Women Playwrights in the Suffrage Era: Writing from the Perspective of the New Woman

Petra Smažilová

Abstract
The present article focuses on the position and perception of Edwardian actresses and women who wrote plays. Reasons are highlighted as to why in that era female dramatic production surged and became immensely important for promoting the vote for women. The core of the paper introduces some of the most prominent women playwrights of the period, such as Elizabeth Robins, Elizabeth Baker and Githa Sowerby. The dramas selected for analysis feature common themes such as questions of marriage and motherhood versus career. Through the re-examination of Ibsen's female characters and of the melodramatic fallen woman these plays attempt to provide a more credible representation of the 'other' sex.

Keywords
Ibsenite actresses, women playwrights in the suffrage era, the New Woman, Elizabeth Robins, Elizabeth Baker, Githa Sowerby

Introduction: Ibsenite Actresses

The British dramatic landscape at the end of the 19th and in the first decade of the 20th century was enriched by the dramatic production of numerous women playwrights whose late-Victorian female characters, as Susan Carlson and Kerry Powell observe, "often resonate with a psychological complexity rarely to be found in their precursors. They also confront more straightforwardly the social codes which women's plays of an earlier date called into question by implication more than direct challenge."[1] As Carlson and Powell suggest, women did write plays throughout the whole 19th century; what distinguishes the plays of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, however, is not only the complexity of the characters and the limitation of melodramatic features, but also the centrality of politics and the manner of distribution – in the Edwardian period the plays were commonly published, e.g. in the suffrage press, thus, they were made accessible to the wider public.

Without a doubt, British theatre in general had for centuries been contentious territory for gender, from when Elizabethan-era cross-dressers represented women, continuing after the eventual entrance of actresses on the stage in the Restoration period. The first female performers were associated with low status; they were, for example, commonly chosen as mistresses by the members of the court. Thus, even at the end of the 19th century it was difficult for some middle class actresses to prove themselves in the profession despite the fact that for the bourgeoisie theatre-going had become respectable, even prestigious. Nevertheless, seldom did these actresses obtain the approval of their parents, since such occupation was thought to be rebellious. Julie Holledge

1 Susan Carlson and Kerry Powell, "Reimagining the Theatre: Women Playwrights of the Victorian and Edwardian Period," in *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 242.

asserts that "[a]lthough the average middle-class father accepted, by the end of the century, that the theatre was suitable entertainment for his daughter, he reacted with horror at the thought of her becoming an actress."[2] To improve their status actresses tended to marry early, as their profession was associated with promiscuity.[3]

The actresses were not satisfied with the women they were representing on the stage. Female characters were flat, stereotyped and relegated to minor roles; their actions did not seem psychologically credible. The change in depicting women came with the introduction of Henrik Ibsen's new drama in the 1880s. As Sos Eltis suggests, even though "Ibsen's plays never became major box-office successes in England, […] they did serve to make the sentimental drama and melodrama look increasingly old fashioned, and set a new standard for intellectually demanding and socially challenging theatre."[4] At first, the Norwegian's plays were translated and privately staged by British women who appreciated independent, believable, internally motivated heroines who appeared at the centre of the action. These characters were clearly desiring, articulating and heading for emancipation. According to Katherine Newey, "Catherine Ray, Henrietta Lord (signing herself Frances Lord) and Eleanor Marx [Karl Marx's daughter, who believed in socially committed and challenging theatre] all made significant early translations of Ibsen's plays, and circulated Ibsen's work in London's intellectual and artistic circles."[5] In spite of the prominence of the women who brought Ibsen to the British stage, their endeavour was soon overshadowed. Katherine Newey indicates that "[i]n the hands of the reformers of the drama and advocates of Ibsen such as Archer and Shaw, the work of these first female translators and promoters of Ibsen was set aside, and subsequent histories have continued this invisibility."[6] Not only was it gratifying for women to translate Ibsen, but it was extremely pleasing to act in his plays. Elizabeth Robins, a famous American actress influenced by the Ibsenite New Woman and his theatrical naturalism later in her own plays, famously claimed: "What you won't be able to imagine (unless you are an actress in your twenties) is the joy of having in our hands … free hands … such glorious actable stuff."[7] Robins produced as well as acted in such Ibsen's plays as *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House* and *The Master Builder*, her artistic skills making her admired by prominent playwrights like George Bernard Shaw.

Shaw himself is of course regarded as an important figure in reforming the British drama of the period. Not only did he promote Ibsen's plays and work with Ibsenite topics but, as Kerry Powell observes, he also recognized that "the theatre was on the threshold of apocalypse, one that would be wrought by the efforts of newly

2 Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Virago P, 1981), 10.
In her introductory chapter "Before the Curtain," Nina Auerbach re-examines 19th century audiences and theatre. The experience of theatre-going was common since drama represented popular culture of the time. The author claims that British theatre was not associated with class division as much as Victorians themselves and the historians of the 20th century liked to believe. Auerbach questions not only the received rigid division between East and West End, with each attracting exclusively audiences from a particular stratum of the society, but also a time factor of the progressive rise gradually changing the experience of theatre-going into a cultivated phenomenon of the middle class. Nina Auerbach, "Before the Curtain," in *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 3-14.

3 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 16-19.

4 Sos Eltis, "The Fallen Woman on Stage: Maidens, Magdalens, and the Emancipated Female," in *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 228.

5 Katherine Newey, "Ibsen in the English Theatre in the *Fin de Siècle*," in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880 – 2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 38.

6 Newey, "Ibsen in the English Theatre in the *Fin de Siècle*," 40.

7 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 25.

assertive women of the stage."[8] The presence of the so-called New Woman[9] in theatre, a highly controversial phenomenon of the period, the "struggle between the sexes for control of the London stage"[10] and the activities of actress-managers were welcomed by Shaw. Elaborating on Ibsen's influence, Shaw wrote: "[H]e lifted them [the actresses] from being doll-sweethearts, with no influence except the influence of those pretty faces, into serious and sometimes heroic figures, exercising moral influences and religious influences, responding to these influences from others; and struggling with all the currents of the thoughts of their day."[11] However, even Shaw, who seems to have disrespected female intelligence, ranked among those who were convinced that women could not write plays and by his comments he tried to discourage them from doing so.[12] This prevailing Victorian opinion caused many women to dwell on the privacy of novel writing, an activity that was free from the negotiations typical of the male dominated hierarchical sphere of theatre. Exemplary for the mentality was William Archer's comment to Elizabeth Robins, an otherwise highly acclaimed actress-manager: "To tell you the truth I don't think you have the power of concentration required for playwriting. Certainly you could find a novel far easier than a play."[13]

In spite of the fact that Ibsen's characters were praised and regarded as inspirational, some actresses and later female dramatists did not always consider them fully representative of women. The Ibsenite New Woman, elaborated on but also ridiculed by G. B. Shaw in his plays, nevertheless appears to have been admired. James Joyce claimed in 1900 that Ibsen "seems to know [women] better than they know themselves."[14] Prominent actresses did not agree, and many of them revised the Ibsenite New Woman in their own plays.

The Suffrage: Theatrical Strategies

One crucial phenomenon contributed to the surge of female creative energy on the stage, the issue of women's suffrage. As Carlson and Powell agree with other scholars who find it "impossible to analyse Edwardian women's playwriting without understanding

8 Kerry Powell, "New Women, New Plays, and Shaw in the 1890s," in *Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, ed. Christopher Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 76.

9 The term New Woman is not easily defined. As Powell claims, "[s]he was not so much a person, or even group of people, as a constructed category which expressed metonymically some of the historic challenges being brought to bear in the 1890s on traditional ideas of woman, in particular, and gender as whole." Generally, it was believed that the New Woman distanced herself from traditional femininity. She was smoking and travelling unescorted; she cast away elaborate dresses, devoted herself to education and pursued a particular profession. "Sometimes the New Woman was perceived to be freer in her dealings with men than custom allowed, and at other times a cold and 'apparently sexless' creature who rejected out of hand all relations with men. In these varied forms the New Woman was consistently a symbol of upheaval, threatening to dissolve the boundaries of gender and disrupt the maternal activities which nature was thought to have ordained for women." Powell, "New Women, New Plays, and Shaw in the 1890s," 76-77.

10 Powell, "New Women, New Plays, and Shaw in the 1890s," 94.

11 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 31.

12 Powell asserts that "for Shaw these New Women's attempts to write plays were inappropriate, even ludicrous, and the scripts they produced were not really plays at all." Powell, "New Women, New Plays, and Shaw in the 1890s," 86.

13 Powell, "New Women, New Plays, and Shaw in the 1890s," 83.

14 Sally Ledger, "New Woman Drama," in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880 – 2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 48.

the context of suffrage activism,"[15] here I will further attempt to establish the necessary background and especially the mutual influence of the theatrical and the political.

In her introduction to the selected plays *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*, Dale Spender describes the process of the struggle for the vote, the symbol of equality: "For more than thirty years women adopted the policy of good behaviour. From 1866 when women organised the first petition for women's suffrage (which John Stuart Mill presented to Parliament: for of course the women were not allowed to do so), women worked to prove that they were fit persons to exercise the vote."[16] In order to confirm that women deserved the franchise, they were trying to assert themselves as peaceable, patient and polite creatures. However, the strategy of peaceful petitions did not take the cause any further; on the contrary, in such a climate it was easy to promise women the right to vote and then to leave the issue unaddressed. In 1903, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed, with Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel as the leading figures. The tactics of the WSPU can be summarized by Emmeline Pankhurst's words as follows: "[d]eeds, not words, was to be our permanent motto."[17] As Spender observes, the militant strategies of these "new women (later to be termed the 'suffragettes' [thus distinguished] from the better behaved 'suffragists')"[18] were considered appalling by the latter group. The Pankhursts, as the members of the WSPU were often referred to, chose militant action combined with theatricality: the windows of government offices were broken, public demonstrations, processions and parades were held, and some members of the union chained themselves to railings in public spaces. Moreover, as Spender asserts, "they dug up the golf greens of England leaving behind the message, 'No Votes – No golf!'"[19] Such riots, as expected, were followed by arrests. According to Holledge, the imprisoned women "demanded the right to be treated as political prisoners rather than common criminals and when this was refused, they retaliated with hunger strikes"[20] thus trying to support the cause by attracting further attention of both the authorities and the common public.

As most women were not accustomed to speaking publicly, the role of actresses became crucial at the suffrage meetings. In 1908, the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) was set up to support and cooperate with such organizations as the WSPU and NUWSS (the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies). At the beginning of its existence, as Holledge observes, the AFL identified more with the radical militancy of the WSPU. The actresses, however, did not participate in the actions of the WSPU – because of their evening performances, they could not afford to get arrested and miss the evening's curtain.[21] Holledge quotes AFL vice-president Eva Moore, who specified that the organization "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.'"[22] Thus, the

15 Carlson and Powell, "Reimagining the Theatre," 246.

16 Dale Spender, introduction to *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays,* ed. Dale Spender and Carole Hayman (London: Methuen, 1985), 7.

17 June Purvis, "Christabel Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union," in *The Women's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Maroula Joannou and June Purvis (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), 157.

18 Spender, introduction, 9.

19 Spender, introduction, 10.

20 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 55.

21 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 53-56.

22 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 53.

primary function of the AFL was to provide entertainment at the political meetings through monologues, songs, poems and dance, the theatricality of which brought actresses even closer to the members of the WSPU. The popularity of the activities of AFL members contributed to the development of feminist drama, and theatre became an essential part of the campaign. Thanks to this immense interest in suffrage performance, a play department was set up within the AFL, with Australian actress and writer Inez Bensusan as the leading figure. In such an environment, women who had written plays before as well as those who had not even dared to dream of it were encouraged to use the pen to promote the cause. However, with the beginning of World War I the production of pro-vote plays ceased. As the ballot was given to women over thirty only after the Great War, the political success of the pro-vote activities can be disputed. Cicely Hamilton's reminiscences of the moment when she learned that the franchise was to be given to women can summarize the feelings of many:

> I remember – how well I remember – receiving the official intimation that my name had been placed on the register of the Chelsea electorate! I was in Abbeville at the time, and, as the post arrived, a battery of Archies, somewhere on the hill, began to thud; an enemy airplane was over, taking photographs. I remember thinking, as I read the notice, of all that the suffrage had meant to us, a year or two before! How we had marched for the suffrage and held meetings and had been shouted at; and how friends of mine, filled with the spirit of the martyr, had hurled themselves at policemen – and broken windows – and starved themselves in prison; and that now, at this moment of achieved enfranchisement, what really interested me was not the thought of voting at the next election, but the puff of smoke that the Archies sent after the escaping plane. Truth to tell, at that moment I didn't care a button for my vote; and, rightly or wrongly, I have always imagined that the Government gave it to me in much the same mood as I received it.[23]

In spite of the fact that the vote was finally received impassively by many of those who were actively involved in promoting the cause during the suffrage era, the legacy of an unprecedented surge of British political theatre remains.

Pro-Vote Plays: A New Element on British Dramatic Canvas

In her 1992 book *A Stage of Their Own* Sheila Stowell divides suffrage plays into two broad categories, one propagating the vote itself through witty argumentation dismantling "the positions of suffrage opponents," the other focusing on a more general portrayal of the female experience, i.e. on the burdens of the economic and patriarchal exploitation of women.[24] This paper follows Stowell's classification and it focuses on how the question of marriage, motherhood and work is approached in three plays, in *Votes for Women!* by Elizabeth Robins, in Elizabeth Baker's *Chains* and Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son.*

Unlike the plays belonging to the second category, which depict women as victims within social and political systems, the plays promoting the vote for women can be regarded as overtly political. Their aim was openly articulated and well apparent from the very beginning and remained the same – to persuade the public that the

23 Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, 100.

24 Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992), 45-46.

women's suffrage was needed. The pro-vote plays share many common features – they are usually rather short, generally consisting of one act since they often featured as entertaining interludes at suffrage meetings. As Susan Carlson specifies, "creating converts to the cause was at the heart of the suffrage campaign."[25] In order to convince the audience of the importance of the franchise, the form of argumentative duologues of two characters, each representing a different pole, was commonly used, the character of the anti-suffragist finally seeing the irrationality of her former opinion and being converted to the cause.[26]

At the very beginning of an immense surge of suffrage plays written between 1908 and 1914, Elizabeth Robins'[27] *Votes for Women!* (1907) was staged. This three act piece combines the well-known genre of drawing-room drama with a new element, a feminist character who refuses to remain passive and silent. According to Stowell, when drafting the play Robins herself invited an intervention from her more experienced male colleagues such as Henry James, Harley Granville-Barker and G. B. Shaw. While she incorporated some of their comments into her play, limiting the number of characters as well as focusing more on the past of the main protagonist, she ignored some of their other suggestions.[28] It was not certain at the time whether Lord Chamberlain would allow such a political play to be staged. Thus in Stowell's view, "one wonders whether the ultimate granting of a licence to Robins' play was evidence of the Lord Chamberlain's whimsical inconsistency or of a patriarchy so smug as to be unperturbed at the possibility of any real threat from specifically women's agitation."[29]

The main character, Miss Levering, entering the stage after having been briefly introduced through the discussion of others, is presented as a confident, independent, "*attractive, essentially feminine, and rather 'smart' woman*"[30] in her early thirties. The fact that Vida Levering is "feminine" creature is no coincidence; such a depiction seems to be a reaction to and an attempt to rebel against, in Stowell's words, the "prevailing stereotypes of suffrage supporters" portrayed as mostly unattractive, unnatural, masculine and "frustrated spinster[s]."[31] When Vida appears, the women's position in society is intensively debated among the gathered guests. As they discuss the Parliamentary consideration of women's suffrage which took place on 25 April 1906[32] (actual events as a basis for the discussion on the stage not being a rare feature of pro-vote plays), different voices represented by the various characters educate the audience about the particular incident, with Vida's opinion presented as the most informed and persuasive. As Stowell

25 Susan Carlson, "Comic Militancy: The Politics of Suffrage Drama," in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 203.

26 Jane Lewis points out in her social history of women that anti-suffrage rationalizations included for example the imperialist belief in "physically strong and virile rulers" and the opinion that if politics was suitable at all for women, it would only be on the local level along with the conviction that the primary function of women was reproduction and "that women's natural sphere was the home." Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870 – 1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984), 96-97.

27 Elizabeth Robins (1862 – 1952), actress and writer of American origin, was a prominent figure in suffrage drama. Although her father had supported her in starting the unconventional for-the-time studies at medical school, Robins decided for the profession of an actress. After her husband, also an actor, committed suicide, she settled in London. Robins was a progressive figure influenced by the New Woman and new drama phenomena, and later was actively involved in the suffrage movement. Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 10-14.

28 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 15-16.

29 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 15.

30 Elizabeth Robins, "Votes for Women," in *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*, ed. Dale Spender and Carole Hayman (London: Methuen, 1985), 46.

31 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 21.

32 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 23.

indicates, on that day in the House of Commons the vote was being "aimlessly debated and ridiculed." Women, seated in the Ladies' Gallery, expressed their discontent by quiet hissing; however, when they realised that a policeman had been sent there by the Speaker to force the WSPU supporters to leave in the case of another disturbance, they started to protest openly and loudly, causing a scandal.[33] The episode appeared in the press the very next day informing readers, in Vida's words, "in Europe and America [… that] there were women in England in such dead earnest about the Suffrage that the men had stopped laughing at last, and turned them out of the House."[34] Not surprisingly, Vida's argument in favour of more militant actions is not shared by other ladies considering the issue. Mrs Freddy, who in Dale's terminology belongs to the generation of polite, patient and peaceful 'suffragists,' believes that the conduct of the WSPU supporters was "a perfectly lunatic proceeding,"[35] "[t]he work of forty years [being] destroyed in five minutes" and the action itself "show[ing to men] how unfit women are for any sort of coherent thinking or concerted action."[36] Common opinion of the time was that militancy or any truculent behaviour would convince men that women were not mature enough to be given the right to vote. Moreover, troublemaking women were perceived as hysterical and not far from insanity by both sexes. Indeed, many women disparaged the belligerent behaviour of more militant suffragettes, believing that rashness would make the vote unreachable by promoting antagonism between the sexes.

In act three, Vida's personal history is revealed: in her young adulthood she became pregnant by an influential politician, Geoffrey Stonor, and underwent an abortion. Vida's painful personal experience made her an activist fighting for the rights of those who are vulnerable. Through the fictional character Robins managed to suggest how easily the personal can become political, which is apparent in Vida's claim: "The few who know about me, they'll be equally sure that it's not the larger view of life I've gained – my own poor little story is responsible for my new departure."[37] Being convinced that hers is an unmarried childless future, Vida insists that her role must be public. In Robins' fictional world, being single and childless obligates a woman to active public life, as Vida explains to Stonor regarding his future wife: "Jean's ardent [political] dreams needn't frighten you, if she has a child."[38] Stowell indicates that Robins "argues in her play that maternal duties (once incurred) take precedence over personal freedom."[39] This more personally responsible approach to motherhood makes Robins' character different from Ibsen's Nora. While Vida makes it explicit that once a mother, the act of leaving becomes impossible, Nora finds such behaviour necessary in the process of emancipation: "Ibsen has put the leaving of [Nora's] children on the same moral and emotional level as the leaving of her husband and we cannot in our hearts assent to that."[40] It is Robins' New Woman whose experience of brief and painful motherhood made her understand and articulate what Nora does not seem to realise, at least when on stage.

Apart from the differing approaches to motherhood, one more aspect makes Robins' character remarkable: the recognition of collective female power. Speaking publicly

33 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 23.

34 Robins, "Votes for Women," 58.

35 Robins, "Votes for Women," 58.

36 Robins, "Votes for Women," 57.

37 Robins, "Votes for Women," 81.

38 Robins, "Votes for Women," 87.

39 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 34.

40 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 33.

at a suffrage rally, Vida tries to persuade her fictitious audience on stage as well as the public watching from the seats that the subversive force and alliance of women can bring the desired change. Even though Vida is radical enough to denounce men on several occasions as she stresses female creative energy, the moment comes when she is aware that male assistance is vital; thus, she decides to convince Geoffrey to sign a document supporting the vote. In her final speech, Vida attempts to persuade Geoffrey and the rest of her audience through figures of her own tortured, wandering journey:

> One woman's mishap? – what is that? A thing as trivial to the great world as it's sordid in most eyes. But the time has come when a woman may look about her, and say, 'What general significance has my secret pain? Does it 'join on' to anything?' And I find it does. I'm no longer merely a woman who has stumbled on the way. I'm one […] who has got up bruised and bleeding, wiped the dust from her hands and the tears from her face, and said to herself not merely, 'Here's one luckless woman! But – here is a stone of stumbling to many. Let's see if it can't be moved out of other women's way.' And she calls people to come and help. No mortal man, let alone a woman, *by herself*, can move that rock of offence. But […] if many help, Geoffrey, the thing can be done.[41]

After this monologue Vida exits victorious and confident, with "*the 'political' dynamite* [signed by Geoffrey] *in her hand*."[42] Robins represented her New Woman as a smart, charismatic, determined individual who speaks out. Vida has come to terms with her own previous history; moreover, she is able to use her experience to make the lives of others more bearable. Thus, as Stowell observes, "Levering is a reconstruct of the popular 'woman with a past.' […] Having stripped the 'woman with a past' of her conventional accoutrements, Robins reinvests her with a future, not the traditional future of the long--suffering heroine […] but a future of public service to the cause of female emancipation."[43] Through altering the fate of a melodramatic fallen woman, a figure who had traditionally been destined to suffer, most commonly a premature death, Robins suggests how this view of women is itself constructed and wrongly represented. In turn, Robins offers other possible alternatives: a political future and the refusal of silence and self-pity.

Elizabeth Robins' mature work *Votes for Women!* influenced the plays directly promoting the vote as well as plays focused on the broader theme of female victimization in the contemporaneous social and political system. However, unlike *Votes for Women!*, other pro-vote plays, such as Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St John's *How the Vote Was Won*, Beatrice Harraden's *Lady Geraldine's Speech*, Evelyn Glover's *A Chat with Mrs Chicky* and *Mrs Appleyard's Awakening* as well as Gertrude Jennings's *A Woman's Influence*, are one act pieces, mostly with two characters on the stage. These overtly political pro--suffrage plays represent an immense surge of female playwriting activity, political female voices made distinct not only on the stage but also through the printed version of the plays.

The Portrayal of Female Experience

As already suggested, the plays written in the suffrage era focused not only on the vote per se but also on more general female experience. The plays re-examine not only questions

41 Robins, "Votes for Women," 87.

42 Robins, "Votes for Women," 87.

43 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 18.

of motherhood, work and marriage but are also preoccupied with sexuality and female alliance. These preoccupations are, however, embedded within the realistic tradition, as in the period in question realism was still perceived as a subversive force challenging and critiquing melodrama of the previous century.

Like other prolific playwrights such as Elizabeth Robins and Cicely Hamilton, the author of *Diana of Dobson's,* Elizabeth Baker (1876 – 1962) was also actively involved in the suffrage movement. Her lower middle class roots and her working experience as a typist influenced her first full length play *Chains* (1909). As Linda Fitzsimmons asserts: "Contemporary reviews of *Chains*, while being mostly favourable, were also patronising, insisting that Baker, as a typist herself […] was merely recording her observations of a milieu and class she knew first-hand."[44] Moreover, according to Stowell some reviewers regarded her characters too ordinary, while William Archer described the play "as having 'absolutely no "story" … no complication of incidents, not even any emotional tension worth speaking of.'"[45] As in *Diana of Dobson's,* the question of the extension or limitation of independence within the institution of marriage is foregrounded in *Chains* as the play focuses on the tension between personal freedom and family or working ties.

At the beginning of act one the audience meets Charley Wilson, a lower middle class city clerk whose very uniform symbolises the imprisonment and monotonousness he experiences at work and, as it becomes apparent later, in his marriage too. His wife Lily, represented as the ideal angel in the house – pretty, practical, submissive, content and hard-working, as Stowell observes – "makes do without a servant, takes lodgers and does her own washing."[46] Already in the first act Charley's long suppressed desires to free himself from his routine lower middle class life come to fore. Stowell cites a contemporaneous *Times* review which notes that the servitude of the characters in *Chains* "consists not in the work these city clerks do in the city, not in the routine of their occupations, not in their decent poverty, but in the narrowness, the ugliness, the vulgarity of the lives they lead at home."[47] Viv Gardner elaborates on how this wretchedness is represented in the play:

> Maggie [Charlie's sister-in-law] finally rejects a loveless marriage, recognising that she would just be swapping one cage (the shop) for another. Her future is uncertain, but it is her own. Maggie's sister, Lily, is used to show the other side of marriage. She is a woman trapped by the conventional attitude to marriage whose pursuit of respectability in her lower middle-class household, binds herself and her husband, Charley, tighter and tighter. Her final 'chain' – the news of her pregnancy – thwarts Charley's hopes of ever breaking out of the destructive suburban spiral that holds them both.[48]

As Baker seems to suggest through the characters of Charley and Maggie, middle class marriage and work are interconnected. The implications are different, however, for a man and for a woman. Jane Lewis points out how "[a] prospective husband had to be able to afford a wife, children and their educational expenses, and the trappings of

44 Linda Fitzsimmons, "Elizabeth Baker (1876–1962)," in *New Woman Plays,* ed. Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner (London: Methuen, 1991), 81.

45 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 107.

46 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 113.

47 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 111.

48 Viv Gardner, introduction to *New Woman Plays*, ed. Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner (London: Methuen, 1991), xi.

domestic life."[49] After having gathered enough funds, a man was considered ready to enter matrimony. Such a prerequisite, nevertheless, implies that once married, his primary obligation is to keep earning money, thus he is chained to his profession even tighter than before. On the other hand, when a woman gets married her ties to outside employment are released, being replaced by ties to husband and home. Thus, as Baker proposes, both men and women are the victims of the rigid machinery of wedlock, which once entered reaffirms the separate spheres between the sexes, expecting each to perform their stereotyped roles.

Maggie's and Charlie's decisions subvert traditional gender roles in the play. Maggie, despite realizing that as a single woman she is not free enough to emigrate, is nevertheless presented as an active person daring enough to rebel against female destiny. On the other hand, Charlie's passivity, inaction and a sense of obligation to preserve the status quo because of the upcoming baby cannot be overlooked. As Stowell rightly claims:

> In one sense the conclusion of Baker's play brings full circle the pattern of rewriting *A Doll's House* from a woman's perspective. In *Votes for Women!*, Robins used Levering to provide a corrective to Ibsen's lumping together of the roles of spouse and parent. In *Chains*, Baker presents us with a male Nora reconceived through female eyes. Spouses and home can be left (albeit with some effort) but Charley, like Levering, proves incapable of slamming the door on his unborn child.[50]

Interestingly, it is Charlie who seems to be defeated by the obligation patriarchal society imposes on him, whereas Maggie seeks the personal freedom that is incompatible with a loveless marriage. Baker managed to create not only a strong female character in her play but she also succeeded in picturing a believable male figure who sacrifices himself for family life. Unlike Charlie, his wife does not seem a beaten figure: "Like Maggie, Lily does not passively wait for the male to act but takes the initiative herself,"[51] using motherhood to keep her family together. Thus, the play appears to confirm what *Votes for Women!* suggests through Vida's experience – that choices regarding personal freedom are made more easily when children are not involved.

The question of personal freedom and maternal self-sacrifice is further studied in Githa Sowerby's (1876 – 1970) first performed play *Rutherford and Son* (1912). Some critics, according to Stowell, perceived *Rutherford and Son* as "the legitimate heir to Elizabeth Baker's *Chains*," some recognized "a distinctly female voice" while *The Vote* praised covert agenda for the cause: "No play has ever been written that in the truest, strongest sense was so really a 'Suffrage' play, although the word is never uttered and the thought never enters the minds of the people portrayed."[52] Interestingly enough, Sowerby, also known for her children's books, was, unlike the other playwrights studied earlier, not active in the suffrage movement.

Her play *Rutherford and Son* shows the life of the family of a factory owner who controls his workers as well as his children. His daughter Janet is portrayed as the typical "odd" or "superfluous"[53] woman, a common perception in the Edwardian period due

49 Lewis, *Women in England 1870 – 1950*, 75.

50 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own*, 123-24.

51 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own*, 123.

52 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own*, 130-31.

53 Gardner, introduction, xi.

to the greater number of women in British society.[54] Not being married, Janet is expected to obey her father. She lives a secluded life and is used as unpaid help in a house in which she feels imprisoned. Writing about the perception of marriage in this time, Lewis confirms that "[w]omen who did not deliberately choose to remain single out of conviction or because they wished to pursue a career, but who nevertheless 'got left on the shelf', were often made to feel that they were failures" as spinsterhood represented a lower status than marriage.[55] Janet's bitterness and quiet resentment become apparent when she for once does not take off her father's shoes immediately after his return from the factory. She finally decides to leave the tyrant's house. In contrast, Mary, her lower middle-class sister-in-law who has been shattered by her previous working experience, "assumed that marriage would lift her out of such a 'deadly' life."[56] Mary is also an invisible person for Rutherford, who believes his son married beneath himself. When Mary's husband decides to leave the patriarchal home of his father for good to seek fortune, it is Mary, having experienced poverty, who does not want to join him because she feels responsible for their son. Thus, she is content with her husband abandoning her, voluntarily choosing the imprisonment that she envisions in the following way: "[I'll] sit and sew at the window and see the furnace flare in the dark; lock up, and give you [Rutherford] the keys at night."[57] Mary's reasons for such a decision are obvious when she, in a truly capitalistic manner, makes a bargain with her father-in-law:

> It's for my boy. I want – a chance of life for him – his place in the world. John [Mary's husband] can't give that, because he's made so. If I went to London and worked my hardest I'd get twenty-five shillings a week. We've failed. From you I can get what I want for my boy. I want – all the good common things: a good house, good food, warmth. He's a delicate little thing now, but he'll grow strong like other children. I want to undo the wrong we've done him, John and I. If I can. Later on there'll be his schooling – I could never save enough for that. You can give me all this – you've got the power. Right or wrong, you've got the power. … That's the bargain. Give me what I ask, and in return I'll give you – him. On one condition: I'm to stay on here. I won't trouble you – you needn't speak to me or see me unless you want to. For ten years he's to be absolutely mine, to do what I like with. You mustn't interfere – you mustn't tell him to do things or frighten him. He's mine. For ten years more.[58]

Mary's speech implies a brighter future. Her son, who is to be brought up and influenced by a self-empowered woman, will be the bearer of the desired change.

As suggested above, both Janet and Mary are abandoned women. However, neither of them has been devastated by the experience. Like Vida in *Votes for Women!*, they are depicted as strong characters. Janet denounces passivity and leaves the family. Like the childless Maggie from *Chains*, she projects the self-reliance and independence that her future is to bring. On the other hand, Mary's future is defined by her maternity. Having experienced poverty when young, she understands that she is not personally free, but her fate is tied to that of her son. She prefers self-sacrifice and confinement in

54 As Lewis explains in her study, "[t]here were […] many women who never married. This was partly due to the imbalance in the sex ratio, which increased steadily from 1871 to 1911, and dramatically as a result of World War I." Lewis, *Women in England 1870 – 1950,* 4.

55 Lewis, *Women in England 1870 – 1950,* 77.

56 Githa Sowerby, "Rutherford and Son," in *New Woman Plays*, ed. Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner (London: Methuen, 1991), 136.

57 Sowerby, "Rutherford and Son," 189.

58 Sowerby, "Rutherford and Son," 188.

her father-in-law's house to personal liberty; thus, refusing to join her Nora-like husband. In Githa Sowerby's world, although women long for personal freedom, they are willing to forego independence to provide for their offspring. Such maternal self-sacrifice unites these works from the Edwardian period.

Conclusion

The article builds on the idea of commentators who, as Carlson and Powell summarised, have noted that "the forces allied in the fight for the vote made the campaign theatrical and conversely made the theatre political."[59] The Edwardian period enriched the British dramatic landscape with female voices that attempted to provide a corrective view of the depiction of women on the stage. While the pro-vote plays with their overtly political message always presented the unequivocal solution of granting the vote for women, the works dealing with other issues of female political and social victimization did not show such an easy resolution. Common thematic features can be found in the three plays examined in this paper. While Elizabeth Robins' influential three-act *Votes for Women!* reconsidered not only Ibsen's Nora, who in her process of emancipation decided to abandon her child, but also the figure of melodramatic woman-with-a-past who had traditionally died prematurely, it also promoted the militant strategies of women who were actively involved in the suffrage movement as well as influenced other pro-vote plays. Elizabeth Baker's *Chains* and Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* further subverted Ibsen's perception of the 'other' sex by suggesting that, notwithstanding the quest for freedom, the act of leaving a child is unacceptable.

Bibliography

Auerbach, Nina. "Before the Curtain." In *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, edited by Kerry Powell, 3-14. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Carlson, Susan. "Comic Militancy: The Politics of Suffrage Drama." In *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, edited by Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner, 198-215. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.

Carlson, Susan, and Kerry Powell. "Reimagining the Theatre: Women Playwrights of the Victorian and Edwardian Period." In *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, edited by Kerry Powell, 237-256. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Eltis, Sos. "The Fallen Woman on Stage: Maidens, Magdalens, and the Emancipated Female." In *Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, edited by Kerry Powell, 222-236. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Fitzsimmons, Linda. "Elizabeth Baker (1876 – 1962)." In *New Woman Plays*, edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, 81-83. London: Methuen, 1991.

Gardner, Viv. Introduction to *New Woman Plays*, edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, vii-xi. London: Methuen, 1991.

Holledge, Julie. *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*. London: Virago P, 1981.

Ledger, Sally. "New Woman Drama." In *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880 – 2005*, edited by Mary Luckhurst, 48-60. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

59 Carlson and Powell, "Reimagining the Theatre," 246.

Lewis, Jane. *Women in England 1870 – 1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984.

Newey, Katherine. "Ibsen in the English Theatre in the *Fin de Siècle*." In *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880 – 2005*, edited by Mary Luckhurst, 35-47. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Powell, Kerry. "New Women, New Plays, and Shaw in the 1890s." In *Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, edited by Christopher Innes, 76-100. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Purvis, June. "Christabel Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union." In *The Women's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives,* edited by Maroula Joannou and June Purvis, 157-172. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009.

Robins, Elizabeth. "Votes for Women." In *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*, edited by Dale Spender and Carole Hayman, 41-87. London: Methuen, 1985.

Sowerby, Githa. "Rutherford and Son." In *New Woman Plays*, edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, 133-189. London: Methuen, 1991.

Spender, Dale. Introduction to *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*, edited by Dale Spender and Carole Hayman, 7-13. London: Methuen, 1985.

Stowell, Sheila. *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992.

Petra Smažilová is an Assistant at the Department of English and American Studies, University of Pardubice. Her research interests include 20th century British Drama authored by women. She also contributed to the anthology of Anglo-American feminist literary theory (*Ženská literární tradice a hledání identit*, Praha: SLON, 2007) as a translator.