle up through the slime have not led to fresh air, but rather to a diving back into the filth. At the discovery of her mother's continued involvement in the business, Vivie's admiration and daughterly compassion evaporate. Were she now to accept support, knowing its source, she herself would be tainted, and, further, her instincts are all for freedom unencumbered by the vanities her mother offers as bait. She must be an unnatural daughter in order to escape both the clinging Victorian bonds of duty to one's parent and the whole fabric of a society in which money can float brainless young creatures on a smooth river of vanity and luxury. As a saleswoman of such things, there could be no more effective advocate than an experienced procuress such as Mrs. Warren, but the wares she has to sell are too cheap for a third wrangler, idealist and New Woman.

As a protagonist in a morality play, then, Vivie starts out in comparative ignorance of the world and progresses through a

series of temptations and experiences which educate her, clarifying and purifying her vision, leaving her at the end in a state of self-knowledge, purgation and peace with herself, constituting salvation. The religion of the Philistines, encrusted with social servility, is rejected in the person of Reverend Gardner. The traditional Victorian motive of raising one's social standing through marriage is thrown over in the person of Crofts. The world of esthetics and romance, with its inaction and passive concealment of foul reality, is allowed to go to Italy with Praed. Love's young dream, the idealism and passion of youthful marriage, is scrutinized by pragmatic intellect and dismissed, since Frank Gardner in his coasting, idle way, is its advocate. Luxury and filial affection are resolutely rejected in the form of Mrs. Warren when their attachments to social corruption become clear. The common denominator of all the temptations is that they have become encrusted with the thoughtless, squalid, inactive and hypocritical elements of worldly existence. Each in its way is a dodge from reality, and Reality is the goal of the morality play and of Vivie. The morality finds it in God; but this God has vanished somewhere in the Industrial Revolution, the Social Revolution, and modern rationalism. Vivie finds it in as near an absolute as she can determine—in facts, in hard, cold mind and in work, work, work. The active mind dealing in tangibles becomes the basis of salvation.

In terms of a morality play, then, *Mrs Warren's Profession* develops coherently and effectively, the action evolving into a spiritual triumph for the protagonist. On a realistic level, however, the ending amounts to a tragedy, and although temporal tragedy tends to be involved in many spiritual triumphs, the inevitable irony is especially strong here since the realism is heavily weighted and since Vivie's spiritual goal is a relatively modest one, infused with spiritual vigor, it is true, but diminished by an intrinsic mundanity. The moral allegory may be the structural idea behind the play, but each of the characters functions nearly as well in life as in allegory, and the two levels act as sounding-boards for each other, creating the greater depth and reality of a synthesis.

The element of greatest interest, revealing the highest dramatic skill on the realistic level, is the conflict between Vivie and her mother. On this level the focus shifts away from Vivie and onto the vital difficulties and ironies of the conflict in a

manner which ultimately gains for Mrs. Warren the sympathetic upper hand. Obvious flaws elsewhere in the dramaturgy tend to fade out in the total kinetic effect.¹⁰ Characters who have nearly equal independence and importance in an allegorical sense are, in their more realistic sense, unevenly subordinated to the major conflict, although they still carry an echo of their allegorical significance. Reverend Gardner is a puffy, foolish man, ineffectual as a father and a misfit as a clergyman, a pathetic picture of what twenty years of playing a clergyman's role will effect in a stupid, gay young blade who was shunted into the Church for lack of a better place. Sir George Crofts' moral emptiness and greed are products of his younger days and an indication of the society which endured him. In age this moral bankruptcy emerges in the form of a worn-out lecher, leeringly wanting to settle down with a young wife, offering the security of money as a substitute for the virility of youth. His lechery, cynicism and temper are briefly and adroitly set forth in Act II in an exchange with Mrs. Warren regarding Vivie—"Theres no harm in looking at her, is there? . . . And a baronet isnt to be picked up every day. No other man in my position would put up with you for a mother-in-law. Why shouldnt she marry me? . . . if you want a cheque for yourself on the wedding day, you can name any figure you like—in reason"—all of which, when Mrs. Warren cuts him down, is erased with a savage "Damn you!" (pp. 58-59). Rotten respectability, sustained both by money and family, weave his character into the fabric of the social system, yet the leering, brutal bulldog has independent force.

Praed is less an individual than a representative of cultured society and a sounding-board for the other characters. As an architect, he is naturally apprehensive about Reverend Gardner's church restoration, he gets along famously, offstage, with cultured Mrs. Gardner, and he offers Vivie the broadening esthetic opportunity of art and travel. He is more a gentle pressure than a positive force in the scene, respected by all, but scarcely understood by them—the artist in a Philistine world. Frank Gardner combines a chronic irresponsibility with a sensitive, flexible appre-

¹⁰ The eating arrangements of Act II, used as a device to shuffle people on and off stage, are unnatural and clumsily handled; Reverend Gardner's portrayal is too broad and obvious; Frank's melodrama with the gun in Act III is greatly overdrawn; and, in Act IV, Praed and Frank's seeming innocence and surprise at the full nature of Mrs. Warren's occupation does not ring true.

ciation of his own and others' worth. His lack of self-deception, his insolent boldness and his adaptability to circumstance create a vital character sketch deeper than that of a mere shallow youth, a category in which he could be easily dismissed. His poignant remark to his father regarding Vivie—"Took a higher degree than you did; so why should she go to hear you preach?" (p. 47)—would be insolent and shallow were it not so insolent and true. When at last Frank gives up Vivie, he does so with some genuine realism and nobility—"I shall be on short allowance for the next twenty years. No short allowance for Viv, if I can help it"—to which Praed responds—"But must you never see her again?"—and he piquantly answers: "Never see her again! Hang it all, be reasonable. I shall come along as often as possible, and be her brother. I can not understand the absurd consequences you romantic people expect from the most ordinary transactions" (p. 96). On three separate occasions Frank extols the virtue of character, a quality he has seemingly abrogated, but one which he must by implication possess to some degree, to be able to properly respect its superiority in others. His perception of Vivie's true relationship with her mother is instinctive, accurate and penetrating.

It is the irony of Vivie's evolution and a special element of the effectiveness of the play that as she proceeds through illusion to reality on an allegorical level, she descends from ignorance to illusion on a realistic level. In the meantime, her mother's great vitality and unconventionality ascends throughout the play with emotional power and forces a collision of principles at the end which approximates tragedy. When early in Act I Praed admires Vivie's outstanding record in mathematics at Cambridge, she disclaims its value as "grind, grind, grind," asserting that it has left her ignorant of everything but mathematics. From this basis of ignorance and mathematics she is suddenly thrust into a complex moral position which for any balanced judgment requires substantial knowledge of the world. Naturally she turns to the tools she has at hand, which are mental and analytical. In her emotional world she wavers into sentimentalism toward her mother and baby talk with Frank, but invariably she catches herself short, because to her stringent mental nature this is an area of retreat, of uncertainty, of hazardous loss of self-control. Since the various temptations she encounters all require that to some extent she give up pure rationalism and self control, she repulses them through fear

of a loss of reasonable order. She recoils from the world of religion, of marriage, of art and her mother, less because she knows their nature truly and intrinsically than because they are foreign to her and, instinctively, she does not like them. Her antipathy is based on ignorance, not knowledge. She can perceive them intellectually, and on these grounds she passes judgment, but she can in no sense trust herself to know them emotionally. She claims that she is prepared to take life as it is, as a woman of business, permanently single, unromantic, with no illusions. In truth, when the moral complexity of her mother confronts her, she finally falls in line with Victorian moral principles and rejects it. She denies herself emotional involvement with her mother or Frank, turning to work and mathematics as a young nun turns to devotion and God. Her Gospel of Getting On is a rejection of life as illusory, an avoidance of that sensitive immersion in life which is conducive to a knowledgeable absorption of it, that first step which is necessary for a true transcendence.

Mrs. Warren says that Vivie has been taught wrong on purpose, that she has been instilled with a false view of life which is quite removed from reality. This is manifestly true, and Vivie's awakening is too abrupt for her to absorb the world, so she rejects the beauties of Ostend and Brussels merely because there are "private hotels" in those cities. The Brothels of society blind her perspective. In facts, figures and morals she can draw sure lines, but in affairs of the heart she is uncertain, weak, and distrustful of herself. Like Don Juan in *Man and Superman*, she equates the sentimental world with hell and illusion, and seeks a purer life in the mind. But, less like Don Juan, there is a sterility and loss in her retreat, an evasion of the difficulties and ambiguities of existence. Whereas on an allegorical level she finds her soul in mind and work, on the level of the world she loses her soul to cold calculations and a negation of human emotion, inflicting ascetic contraction upon her own personality and cruelty upon others. She thus is a near-saint and very foolish girl at the same time—interestingly, and ironically, not unlike Saint Joan, but without Joan's bold vision, warmth, strong compassion, and without Joan's God.

The passages in Acts II and IV in which Mrs. Warren reveals herself to Vivie are two of the most notable instances in Shaw in which he transcends verisimilitude to powerful effect. By giving Mrs. Warren heightened insight and eloquence, he achieves a bril-

liant and penetrating portrayal of a vital human character impressing itself upon the putty of society. Early in Act II, Vivie had accused her mother of being among wasters and without character. This misconception is speedily demolished, and Mrs. Warren emerges as the most dynamic individual in the play, a true “career woman” antedating Vivie by at least twenty-five years. It would seem in Act II that Shaw’s preface regarding the social causes of prostitution is borne out: rather than the whitelead factory, the scullery, the bar, or even a jump off of Waterloo Bridge, the most sensible course for a poor and pretty woman is prostitution. There is more self respect in selling oneself, saving the proceeds, and living to a comfortable old age than in starvation and slavery. But by Act IV the premise is modified if not quite refuted. It becomes apparent that Mrs. Warren *likes* her work and pursues it with much the same devotion and absorption with which Vivie pursues hers. Thus natural inclination emerges as nearly as much a motive as economics—less sexual, perhaps, than some commentators would have it, but surely as deeply tied to a psychological need.¹¹

Vivie’s shocked reaction to the discovery that her mother is still in the business and her rejection of her ultimately take two courses. On the one hand, she claims not to object to the fact that Mrs. Warren must work in the line which destiny has thrown into her path—each person has his own occupation to follow—but, on the other, Vivie would not have lived one life and believed in another. Her mother is conventional at heart, and that is why Vivie is leaving her. But both reasons are only half-truths, and reveal Vivie’s actual eclipse into irrationality. First, it is quite clear when she learns from Crofts that her mother is still a procuress *par excellence* that she experiences a revulsion close to Victorian priggishness. In Act IV, she clearly *does* blame her mother for continuing the trade: “Tell me why you continue your business now you are independent of it” (p. 102). There are all sorts of traditional moral compunctions vibrating on the fringes of her reasoning. Second, it is clear that indeed Mrs. Warren is not a conventional woman at heart. She does cluck over Vivie like a Victorian mother hen, worrying about sunburn, marriage prospects and daughterly duty, but the foundation behind all this is scarcely conventionality. Mrs. Warren has beaten the Victorian

¹¹ See Bernard F. Dukore, “The Fabian and the Freudian,” *Shavian*, II (June, 1961), 8-11.

system at its own game and knows it. She has chosen an anti-social, anti-religious path, and thrived on it in a “virtuous” society. The society, rather than repudiating her, sells itself to her—prestige, comfort and luxury are all to be had for a price. And Mrs. Warren has bought them for Vivie. A mother’s affection in this context is less conventional than it is biological. The conventional woman at heart may be Aunt Liz, who sold out and went into respectable retirement. Perceptively, Mrs. Warren likens Vivie to Liz—she has the air of a *lady* (p. 70). Certainly if anyone is conventional at heart it is Vivie. Mrs. Warren admits that she herself is too much of a vulgarian, too honest, too imbued with the excitement of her work—in essence, she admits that she is less able to play the hypocritical role which society demands as the price of respectability. Ultimately, on this realistic level, she triumphs over Vivie, calling the cards quite accurately, albeit over-emotionally: “Oh, I know the sort you are . . . I can tell the pious, canting, hard, selfish woman when I meet her. . . . I was a good mother; and because I made my daughter a good woman she turns me out as if I was a leper” (pp. 103-104). Both emotionally and rationalistically the power of Mrs. Warren is felt after she has left the stage. The justice of the case has been hers, if not the triumph.

Shaw has filled *Mrs Warren’s Profession* with cohesive parallels and themes which give the fabric of the play artistic tightness. For example, the parallels between Mrs. Warren and Vivie tie the two together in a fine web of paradoxes and ironies. Both have a compulsion to work, admire character and hate wasters; both have romantic illusions, Mrs. Warren in motherhood, Vivie at first in Frank, later in the purity of her work; both desire to tell the *truth* about prostitution; both condemn hypocrisy—and each sees it in the other. Recurrent themes of philosophical import reverberate throughout: themes of who has character and who has not—Frank attributing it to Vivie, Vivie denying it to Mrs. Warren, Mrs. Warren denying it to common prostitutes; who has choice and who has not—Crofts corrupt because he had a choice to invest in the profession or not, Mrs. Warren exonerated because she had no choice; the theme of the profit of youth by the death of elders—Frank by the death of Reverend Gardner, Vivie by the death of potential husband Sir George, then by the death of her mother; and, finally, the frequently recurring distinction between workers and wasters. Both the structural unity and

intellectual and esthetic harmony of the play are enhanced by Shaw's attention to such detail.

Permeating and subliminally compromising both the morality play and the realistic level is a strong comic element. G. K. Chesterton called the play "pure tragedy,"¹² but this is only a very partial view. Inherently comic potentialities of incongruity are rife throughout: Reverend Gardner is the absurd contradiction of a young gayblade grotesquely metamorphosed into an old clergyman; Crofts is a pathetic-comic representation of the old lecher seeking to retrieve vestiges of youth in a young bride, much like Chaucer's January in *The Merchant's Tale*; Mrs. Warren is a vigorous whore in the autumn of life pursuing the ideal of Victorian motherhood with as much tenacity as she pursues her lucrative business; and Aunt Liz, a wealthy procuress, is now a respected lady of Winchester, living near the cathedral, entrusted to chaperone girls at the county ball. The comic element of repetition occurs with wryness in a number of instances: Crofts is backed into cursing, "Damn you," at Mrs. Warren in Act II and again at Vivie in Act III; on learning in Act III that Vivie knows the business of the "private hotels" from her mother, Crofts mutters "The old—" to which Vivie responds "Just so," and the same pattern is repeated with Mrs. Warren and Vivie in Act IV; the bandying of the terms "wasters" and "character" in different contexts, achieving fine ironic ramifications, has been noted; and Vivie's perception that her mother is trying to entice her into a life of luxury with a repetition of the same arguments she uses to allure young girls as a procuress, produces a lethal sense of contrast, incongruity, wry humor and horror all at the same time. Humor also appears when humans are likened to animals or inanimate objects, such as in the repeated references to Crofts' dog-like appearance, to Mrs. Warren as a sparrow and to Vivie as a steam roller. The sparrow, it will be remembered, carries connotations of lechery.

Most comically telling and important, however, is a sense of the humorous which revolves around Vivie, jocularly compromising the seriousness of her quest. Vivie is comical in the manner which Henri Bergson describes in "Laughter": any person becomes comic who loses vital, flexible contact with life and humanity, and takes on the attributes of an automaton or a machine. Vivie has vitality, and in this there is a degree of growth

¹² George Bernard Shaw (New York, 1962), p. 102.

and seriousness, but her quest is ultimately more one of mental fixation than of spiritual expansion, and this fixation tends to reduce her image with comic overtones throughout the play, permitting the dynamic emotional transcendence of her mother at the end. From the first, she is the New Woman with a vengeance, loving nothing better than a chair, whiskey, cigars and a detective story for her leisure, when she is not ardently engaged in actuarial calculations. Her hard handshake and her tough, uncompromising, unesthetic attitudes make Frank's Act IV image of her as a steam roller seem remarkably apt. In writing a novel as a sequel to *Mrs Warren's Profession*, Sir Harry Johnston felt it necessary to make her more human by repudiating whiskey and cigars for tea and cigarettes.¹³ If a steam roller can roll over Crofts, Frank and Praed, what chance has a poor lecherous little sparrow? Mrs. Warren is comical in adopting the ill-fitting convention of a Victorian parent, but there is a warmth, a frailty and humanity in her which trembles in the end at the rumble of the mighty machine. Vivie rolls on to the conclusion with her mental integrity scarcely bruised and her emotional integrity remarkably insular. In one sense this makes her the victor. But it is a machine-like victory, and fundamentally absurd in a young lady. Mrs. Warren, with her more flexible and adaptable vitality carries ultimately the great sympathetic insight, her dynamics being more human and more relevant to life.

Each of the three levels of morality play, realism and comedy in *Mrs Warren's Profession* has its own integrity and consistency while it compromises and qualifies the others. The nobility and purity of the morality element elevates the realism and the comedy, giving allegorical scope to the action, while at the same time the realism and comedy pull it down to life. The tragedy on the realistic level gains a good part of its poignancy through the relatively blind triumph of the allegory, yet both are mollified and given perspective by contrapuntal comic sensitivity. The comedy has a life of its own, but it is given a considerable degree of pain by the pathos of the realism and by its contrast with the allegory, a pain which, perhaps, brings it closer to sympathy. The scope and depth of Shaw's artistic achievement, the play's final effect, lies in the esthetic tension of these divergent forces.

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¹³ *Mrs. Warren's Daughter: A Story of the Women's Movement* (New York, 1920), p. 7.