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NEW WOMAN THEATRE AND THE BRITISH AVANT-GARDE, 1879-1925

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

New Woman Theatre and the British Avant-Garde, 1879-1925

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This dissertation explores how women theatre professionals on the forefront of suffrage activism—playwrights, directors, dramaturg and actresses—influenced late Victorian and modernist British drama. The theatre artists featured in this project include playwright-translator-actress-producer Elizabeth Robins, playwright-translator-actress Christopher St. John (Christabel Marshall), and director-designer-actress-producer Edith Craig. Recent studies that consider their work treat first wave feminist or suffrage drama as a separate analytic category. In contrast, I explore their contributions to British modernist drama and re-situate their work in the context of international theatrical modernism.

My project covers a range of innovative theatrical activities by these female dramatists, centered on their avant-garde impulses to deconstruct the subject and continually experiment with form. I consider Robins' central role in translating,

performing in and directing interpretations of Henrik Ibsen's dramas, her later feminist critique of Ibsen and subsequent new ways of portraying female political subjectivity in her plays *Alan's Wife* (1893) and *Votes for Women* (1907). My chapter on Edith Craig considers how her feminism intersected with her extensive theatrical career and showcases some of her contributions to British modernist theatre. I illustrate Craig's engagements with international avant-gardism through an analysis of two plays she directed: a Russian symbolist drama and Japanese marionette play. My final chapter reviews the theatrical career of little-studied playwright Christopher St. John, with particular attention to dramaturgical activities with the Pioneer Players (literary management, translation, and advocacy for experimental European drama). I discuss St. John's many important contributions to documenting women's history and analyze her play *The First Actress*, arguing for her innovative appropriation of the pageant form for political ends. My literary analysis of dramatic texts is enriched by archival research into the lives of these artists, their correspondence, theatrical reviews, working documents such as promptbooks (play texts with actress's or director's notes), lighting and sound plots, and writings by their colleagues and other contemporaries.

In this dissertation I hope to contribute to the history of avant-garde and modernist drama studies in Britain and add dimension to the cultural histories of first wave feminism and fin-de-siècle theatre.

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1. Introduction:

New Woman' Theatre and the British Avant-Garde, 1879-1925

In this dissertation, I consider how women theatre professionals on the forefront of suffrage activism—playwrights, directors, dramaturg and actresses—influenced late Victorian and modernist British drama. Most theatre histories of the period focus on canonical male playwrights working in the commercial theatre establishment¹ or in the independent theatre movement that sponsored naturalistic social problem plays.² Many of the dramas that dominated the late Victorian and Edwardian stage concerned themselves with pressing social issues, such as the Woman Question—a cluster of contemporaneous debates regarding women's higher education, professional employment, equality within marriage, the right to property ownership and voting rights. However, the male authors of these Woman Question or New Woman plays worked almost exclusively within generic boundaries of dramatic realism and naturalism. Moreover, as Mary Luckhurst noted in her Introduction to *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*, despite important recent advances in theatre criticism, “too many retrospectives of British...theatre have paid “shockingly tokenistic attention to plays by female authors”

(2). Speaking into this critical void, my study takes as its central subjects feminist theatre professionals all on the forefront of suffrage activism, who used their backgrounds in the dramatic arts to create culturally significant, yet under-studied, theatrical productions.

¹ Such as Arthur Wing Pinero, J.M. Barrie and Henry Arthur Jones.

² Most notably, translations of Henrik Ibsen's plays and works by George Bernard Shaw. J.T. Grein's Independent Theatre and the Stage Society were vanguard theatres that embraced and promoted the then-radical productions of Ibsen and Shaw. The women theatre artists featured in this dissertation project collaborated at various points with these other enterprising theatre establishments.

The theatre artists featured in this dissertation who applied their considerable theatrical intelligence(s) as far as possible to produce experimental theatrical works, include playwright-translator-actress-producer Elizabeth Robins, playwright-translator-actress Christopher St. John (Christabel Marshall), and director-designer-actress-producer Edith Craig. The few recent cultural and literary studies that consider their work, while excellent, tend to treat first wave feminist or suffrage drama as a separate analytic category. In this dissertation, I explore their contributions to British modernist drama and re-situate their work in the context of international theatrical modernism.

The actresses, playwrights and directors that I feature were working theatre professionals caught up in modernist drama's questions of identity, subjectivity and representation. I argue that their feminism led them question existing models of gender politics as well as existing models of the female individual (in theatre and society) to explore subjectivity in their work not only through plot, but also through theatrical innovations. My study offers a new critical frame for understanding the feminist theatre experiments represented in this dissertation, by posing them in relation to the international avant-garde. I consider how these plays and performances overlap with and differ from continental avant-garde movements in their ideological aims and forms of cultural production. For the purposes of this project, I reframe the "avant-garde" as a set of *impulses*, rather than the now-canonical rigidly defined sub-movements (Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, and so forth), as this better reflects how the British women theatre artists responded to experimentation abroad.

For example, they immediately took up the quintessential avant-garde project of deconstructing the bourgeois subject, without adhering to any one group's leaders or

philosophies. As I will later discuss, the dramatic modernism of Robins, St. John, and Craig deconstructs the bourgeois subject in ways other than the canonical avant-garde; they form an avant-garde through a politics of representation and difference. Second, these female theatre artists share the critical avant-garde impulse to resist theatre's most pernicious trait: its temptation to pander to the public and reinforce the status quo. I argue that the increasingly experimental works written and directed by these artists should be understood within the context of a distinctly British aspect of the international avant-garde.

Section I of this Introduction begins by establishing why the figures in this study and their work are worthy of this project, despite their general exclusion in major histories of British theatre of the period. I discuss why re-locating these women theatre professionals within histories of modernism and the avant-garde—as opposed to merely categorizing them as suffrage dramatists—is necessary for more fully understanding their work. Drawing upon the theoretical writings of Josephine Guy, I locate the artists featured in my dissertation within a distinctly British stream of avant-garde experimentation. In Section II, I emphasize the radical potential of Ibsen's reception and production history in late 1880s and 1890s England as a formative moment for the feminist theatre professionals of this dissertation. In exploring the tension between Ibsen's career-long engagement with feminist and socialist questions and his corresponding broad emphasis on the human individual, I argue that Ibsen radically posited the female individual as the quintessential human subject. Robins, Craig and St. John took up this theme in various ways throughout their careers, although their productions departed from Ibsen's dramaturgy.

Finally, in Section III, I outline the dissertation chapters, highlighting the ways in which Robins, Craig and St. John's feminism propelled their modernist explorations of subjectivity. My project covers a range of innovative theatrical activities by these female dramatists, centered on their avant-garde impulses to deconstruct the subject and continually experiment with form. I begin with Elizabeth Robins' central role in translating, performing in and directing interpretations of Ibsen's realist dramas as well as his more abstract and symbolic New Woman plays. I then move to Robins' feminist critique of Ibsen and subsequent new ways of thinking about and portraying a female political subjectivity. My chapter on Edith Craig considers how her feminism intersected with her extensive theatrical career and showcases some of her contributions to British modernist theatre. I illustrate Craig's significant engagements with international avant-gardism through an analysis of two plays she directed: a Russian symbolist drama and Japanese marionette play. My final chapter reviews the theatrical career of little-studied playwright Christopher St. John, with particular attention to dramaturgical activities with the Pioneer Players (these include literary management, translation, and advocacy for experimental European drama). I also discuss her many important contributions to women's history—particularly in documenting a tradition of woman's theatrical work. In my analysis of her play *The First Actress*, I argue for her innovative appropriation of the pageant form for political ends. In this dissertation I hope to contribute to the history of avant-garde and modernist drama studies in Britain and add dimension to the cultural histories of first wave feminism and fin-de-siècle theatre.

II. ‘New Women’ and the British Avant-Garde

The subjects of this dissertation were unique in their time. These were women for whom life in the theatre allowed them not only to express their political identities in extraordinary ways, but also to explore, personally and professionally, all aspects of their individuality. Through their work and their performances, they constructed and displayed new versions of the self. Discovering alternate realities for themselves through life in the theatre, these women changed theatrical form and conventions as well. Their contributions to British modernist theatre move beyond conventional characterizations of drama of this period as conservative and devoid of performative experimentation. As my chapters will show, these ambitious and accomplished theatrical professionals were very much engaged in the kinds of exploration and techniques associated with the modernist avant-garde. Their involvement in suffrage activism—as well as other causes related to first wave feminism—initially fueled many of the experiments we might now associate with the European avant-garde. Yet they have remained under-studied and marginalized figures in most theatre histories of the period.

My analysis of certain key works is enriched—in many cases—by archival research into the lives of these artists, as well as their correspondence, theatrical reviews, working documents such as promptbooks (play texts with actress’s or director’s notes), lighting and sound plots, and writings by their colleagues and other contemporaries.³

Attention to various archives reveals the ways in which Robins, Craig and St. John

³For this dissertation project, I consulted the following archives: the British Library – Manuscript Room and Lord Chamberlain’s Play Collection, the Theatre Museum Archive–London, the Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection (Jerwood Library of the Performing Arts, Old Royal Navy College, Greenwich, UK), the Women’s Library–London, the Edith Craig Archive at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum (Smallhythe, Kent), the UCLA Manuscript Collection, the Elizabeth Robins Collection--Fales Special Collections Library (Bobst Library-NYU) and the Harry Ransom Humanities Center (University of Texas at Austin).

conversed with other big players of both mainstream British theatre and international avant-garde or art theatres. While they chose somewhat demimonde lifestyles (particularly the lesbian partners Craig and St. John), these were not poor and struggling or dilettante artists. They were serious and successful producers of theatre—well connected and respected within literary and theatrical circles in England. Their powerful drive to make theatre and engage with the cutting edge forms available to them paid off with many critically acclaimed productions. I hope to show some of the interconnections between Robins, Craig and St. John and their broader cultural milieus. A second, and even more significant goal, is to pay careful attention to the contributions they made through the plays and productions I analyze in this dissertation, in an attempt to expand our understanding of Britain's vibrant and multifaceted avant-garde theatre, particularly that of these feminist dramatists.

Feminism, for these women theatre artists, fueled by the decades-long suffrage struggle, lead to a frustration with existing models for understanding the female individual—whether those models be the limited roles available to women in the public sphere, or the derogatory caricatures of the New Woman figure popularized in political cartoons, fictional pieces and dramatic works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The artists featured in this dissertation sought to create new ways of representing the female individual on stage, absorbing, like their other modernist counterparts, key social and aesthetic questions concerning the role of the individual and the representation of subjectivity through theatrical experiments. As marginalized non-citizens, these feminist dramatists maintained the significance of the individual in their dramas. They highlighted the female individual's dignity and need for representation—

not only on stage, but also through the vote. In some senses, their feminist commitments may also have constrained their expressions of subjectivity, particularly when compared to the European male poets, playwrights, musicians and painters who founded the avant-garde movements of Dada, Surrealism, and Futurism. The representations of the individual in these more nihilistic movements are that of largely fragmented, divided, distorted, even ‘mad’ human subjects. The feminist theatre artists in this dissertation, however, remained grounded in a specific political goal—enfranchisement—and as such, retain an investment in representing subjectivity in a way consistent with this goal. While agitating on the streets and on stage for radical reform and inclusion in political structures hostile to them as women, Robins, Craig and St. John walked a fine line in their dramatic performances. As modernist theatre artists, they sought to push the boundaries of representing the human subject; yet they remained constrained by an ideological need to emphasize dignity and sanity of women in order to avoid being dismissed as unfit for full political participation. Even the most deconstructed, experimental and problematic representations of human subjectivity in their plays and productions never devolve into utter chaos, nor do they reflect a nihilistic worldview. The modernist theatre of Robins, Craig and St. John never discards the centrality of the problematic category of the individual; rather, they seek to place this individual in the context of historical change.

Josephine Guy’s argument in *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition* is useful to understand and appreciate the subtly experimental theatre work

of the subjects of my dissertation.⁴ While all avant-garde movements share a self-conscious opposition to the past or tradition, Guy argues, the particular forms that opposition takes marks significant differences between the movements (2). The majority of theories of the avant-garde posit a radically oppositional relationship between avant-garde artists and writers and the cultural and political traditions which precede them; as a result, certain political and aesthetic approaches are unquestioningly held up as superior to others (Guy 11). Guy emphasizes the role of a culture's intellectual history for understanding its avant-garde artists' relationships to tradition, particularly as this history unfolded in the mid-nineteenth century, the era widely considered the start of avant-gardism (13). British intellectual and political history in the nineteenth century is a story of reform movements, following a rhythm of gradual or incremental changes as political discourse incorporated new parties. Likewise, Guy's re-evaluation enables critics to understand the British avant-garde as one in which "even the most innovative of British writers and artists were correspondingly very much concerned to place themselves *within* rather than *against* a tradition" (13).⁵

Guy's framework assists in several ways for thinking through the cultural work that Robins, Craig and St. John accomplished. Guy's formulation of the British avant-garde helps us think about the complicated relationship between their experiments and

⁴ Josephine M. Guy, *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

⁵ To make her case, Guy contrasts the French and British avant-garde movements in the late nineteenth century, arguing that the primary differences stem from the different intellectual histories of the respective nations. In contrast to the centrality of "reform" in Britain, modern French intellectual history is one of a radical break, rooted in the French Revolution. French innovations in literature and the arts are correspondingly extreme in their 'break' from previous forms. Guy argues that previous theories of the avant-garde which favor 'radical' oppositional stances between artists and the traditions they react against unduly favor certain culture's artistic innovations (like France) and completely miss the innovations of other cultures (like England) (1-13).

the theatrical and literary traditions to which they responded. Many of their subtle formal innovations might be easily overlooked if a critic relies on earlier theorizations of the avant-garde, without taking into account how these women experimented through nuanced appropriations of traditional English theatrical forms.⁶ Guy's identification of reform as the touch point of nineteenth century British intellectual history holds particular resonance for women who were suffrage activists as well as theatre artists. Robins, Craig and St. John sought in political as well as aesthetic terms to build upon this incremental process of becoming incorporated into Britain's political citizenry and discourse. Moreover, as Guy and other recent cultural critics have argued, traditional histories of modernist theatre tend to privilege certain centers of European avant-garde flourishing; as a result, these histories miss the two-way connections between these central avant-garde movements and those avant-garde artists or works considered to be on the margin.⁷ It is not only more accurate to think of many avant-gardes, but doing so also opens up a space for foregrounding the particular, significant work of the feminist theatre artists discussed in this dissertation.

III. Ibsen, Feminism and the British Avant-Garde

In this section, I sketch out historical details of Henrik Ibsen's early reception in England in order to show his cultural, intellectual, political and theatrical influence on British modernist theatre, as well as his specific impact on the feminist dramatists featured in my dissertation. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was a key

⁶ This is especially true of Robins' & St. John's plays that I discuss in chapters two and four.

⁷ This problem is addressed in Sanja Bahun-Radunovic & Marinos Pourgouris (Eds.), *The Avant-Garde and the Margin: New Territories of Modernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006.

figure in theatrical modernism whose body of work interrogates the plight of the individual in modern society and explores questions of justice and equality for women. The historical moment of the reception of Ibsen's dramatic work in England (1870s – 1890s) proved formative for the figures studied in this dissertation. At early points in their theatrical careers, Elizabeth Robins, Edith Craig and Christopher St. John all performed in Ibsen plays with some of the legendary actors and directors of their time.⁸ Moreover, Robins, Craig and St. John took up some of Ibsen's most prominent themes in their plays, yet also expanded beyond his dramaturgy with increasingly innovative theatrical experiments. Drawing on the work of recent feminist theatre critics, I pursue two goals in this section. First, I show the radical and avant-garde potential of Ibsen's dramatic work and discuss the significance of important feminist thinkers and artists for the earliest incarnations of his work in England. Second, I explore the uneasy tension between Ibsen's feminism and his humanist concerns throughout his career. I argue that this should be read as Ibsen's thematic and dramaturgical assertion that the "modern subject" is in fact the "female individual". Moreover, I meditate on the implications of this interpretation of Ibsen for the feminist theatre artists featured in this project. Namely, I argue that engagement with Ibsen's *corpus* laid the groundwork for their initially feminist-inspired explorations of modernist subjectivity. In so doing, I firmly locate a starting point for the trajectory traced throughout the course of this dissertation.

Ibsen's legacy within modernist British theatre history is divided. On one hand, some scholars and critics have understood Ibsen to be a radical figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century avant-garde. Controversies raged when the first

⁸ Subsequent chapters of this dissertation will discuss some specific details of these productions.

translations of Ibsen's plays appeared in England in publications or performances on London stages in the late decades of the nineteenth century. Drama critics and social commentators debated the dangers and merits of the feminist arguments of the first of Ibsen's plays to reach the British public.⁹ British theatergoers understood Ibsen's mid-career plays featuring female protagonists trapped by, and resistant to, the oppressive conventions of patriarchal late nineteenth century Europe as particularly radical. Yet by the early decades of the twentieth century, British theatre critics and historians had come to primarily view Ibsen as a naturalist or realist playwright whose oeuvre fit comfortably—and not at all radically—into the realm of English realist drama (Newey 35). Due to these associations, the subsequent generation of avant-garde theatre artists dismissed Ibsen as “a fuddy-duddy old realist who never truly became modern” (Moi 247).¹⁰ It has even been argued that the New Modernists theatre practitioners—Max Reinhardt, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Edward Gordon Craig—set their aesthetic as fundamentally in contrast to the naturalism they associated with Ibsen's body of dramatic work (Marker and Marker 193).¹¹

Attention to Ibsen's early reception in London at the end of the century helps us understand the split in theatre history that has led to mischaracterizations of Ibsen's work,

⁹ For information regarding the cultural debates surrounding Ibsen's works, see Miriam Alice Franc, *Ibsen in England*, Boston: Four Seas, 1919. For a list of newspaper articles and publications about the Ibsen controversies during this period, see Gretchen P. Ackerman, *Ibsen and the English Stage, 1889-1903*, London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1987.

¹⁰ Cited in Newey 35. Moi simply notes, and does not share, this attitude.

¹¹ These New Modernists shared “an anti-naturalistic determination to present a heightened conceptual image of the inner thematic [...] spirit of the work at hand, rather than a photographic reduplication of its surface reality.” See Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, ‘Ibsen and the Twentieth Century Stage’ in McFarlane (1994: 193).

as Katherine Newey has argued.¹² In 1870s and 1880s Britain, various avant-garde theatrical, literary and political campaigns appropriated Ibsen's plays (Newey 37). Ibsen's most famous promoters in late nineteenth century England were theatre critic and activist William Archer (1856-1924)¹³ and critic and playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).¹⁴ William Archer supported Ibsen as part of his overall campaign to reform the English stage and introduced Ibsen as a 'prophet of the New Drama'.¹⁵ Archer dedicated himself to "protecting a literary approach to Ibsen founded on the principles of textual and aesthetic fidelity" (Newey 37, 40). As Errol Durbach argues, Archer saw Ibsen as "the champion of a fundamentally well-made form of Realism" (McFarlane 1994:235). George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, heralded Ibsen's plays for their shocking ideas and critiques of Victorian mores. Rather than focusing on Ibsen's dramaturgical innovations, Shaw was primarily concerned with the dramas' important role within contemporary social debates (Newey 37).

Later, twentieth century theatre historians likewise absorbed the dominant legacy of the late nineteenth century British male drama critics most closely associated with Ibsen. From Archer, Ibsen gained a close and possibly limiting association with realism (and in particular, the dramatic form of the well-made play); through Shaw, Ibsen became categorized primarily as a dramatist of the social problem play. Once the English theatergoers and critics associated Ibsen with these particular modes, one of the most shocking and radical European writers of the 1870s and 1880s became absorbed into a

¹² Katherine Newey, "Ibsen in the English Theatre in the *Fin de Siècle*" in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*, Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, 2007.

¹³ Thomas Postlewait, *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign*. Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1986.

¹⁴ Newey also discusses the lesser roles of drama critic Edmund Gosse and social theorist Havelock Ellis in the early promotion of Ibsen in England (37).

¹⁵ Postlewait's phrase.

“teleological narrative” of the emergence of realism on the English stage (Newey 36).

While early British advocates for Ibsen’s work recognized its radical potential, the subsequent emphasis on his naturalist dramaturgy resulted in a “concomitant diminution of awareness of Ibsen’s aesthetic and social theatrical innovation” (Newey 35).

However although many credit Archer and Shaw for introducing Ibsen to British audiences, women writers produced early English translations of Ibsen’s plays and were among the first to circulate Ibsen’s work in London’s intellectual and artistic circles¹⁶ (Newey 38). The first translators of Ibsen’s plays into English, Catherine Ray and Henrietta Lord (who took the pen name Frances Lord), were primarily motivated by what they saw as Ibsen’s feminism (Newey 37). Another early translator, Eleanor Marx¹⁷ (daughter of Karl Marx) and her partner, Edward Aveling, embraced Ibsen’s ideas for their importance to socialism and feminism (Newey 37). Eager for her compatriots to experience these ideas through the powerful medium of live performance, Marx staged the first drawing room reading of *A Doll’s House* (Lord’s translation) at her home in Bloomsbury. In her letter inviting Havelock Ellis to this reading, Marx wrote “I feel I *must* do something to make people understand our Ibsen a little more than they do, and I know by experience that a play read to them often affects people more than when read by themselves” (Knapp 103). A group of notable socialists participated in this first London reading, reflecting the close relationship between radical politics and avant-garde art in late nineteenth century intellectual networks: Marx played Nora, her partner Aveling read Torvald, George Bernard Shaw performed as Krogstad and May Morris (William

¹⁶See Stokes *Resistible Theatres* (1972) and Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts, c. 1884-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

¹⁷ John Stokes (ed.), *Eleanor Marx (1855-1898): Life, Work, Contacts*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000

Morris's daughter) played Kristine Linde (Newey 41). As opposed to the male critics Archer and Shaw who appropriated Ibsen in order to reform English (literary) drama and (realist) staging practice, Marx and Lord valued Ibsen's plays as means of provoking cultural change and for the opportunities they afforded actresses to perform complex and challenging roles (Newey 40).

Feminist intellectuals and theatre artists played an even more central role in ensuring that Ibsen's dramas were produced on the English stage and in filling the seats for these early public performances. For example, Eleanor Marx was instrumental in getting an authentic translation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* performed in front of an English audience for the first time. Initially, Eleanor Marx and actress-director Janet Achurch approached Henry Irving, requesting funding of 100 pounds to stage *Clever Alice*, a comedy; instead, they staged the first professional production of *A Doll's House* in England (Newey 41). Janet Achurch and Charles Carrington's first English production of *A Doll's House* at the Novelty Theatre in 1889 achieved only moderate commercial success, but considerable critical acclaim. Strikingly, the audience for these early London performances of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* included what Sally Ledger has called "a dazzling array of bohemians and intellectuals" and "a roll-call of New Women" (54); these politically engaged audience members included Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, Edith Lees, Clementina Black and Amy Levy, as well as actresses Marion Lea and Elizabeth Robins.¹⁸ Inspired by this production—and enthusiastic about the opportunity to perform Ibsen's dynamic central female characters—actress/directors Lea, Achurch

¹⁸ For accounts of attendance at this production, see Judith Walkowitz (162); Sally Ledger, 'Eleanor Marx and Henrik Ibsen' in Stokes (2000:54); Ruth Brandon, *The New Woman and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Woman Question*. London: Papermac (96); and Elin Diamond (187).

and Robins went on to develop numerous artistically acclaimed Ibsen productions in London over the next decade, including *Hedda Gabler* (1891), *Ghosts* (1891) and *Little Eyolf* (1896).¹⁹ Robins and Lea were so eager to play the female leads in *Hedda Gabler* that they themselves anonymously translated a version from Norwegian into English for stage performance.²⁰

These feminist and socialist intellectuals, as well as avant-garde artists and writers, were the first—and perhaps most impassioned—Ibsen proponents in England. Largely due to the engagement of these activist feminists, Ibsen's ideas took hold in Woman Question debates in 1880s and 1890s England (Newey 38). As Shepherd-Barr argues, the English identification of Ibsen's playwriting with New Woman literature was unique in Europe (29). Through translating, circulating and producing Ibsen's work on the English stage, these early feminist promoters of Ibsen laid the intellectual and cultural groundwork for the revitalized efforts of the early twentieth century suffrage campaign.

Ibsenite Character & the Female Individual

In an odd twist of fate, it was this awareness of British feminism's appropriation of Ibsen that possibly contributed to an anti-feminist reaction by later twentieth century male literary critics and theatre historians. These critics claimed Ibsen as a great 'humanist' dramatist who was more interested in the struggle of the modern individual than in the specific problems of the Woman Question. In fact, a number of these critics

¹⁹ I discuss Robins' work on Ibsen—and her feminist critique of his dramaturgy—at length in Chapter 2. Tracy Davis discusses profits and audience figures for Ibsen plays produced by Robins and Lea (1985:33-5).

²⁰ Robins' and Lea's translation of *Hedda Gabler* was long credited to William Archer, who simply offered his name on their behalf in order to secure translation rights. See Joanne E. Gates, "Elizabeth Robins and the 1891 Production of *Hedda Gabler*", *Modern Drama*, 28: 1985, 611-19.

and historians stressed that Ibsen did not intend for his plays to be understood as having any relationship to the goals of his feminist contemporaries. Taking great pains to ignore the influence of feminism on Ibsen's work, these critics and historians have urged others to read his plays only in light of his concern with the modern individual. Ironically, many of the most adamant arguments against links between Ibsen and first wave feminism center on the play now considered canonical as a feminist text, *A Doll's House*. In 1957, R.M. Adams wrote: "*A Doll House* represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes" (416); nearly fifteen years later, Michael Meyer echoed this sentiment, claiming "*A Doll House* is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings, or *Ghosts* about syphilis....Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person" (457).²¹ Critics in the 'humanist' camp often support their claim by citing a statement Ibsen made at a seventieth-birthday banquet given in his honor by the Norwegian Women's Rights League in 26 May 1898:

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more poet and less social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this

²¹ Adams and Meyer quoted in Templeton 28.

women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general.²²

However, feminist critic Joan Templeton has compellingly argued that some literary critics have taken this quote out of context in order to discredit Ibsen's investment in the Woman Question.²³ Moreover, as both Joan Templeton and Gail Finney have persuasively argued, Ibsen's original documents and speeches attest to his sympathies with early feminist and suffragist concerns.²⁴

In fact, Ibsen's early writings during his months of planning *A Doll House* show his inclination to think through specific issues of gender, problems that were both in his time—and even now—considered central to feminist thought. In notes made for *A Doll House* in 1878, Ibsen wrote “A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view”.²⁵ Ibsen's point in these notes forms a major theme of *A Doll House*—a female protagonist trapped by the laws, mores and social expectations of her sexist and patriarchal society—and figured prominently in several other major Ibsen plays (most notably *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler*). Moreover, even in Norway, Ibsen closely associated with key feminist thinkers—most notably his wife Suzannah Thorenson Ibsen,²⁶ his mother-in-law Magdalen Thorenson,²⁷ and his

²² Henrik Ibsen, *Speeches and New Letters*, trans. Arne Kildal, 1909, New York, 1972, 65.

²³ See Joan Templeton, “The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen” in *PMLA*, Vol. 104, No. 1 (Jan. 1989), 28-40.

²⁴ See Gail Finney, “Ibsen and Feminism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* Ed. James McFarlane, Cambridge UP: New York, 1994.

²⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *Speeches and New Letters*, trans. Arne Kildal, 1909, New York, 1972, v, 436, qtd. in Finney 90.

²⁶ An independent-minded woman whose favorite author was George Sand, Ibsen's wife Suzannah influenced the playwright's conception of several of his “strong-willed heroines”: Hjordis in *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1858), Svanhild in *Love's Comedy* (1862), and Nora in *A Doll House* (Finney 91).

close friend Camilla Collett, one of the most active feminists in nineteenth-century Europe and founder of the modern Norwegian novel²⁸ (Templeton 36). In a letter written in anticipation of Collett's seventieth birthday in 1883, Ibsen's expressed great esteem for Norway's leading feminist and predicted that the Norway of the future will bear traces of her "intellectual pioneer-work"; later, Ibsen wrote of Collett's long-standing influence on his writings.²⁹ In contrast to the assertions of the critics and historians in the Ibsen-as-humanist camp, English feminists did not impose their cause on Ibsen's work; rather, a concern with the Woman Question formed a crucial part of Ibsen's oeuvre.

Ibsen's commitment to feminism was integral to his broader dramatic theme of individual freedom. Like many progressives in Europe in the late nineteenth century, Ibsen articulated a commitment to both socialism (worker's rights) and feminism (the Woman question) and saw them as crucially interconnected. For example, in an 1885 speech made to the working men of Trondheim, Ibsen stated: "The transformation of social conditions which is now being undertaken in the rest of Europe is very largely concerned with the future status of the workers and of women. That is what I am hoping and waiting for, that is what I shall work for, all I can" [vi, 445-7].³⁰ Similarly, for Ibsen,

²⁷ Magdalene Thorensen, a Danish novelist and dramatist, translated the French plays Ibsen staged in his early days at the Norwegian National Theatre (Bergen); Thorensen was likely "the first 'New Woman' he had ever met" (Templeton 36).

²⁸ Usually regarded as Norway's first and most significant feminist, Camilla Collett's realist novel *The District Governor's Daughters* (1854-5) criticized marriage as an institution that neglected women's feelings and ultimately destroyed love; Ibsen's *Love's Comedy* (1862) picked up some of these themes. During the 1870s, Ibsen had extended conversations with Collett about women's roles in society and marriage (Finney 91).

²⁹ *The Correspondence of Henrik Ibsen*, Ed. Mary Morison, New York: Haskell House, 1970: 365, 423-4, cited in Finney 91.

³⁰ Henrik Ibsen, *Speeches and New Letters*, trans. Arne Kildal, 1909, New York, 1972, vi, 445-7, qtd. in Finney 89.

the struggle of the modern individual for freedom was best understood as one against the strictures of an oppressive patriarchal and capitalist modern society.³¹

In particular, Ibsen's realistic problem dramas—*Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*—critiqued both trenchant institutional sexism and certain corrupt dimensions of capitalist societies. As Bjorn Hemmer has aptly argued, Ibsen's realistic problem plays attacked the “kind of society [which] could not satisfy the natural need of the individual for freedom. It all had to do with power, with status and with the role of the sexes. The repressive attitude of bourgeois society towards everything that threatened its own position of power demonstrated only too clearly how far it had moved from the standpoint of the revolutionary citizens of 1789 (70).³² In the pursuit of encouraging individual freedom, Ibsen wanted his dramas to use “truth” as a tool to expose the hypocrisies of bourgeois society—particularly as they manifested themselves in the contradictions between the public and private lives of individuals (Hemmer 70). To this end, Ibsen adopted and sought to develop the mode of dramatic realism, or naturalism.

Ibsen's most popular plays on the English stage—in the late nineteenth century as well as now—feature strong female characters trapped by the expectations of a repressive

³¹In a number of plays spanning his body of work, Ibsen made this struggle explicit by pitting a protagonist (who stands in for the concept of the modern individual) against the theatrical constructs representing the social dimensions of modernity. Examples include Stockmann versus the threatening masses in *An Enemy of the People* or Solness against encroaching urban crowds in *The Master Builder*. In Chapter 2, I discuss Elizabeth Robins' feminist critique of what she considered to be Ibsen's extreme individualism.

³² In “Ibsen and the Realistic Problem Drama”, Bjorn Hemmer delineates the playwrights' socialist critique of the enervating effects of bourgeois privilege. Hemmer continues “The question of political and spiritual liberty had been thrust into the background by what had constantly been the motivating force in the life of the individual: economic freedom. Capital gave a position of power in society; and once those positions had been won, the bourgeois individual had acquired something which had to be defended. In this way, the bourgeois individual became a defender of the status quo and a traitor to his own officially expressed values” (70).

and sexist society (Nora in *A Doll's House*, Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*, and Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, for example.) In fact, it is the constrictive social roles these female characters must inhabit that showcase the modern subject's plight: the existential reality of being trapped by a bourgeois society that limits individual freedom. Through the representation of this female subject, Ibsen makes explicit his critique of modernity: since the women protagonists of these plays are trapped by repressive social expectations, the condition of the modern subject is one of inauthenticity. The inauthentic life of the modern subject—as exemplified in the characterizations of Ibsen's trapped female protagonists—leads to split not only with society or the 'other', but also within the character herself.³³ So the critics who have heralded Ibsen as a great humanist and praised his interrogations into the problems of modern society are correct. Yet remarkably, his early modernist dramatic explorations of the 'depths of the human soul' set forth women—such as Nora and Hedda--as the quintessential human subject. For Ibsen, the representative modern subject *is* the female individual.

Ibsen constructs this modern subject—an internally divided, alienated and socially-trapped protagonist—and sets her loose within the eighteenth and nineteenth century dramaturgical structure of the well-made play. The unfolding of the tightly-wrapped secret at the heart of the play reveals not only the truth of the plot situation, but also the “truth” about the inner state of the female individual. Ibsen's rendering of the modern subject as both internally split and coherent clearly reflects the contemporary

³³ Janet Garton makes a similar argument in reference to the female protagonists of *Rosmersholm*, *Lady from the Sea*, and *Hedda Gabler*: “Rebecca, Ellida and Hedda are tormented at least as much by their own internalized repression and guilt as they are by external restrictions. They are divided within themselves, and turn in upon themselves in a conflict more destructive than mere lack of opportunity could make it” (107).

discourse of psychoanalysis, —with the audience invited to participate in the role of analyst, as Elin Diamond has argued.³⁴ Many of Ibsen’s dramas show the actions and words of the female individual on stage as a performance for the other characters—a fragile façade, replete with fissures and cracks. At times these public performances conflict too much with her true desires and motives: in those moments, the female character’s unconscious drives bubble up to the surface and erupt through the physical markers of hysteria. In Ibsen’s stage directions these take such forms as detachment, blank gaze, and eruptions of speech, among others.

An inherent and productive tension exists in this transitional moment of early modernist theatre: Ibsen’s complex characters required new approaches to acting. As Simon Williams has argued, “Ibsen’s characters are the essence of contradiction, marked by division rather than the wholeness that was the hallmark of the traditional nineteenth-century type”: they were delineated in what actor Herbert Waring called “minute and elaborate” detail (328)³⁵ and yet many of them were invested with intense passions on the scale of a classic tragic heroine (174). Because Ibsen showed his heroines’ personalities as the product of their relationship with others, his protagonists are infinitely variable, further complicating our readings of their characters (Williams 174). Moreover, Ibsen’s dramaturgy did not reveal character chronologically as did conventional drama. Hence, “in order to play the character fully, the actor had to anticipate action toward the end of

³⁴ See Elin Diamond, “Realism’s Hysteria: Disruption in the Theatre of Knowledge” in *Unmaking Mimesis*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

³⁵ Herbert Waring, “An Actor’s View of Ibsen”, in Egan (ed.) *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, 328, cited in Williams 174.

the play while acting early passages” (Williams 174).³⁶ This complexity of characterization elevated the art of the actress and endeared Ibsen to many theatre performers.³⁷ The emergence of Ibsen’s modernist subject on the page instantiated a flourishing of new interpretive and performance techniques for the stage.

Not surprisingly, many Ibsenite actresses and actors who preferred a naturalistic approach used the language and processes of psychoanalysis to create these characters. As Gay Gibson Cima observes, the detailed study of the whole text became a feature of Ibsenism, with actors constructing the case histories of their characters through close readings and interpretations of the references, evasions, and allusions of the text.³⁸ Performer Minnie Maddern Fiske said “in the study of Ibsen, I had to devise what was, for me a new method. To learn what *Hedda was*, I had to imagine all that she had *ever* been ... [for example] the scenes of Hedda’s girlhood with her father,’ the early relationship with Lovborg, ‘and all other meetings that packed his mind and hers with imperishable memories all the rest of their days’”.³⁹ Perhaps no performer was more adept at this naturalist-psychoanalytic mode of constructing character from the dramatic text than actress Elizabeth Robins. Robins’ promptbooks demonstrate her thorough engagement with the text. For example, Robins wrote ‘grave and absent’ next to Ibsen’s

³⁶ Herbert Waring observed that on first reading *A Doll’s House* struck him as entirely commonplace. Only on re-reading the play with full knowledge of the conclusion did “every word of the terse sentences seem...to give a value of its own and to suggest some subtle nuance of feeling”. Herbert Waring, ‘An Actor’s View of Ibsen’, in Egan (ed.) *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, p. 327, cited in Williams 174.

³⁷ Henry James wrote of Ibsen: “He will remain intensely dear to the actor and actress. He cuts them out work to which the artistic nature in them joyously responds – work difficult and interesting, full of stuff and opportunity. The opportunity that he gives them is almost always to do the deep and delicate thing – the sort of chance that, in proportion as they are intelligent, they are most on the lookout for. He asks them to paint with a fine brush; for the subject he gives them over is our plastic humanity”. See Henry James, “On the Occasion of *Hedda Gabler*,” *The Scenic Art*, ed. Allan Wade, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948, 253-4.

³⁸ See Gay Gibson Cima’s analysis of acting style and Ibsenite realism ‘Discovering Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen,’ *Theatre Journal*. 35:1 (March 1983), pp. 5-40.

³⁹ Qtd. in Diamond 30 .

line “Illusion?”, and next to the line where Hedda says “Not voluntarily?” she indicated ‘sad, far-looking eyes and a smile that says softly how much better I know Eilert than you.’⁴⁰ Robins’ notes mark the relationship between the lines of Ibsen’s dialogue, the actress’s own interpretation of character motive, and her chosen gestural and affective representation of this unspoken idea, or ‘subtext’.⁴¹ As Elin Diamond argues, Robins’ interpretive achievements parallel the goals of Konstantin Stanislavsky’s influential—and psychologically-informed—acting method.⁴²

Although Ibsen’s texts invite the kind of nuanced close readings and psychological interpretations accomplished by Robins and other naturalist performers, some of his characters—and especially his leading women—also exhibit larger-than-life passion and drive. In order to endow their psychologically realistic performances with theatrical form and effect, Ibsenite performers drew upon the gestures and poses of melodramas and well-made plays.⁴³ This was particularly useful for actresses playing Ibsen’s trapped heroines with divided consciousness, since the gestural markers of hysteria corresponded to the stage languages of the nineteenth century genre of popular melodrama.⁴⁴ This is somewhat ironic, since scholars generally characterize melodrama

⁴⁰ Qtd. in Diamond 30.

⁴¹ I pick up this discussion in Chapter 2, where I consider the significance of this acting approach to Elizabeth Robins’ own playwriting.

⁴² “What Robins creates here is an ontological alternate ‘that no critic...ever noticed’ (30) – which was precisely Konstantin Stanislavsky’s goal in the ‘psychotechnique’ that he formalized after years of acting in the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov. An actor ‘after a long and penetrating process of observation and investigation’ creates ‘an inner life,’ a ‘subconscious’ for his/her character. To do this, the actor must pay particular attention to the character’s ‘trauma of the past’ and synchronize these, through ‘emotion memory’, with her ‘own motivating desires’” Stanislavsky cited in William B. Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 145, qtd. in Diamond 29-30.

⁴³ Tracy C. Davis, ‘Acting in Ibsen’, *Theatre Notebook*, 40, 1985, 113-23.

⁴⁴ Diamond discusses this at length in *Unmaking Mimesis* (9-14). The following two excerpts delineate a few of these specific overlapping gestural markers: “Typical of melodrama – and hysteria – actions are write large: the hysteric chokes, she writhes on the ground, she pulls out handfuls of hair, her back is

as a conservative genre emerging from a chaotic post-French Revolution cultural moment that was invested in restoring traditional familial ties and social values.⁴⁵ The commonly used melodramatic fallen woman plot, in which a female character is punished for her sexual transgressions, exemplifies this conservatism.⁴⁶ Many—though not all—of Ibsen’s female-centered plays conform to the fallen woman melodrama narrative.⁴⁷ I discuss Robins’ feminist critique of this problem in Chapter Two. Yet even when it reflects a conservative ethos, the mixture of acting styles used to perform these characters still point to an exciting and experimental shift in theatrical modernism: that is, Ibsen’s introduction of a new subject. Fragmented, internally divided, trapped by history and trauma, replete with repressed drives—this modern female’s body performs its resistance to the bourgeois society that would deny her individual freedom. Moreover, I argue that his foregrounding of the female individual as *the* representative human subject (in many of his plays) is one of Ibsen’s most significant contributions to feminism as well as modernism. These roles put actresses literally and figuratively ‘center stage’ in developing new performance styles and acting techniques in order to produce new modernist forms of subjectivity.

arched, her limbs contracted, her face twitching” and “the nineteenth-century melodramatic actor and the hysteric shared a similar repertory of signs; the facial grimace, eye-rolling, teeth-gnashing, heavy sighs, fainting, shrieking, shivering, choking. ‘*Hysterical laughter*’ is a frequent stage direction” (9-10).

⁴⁵ See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

⁴⁶ Domestic melodrama, on the other hand, offers a precedent for the use of melodramatic gestures and poses to portray women in a manner intended to evoke an audience’s sympathy. As Martha Vicinus points out in *Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama*, “Melodrama’s focus on the passive and powerless within the family made it particularly appealing to the working class and to women, two groups facing great dangers without economic power or social recognition”(177).

⁴⁷ Other Ibsen dramas, on the other hand, also feature instances where the woman characters defy the limitations of the form. In these instances, the female individual protests the melodramatic plot.

Ibsen's contributions to theatrical modernism also extended beyond the new forms of subjectivity constructed in his realistic problem dramas. In his late plays, Ibsen subverts the expectation that his plays will focus on an individual's quest for selfhood (Ewbank 135). Rather, Ibsen's later plays concentrate on a quest dominated by what James McFarlane defined as "a sense of the world as an arena of relationships and meta-relationships" (131).⁴⁸ (And though protagonists of Ibsen's late plays are all male, Ibsen presented strong female characters as well.) At the same time as this shift in emphasis from the individual to relationships, Ibsen moved beyond the naturalism that characterized his middle periods towards modernist experiments with symbolist language and materialist abstraction. Ibsen's last four dramas—*The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)—have been called "more metaphoric, mythopoetic, visionary and mysterious" than his earlier ones (Johnston 254). Moreover, as Ewbank has argued, Ibsen's work in these later plays should be understood as "products of a decade in European literary and dramatic history which saw the flourishing of Symbolist theatre and the beginnings of Modernism" (127).⁴⁹ The responses of some of Ibsen's contemporaries bore out this assessment. Symbolist playwright and poet Maurice Maeterlinck called *The Master Builder* a "somnambulistic drama" in which everything that is said "at once hides and reveals the sources of an unknown life" (35-36).⁵⁰ Actor-director Lugné-Poe (1869-1940) encouraged a symbolist approach to performing Ibsen's characters in *Rosmersholm* and

⁴⁸ "The Structured World of Ibsen's Late Dramas", in Errol Durbach (ed.), *Ibsen and the Theatre*, London: 1980.

⁴⁹ However, as Inga-Stina Ewbank also points out, "Ibsen has not abandoned the conventions of bourgeois realism but, even as he uses those conventions, he challenges them with explicit symbolism, melodrama, even allegory. Each play offers a variety of levels of reality" (131).

⁵⁰ "Le Tragique Quotidien", ("The Tragic in Daily Life") in *Le Trésor de humbles* (1896). Translation in Toby Cole (ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1960, 35-6.

The Master Builder. In his production of *The Lady from the Sea*, Lugné-Poe “suggested ideas beyond the characters rather than represented behavioral traits within them” (274-275).⁵¹

Ibsen himself eschewed the label of “symbolist” and instead insisted that “he did not ‘seek symbols’, he ‘portrayed people.’” (qtd. in Beyer 89).⁵² In fact, Ibsen did not become a symbolist, in the sense that he did not see and represent the world as merely a storehouse of signs and symbols.⁵³ Yet, as Inga-Stina Ewbank has compellingly argued, “[Ibsen’s] people tend to turn into symbolist poets in their attempts at self-analysis and in their reaching out to each other, even as what they do, and the settings in which they do it, evoke meanings beyond the literal. His texts, in other words, show that the two aims need not be as mutually exclusive as his *dictum* suggests” (132). In Ibsen’s late plays, symbolist language emerges in the context of self-examination and interaction with others; in these later dramas, relationships structure the individual, not the individual’s stance against a repressive society.

Many of the feminist theatre artists so committed to translating and circulating Ibsen’s work in the 1870s and 1880s remained invested in acting in and producing this later work of Ibsen’s as well.⁵⁴ Elizabeth Robins, for example, played an active role in performing in and producing Ibsen’s later and more symbolist work. Robins directed and

⁵¹ Jacques Robichez, *Le Symbolisme au theatre* (Paris, 1957) pp. 274-5, cited in Williams 177. Williams identifies Lugné-Poe as one of a number of Ibsen actors who “adopted overtly stylized and almost eccentric means when acting Ibsen. His hollow intonations and dreamlike gestures infuriated several critics” (177).

⁵² Edvard Beyer, *Ibsen: The Man and His Work* (London, 1978), p. 89.

⁵³ On Symbolist poetry and drama, see Maurice Valency, *The End of the World: An Introduction to Contemporary Drama* (New York, 1980), chapters 1-3, cited in Ewbank 131.

⁵⁴ Two other actresses who were well-known for their performances in Ibsen plays included Florence Farr (particularly known for introducing the character of Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*) and Mrs. Patrick Campbell (the Rat Catcher in *Little Eyolf*, Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*, Hedda Gabler in *Hedda Gabler*, Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*).

performed in a star-studded production of *Little Eyolf* (1896), in which Janet Achurch played Rita, Elizabeth Robins played Asta, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell played the small but significant part of the Rat-catcher.⁵⁵ Robins also adapted a version of Ibsen's earlier and less-well known play *Brand*.⁵⁶ Perhaps most significant is Robins' tremendous performance of Hilda Wangel in a production of *The Master Builder*, which she also directed to great acclaim (1893). Hilda Wangel, perhaps one of Ibsen's most fascinating and problematic female characters, physically resembled the New Woman type so popular in English and European literature of the late nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Yet while Ibsen's text physically describes this New Woman character in almost journalistic detail, Hilda Wangel also functions in the play as highly symbolic figure of psychological, social and spiritual instability and threat, closely identified with the allure and danger of 'modernity'.⁵⁸ While Ibsen set forth this delicate balance between feminist typology, naturalistic characterization and symbolist imagery in *The Master Builder*, Robins and other actresses negotiated these tensions in performance. In the early decades of the twentieth century, other feminist dramatists—including Edith Craig and Christopher St. John—inherited, explored and developed these burgeoning ideas of subjectivity through a range of experimental theatrical productions.

⁵⁵ Theatre Museum Archive – Mrs. Patrick Campbell folder – includes articles on the Robins-directed production of *Little Eyolf* and other Ibsen performances, including review from George Bernard Shaw).

⁵⁶ It appears that Robins re-wrote certain sections of the epic poetic drama and also wrote sections for areas that were missing/not translated. Elizabeth Robins' promptbook copy of 3 scenes from Ibsen's *Brand* is located at the Theatre Museum archive (London).

⁵⁷ Satirists and cartoonists in publications such as *Punch* and *Pall Mall Gazette* capitalized upon images of women smoking, wearing rational dress and bicycling, thereby exploiting the powerful visual iconography of the New Woman.

⁵⁸ In "The Rise and Fall of *The Master Builder*: Modernization, Mental Life and the Final Nietzschean "Triumph" of Halvard Solness", I argue that in Ibsen's later symbolic play *The Master Builder*, the on-stage crowd is a figure linked with other abstracted and threatening forces of encroaching modernity, including the images of "youth knocking at the door" (epitomized by Hilda Wangel) and urbanization.

The late nineteenth-century feminists and dramatists who passionately advocated for Ibsen's plays in England through translation, publication and performance were doubly rewarded for their efforts. Ibsen's radical dramas thrust important feminist ideas and social critiques into the public sphere, sparking heated and ultimately productive debate. Moreover, Ibsen's most enduring contribution to theatrical modernism—his rich, complex and psychologically-informed representations of human character—were accomplished largely through memorable female roles. Henrik Ibsen's oeuvre including both his realist and symbolist plays prominently featured the female individual as a new kind of modernist subject. Actresses gratefully accepted the challenge of creating and deconstructing this subjectivity in playing Ibsen roles of “unprecedented complexity and breadth” (Williams 178). Drawing upon the discourses of psychoanalysis, they engaged in detailed interpretive processes. Adapting the theatrical gestures of melodrama, Ibsen actresses ushered in this new subjectivity through provisional and embodied performances. Yet, as Ibsen noted, his concerns were not identified exclusively with feminism or the Woman Question. Ibsen also used both realist and symbolist techniques in representing his male characters with the same goal of revealing the divided inner life of the modern bourgeois subject.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Simon Williams stresses the challenge Ibsen roles often pose to male actors: to create what Shaw called “the treble strata of self, character, and *the role the character plays*” (G.B. Shaw letter to Elizabeth Robins, quoted in Marker and Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art*, 165). In other words, the challenge is create a character “weak at the centre, who nonetheless plays a series of roles projecting heroic images of his self. Indeed, through contrasting these multiple roles and the multiple personality they imply Ibsen achieves several of his most telling ironic effects” (178).

III. Chapter Outlines

Elizabeth Robins, Edith Craig and Christopher St. John built on the groundwork laid by Ibsen during this formative moment of first-wave feminism and early theatrical modernism. The centrality of female protagonists in Ibsen's plays changed the landscape of an otherwise actor-manager dominated theatre establishment. Suddenly, a space opened up in which a woman's narrative could be seen as both representative of all modern people and still instigate a feminist critique of a rigidly patriarchal society. The representation of women on stage itself was socially and politically empowering to early feminists, especially as suffragists intensified their demands for representation through the vote. The Ibsen craze in England was also professionally empowering to Robins, Craig and St. John, all of whom cut their teeth performing in Ibsen plays. Robins, in particular, seized this moment of public fascination with powerful and complex female leads: she penned popular dramas that explored the Woman Question, stirred debate and drew sizable audiences at the same time. As with Ibsen's original aims in writing *A Doll's House*, the women theatre artists that I analyze in my dissertation were initially fueled or influenced in their representation of "subjectivity" by their commitment to resolving the Woman Question. Additionally, Robins, Craig and St. John were all frank and outspoken proponents of women's suffrage; for each of them, some of their theatrical aesthetic was shaped by their activist work on behalf of the movement. Yet also like Ibsen, the plays they wrote and directed took woman-centered dramas into broader representations of the human individual. Robins, Craig and St. John moved even further beyond the frameworks of nineteenth century dramatic conventions in their representations of modernist subjectivity. Over the course of their careers, they

increasingly engaged in theatrical experiments associated with the twentieth century international avant-garde.

In each chapter of this dissertation, I trace the multiple ways in which female dramatists act upon their avant-garde impulses to deconstruct the bourgeois subject and experiment with various theatrical styles. My second chapter, “The Dramaturgy of Elizabeth Robins: Political Subjectivity and Experimental Theatre” takes as its subject feminist playwright-actress-director Elizabeth Robins. I focus on her play *Alan’s Wife* (1893), co-written with Florence Bell) and her suffrage drama *Votes for Women* (1907). Although she came to fame as a late Victorian leading actress, Elizabeth Robins’ theatrical career also included translating Ibsen’s plays from Norwegian to English, producing and directing Ibsen’s work on the British stage and writing plays of her own. Robins’ politicization along feminist and socialist lines led to her campaign for a new structure of theatre and fueled her re-evaluation and critique of Ibsenite dramaturgy. In her published lecture *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928), Robins acknowledged her debt to the Norwegian playwright for the spaces or gaps his text allowed for interpretive choices by actors and especially actresses. However, her own feminist commitments led her to experiment with representations of female subjectivity that were politically—rather than psychologically—determined. Robins’ notion of political subjectivity resulted in her breaking away from the pathological portraits of hysterical women featured in Ibsen’s texts. Instead, she drew on the conventions of melodrama and realism in order to explore ideas about a new kind of politicized feminist subject. I argue that Robins’ formal innovations in the contrasting structure of ‘public and private realisms’ and the incorporation of political theatre tactics—most notably, her innovative use of a massive

on-stage crowd—contribute to a modernist representation of female political subjectivity in *Votes for Women*.

My third chapter focuses on Edith Craig—a director, designer, musician and actress who founded and directed the Pioneer Players (1911-1925), championed the Little Theatre movement, and worked on the forefront of the suffrage struggle. Acclaimed by international reviewers for her direction of both British and European dramas, Craig's outstanding contributions to English theatre—and the internationalist modern avant-garde—have been largely under-valued in studies of the period. Edith Craig was a brilliantly talented polymath whose reputation has been largely eclipsed by that of her famous mother (Victorian actress Ellen Terry) and brother (modernist director, designer and theatre theorist Edward Gordon Craig). In contrast to her celebrated brother Edward Gordon Craig, Edith Craig's more democratic and collaborative directorial approach emphasized the value of the actor/human subject. She drew upon her varied training and professional work in music, acting, costume design, stage management, set and lighting design to direct a tremendous number of productions in her prolific thirty-eight-year career as a theatre director (over 150 productions with the Pioneer Players alone). While Craig excelled in directing plays in a number of styles, this chapter will focus on two of her productions in which a self-consciously modernist understanding of subjectivity is represented through experimental theatrical forms. Specifically, I analyze Craig's staging of the Russian symbolist play *Theatre of the Soul* (1915–Nikolai Evreinov) and the Japanese marionette play *Kanawa* (1917– Torahiko Kori). Both works take up the avant-garde project of deconstructing the individual, albeit in drastically different styles. Like other works she directed during the Pioneer Players 'Art Theatre' period (1915-1925),

these two productions demonstrate an international sensibility and showcase Craig's engagement with contemporary avant-garde experiments. Although Craig maintained the significance of character in the work she directed, she concerned herself—like many other modernist directors in Europe—with increasingly emphasizing the 'total work of art'. I argue that Craig's interdisciplinary directorial approach—in which she skillfully incorporated music, dance, costume and stage design, used theatrical space in innovative ways, and transformed of the spectacle-audience relationship—participated in modernist drama's shift away from literary naturalism into more abstracted, materially-oriented theatrical performance.

My dissertation concludes with a chapter on former actress, translator, adaptor and playwright Christopher Marie St. John (Christabel Marshall), particularly her work with the feminist theatre company the Pioneer Players (1911-1925). Alongside her partner, director Edith Craig, Christopher St. John worked on the frontlines of the battle for women's suffrage. St. John took up the early feminist project of creating and distributing women's histories, initially through first person literary genres and biographies (roman-a-clef, ghostwriting Ellen Terry's memoirs, and writing biographies of influential English women). Later, St. John's play *Macrena* (1912) heralded as feminist heroine the historical figure Irena Macrena, a Polish nun who resisted the imposition of Russian Orthodoxy in 1840. However, she soon began the project of developing and celebrating a history of women's theatre. The project for which St. John is best known to theatre historians is her translation of the first female authored play, *Paphnutius* (1914), by the medieval nun Hrotsvit (Roswitha); Edith Craig directed this Pioneer Players production to great acclaim. Following a review of St. John's prolific

playwriting career, I argue that St. John's multiple roles within the Pioneer Players theatre company correspond to the emerging position of the "dramaturg" in the theory and practice of modernist theatre.⁶⁰ She translated European plays from numerous languages and advocated bringing international avant-garde dramas to the English stage. St. John was a passionate apologist for both experimental theatre and the suffrage movement; she also took the lead in anti-censorship debates.

One of St. John's most innovative dramatic contributions was her appropriation of history by torquing the pageant performance genre for the exploration of feminist themes. In this chapter, I analyze St. John's mixed form (realism & pageant) play *The First Actress* (1911) with attention to the relationship between this play and Cicely Hamilton's famous *Pageant of Great Women* (1909). I contextualize feminist pageantry within the broader Edwardian craze for historical pageants and consider aesthetic traces from the pageants' generic predecessor, the medieval mystery play. In *The First Actress*, St. John makes a pro-suffrage argument obliquely by focusing on the professionalization of women in theatre; the play builds a case for women in the public sphere, using theatre as a metaphor par excellence. At the same time, St. John adeptly engaged with a cultural moment in which celebrity culture overlapped with the aims of suffrage activism, as is evident in her use of famous women playing famous actresses from history. *The First Actress* exemplifies St. John's commitment to create a constructed and polemical women's history to specific political ends.

⁶⁰ I historically situate St. John's dramaturgical work between William Archer and Harley Granville Barker's early twentieth century theorizations of a "literary manager" role for their proposed British National Theatre and Bertolt Brecht's emphasis on the essential role of the dramaturg in the theory and practice of modernist theatre.

2. The Dramaturgy of Elizabeth Robins:

Political Subjectivity and Theatrical Experimentation

Introduction

American-born Elizabeth Robins—New Drama actress, feminist playwright and novelist, and women’s suffrage activist—was an active participant in the British social debates raging around the “Woman Question” from late nineteenth-century to mid-twentieth century. Robins spearheaded various professionally-affiliated political organizations for women, such as the Actress Franchise League and the Suffrage Writers League. She also served as a powerful apologist for the militant suffrage movement by writing in a range of genres, including newspaper editorials (published in England and America), published and unpublished memoirs, her immensely popular propaganda play *Votes for Women!* (1907), and her realist novel based on that play, *The Convert* (1907). My project focuses on Robins’ multilayered theatrical career—as an actress, director and playwright—and some of the overlooked connections between her work as a feminist intellectual-activist and her contributions to modern theater.⁶¹ In her plays *Alan’s Wife* (1893) and *Votes for Women!* (1907), Robins moved beyond the suffrage movement’s central concern with the political representation of women through the vote, to an exploration of modernist ideas about human, and specifically female, consciousness.

Though most critics have focused on Robins’ use of nineteenth century theatrical forms—Victorian melodrama, the well-made play and Ibsenite psychological realism—

⁶¹My project will build upon and extend the work of a small number of feminist critics who have attended to Robins’ theatrical and political career. These scholars include, most notably, Gay Gibson Cima, Elin Diamond, Penny Farfan, Jane Marcus, Kerry Powell and Joanna Townsend.

these forms hold ideological assumptions at odds with Robins' modernist project. Victorian melodramas featured high-stakes moral conflicts between starkly delineated good and evil characters.⁶² The tight organization of the well-made play reflects a structured, orderly universe with clear causal relations between events.⁶³ And Ibsen's realist plays, particularly those with female protagonists, hinge on the idea of a knowable, psychologically-determined subject.⁶⁴ While Robins certainly draws upon nineteenth century dramatic conventions of melodrama, the well-made play, and Ibsenite realism, she uses these theatrical constructs to explore the distinctly modernist theme of subjectivity.

Robins' fascinating mixture of theatrical conventions is a key to understanding her modernist experiments in representing subjectivity. As Robins wrestles with an increasingly material, historical and political notion of human subjectivity, the melodramatic and realist forms she employs erupt into more experimental aesthetics. Moreover, I argue, Robins' engagement with the Ibsenite psychologically determined subject produces a more fluid political subject. This chapter develops connections between Robins' feminist and socialist political commitments, her changing dramatic representations of female subjectivity and the resultant experiments with theatrical form.

The concepts of human—and particularly female—subjectivity in Robins' dramas are shaped by two strains of theory and practice: her experiences as an actress and director of Ibsen plays, and her activist commitments to feminist and socialist causes.

⁶² Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

⁶³ Stephen S. Stanton "Introduction: The Well-Made Play and Modern Theatre" to *Camille and Other Plays*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, viii—xxx.

⁶⁴ See Elin Diamond. "Realism's Hysteria: Disruption in the Theatre of Knowledge" in *Unmaking Mimesis*, 3 – 39.

My analysis will open with a discussion of Robins' experiences as an actor and director of Ibsen plays. Robins' innovations in acting Ibsen heroines taught her to produce a human 'subject' by and through language. This approach directly impacted her modernist experiments with the representations of subjectivity in both *Alan's Wife* and *Votes for Women*. Robins' politicization along feminist and socialist lines radically transformed her approach to three key areas related to her theatrical work: the West End theatre establishment, staging techniques, and representations of female consciousness.

I. From Performing Subtext to Silent Dialogue

Ibsenite Subtext and Character Construction

As she described in her essay *Ibsen and the Actress*,⁶⁵ Elizabeth Robins' theatrical career in London was fully launched by her English-translation productions and acting performances of the radical female characters in Ibsen's New Dramas—most notably, the title character of *Hedda Gabler* (1891) and the role of Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder* (1893). Besides Hedda Gabler and Hilda Wangel, Robins performed six other Ibsen characters: Mrs. Linde in *A Doll House*, Martha Bernick in *The Pillars of Society*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Agnes in *Brand*, Asta in *Little Eyolf*, and Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*. Moreover, Robins not only performed but also staged all of these productions except *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll House*.⁶⁶ An ambitious young actress and manager, Robins believed "that no dramatist has ever meant so much to the women of the stage as Henrik Ibsen" (IA 55). Elizabeth Robins, along with Marion Lea,

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1928; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1973. Henceforth, *IA*.

⁶⁶ In the Introduction chapter, I also discuss Robins' significant contributions in translating, directing and acting in Ibsen plays.

Janet Achurch, and other actresses of the 1890s, praised Ibsen's portraits of strong, bold, unconventional women for providing solid acting opportunities: "Ibsen had taught us something we were never to unlearn. The lesson had nothing to do with the New Woman; it had everything to do with our particular business—with the art of acting" (IA 32-33). Specifically, as an actress, Robins appreciated the acting challenges that Ibsen's dramas offered performers; as she wrote,

To an extent I know in no other dramatist, he saw where he could leave some of his greatest effects to be made by the actor, and so left them. It was as if he knew that only so could he get his effects – that is, by standing aside and watching his spell work not only through the actor, but *by* the actor as fellow-creator (IA 52-53).

In other words, Robins praised Ibsen for what she considered an unusual openness to collaboration with actors who, through interpretive decisions, could elicit through performance meanings underlying the playwright's printed words.

In her fascinating analysis of Ibsenite acting technique, Gay Gibson Cima noted that in Ibsen's plays, characters are developed through a method of "retrospective action" (in contrast to the simpler plots and stock character types of melodrama); as a result, Ibsen's dramaturgy encouraged "critical actors" to develop "new methods of study and rehearsal in order to approach characters distinguished from those in melodrama by interpretive openness, moral complexity, and gestural subtlety".⁶⁷ Moreover, Cima argued that late-Victorian actresses such as Robins gained increased artistic credibility

⁶⁷ See Gay Gibson Cima, "Discovering Signs, The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen", *Theatre Journal*. 35.1 (March 1983): 5-22; and Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, 20-59.

through their revolutionary approach to subtext. The practice of interpreting and performing the subtext of a drama—now considered standard in theatre studies—initially emerged in late nineteenth century theater. Actresses mined the dramatic text for moments when unconscious motives or interests subvert the character’s performed ideas (the lines spoken to the other characters on stage). In Ibsen’s plays, these are often signaled by stage directions for the character’s body language or gestures. Referencing Robins’ approach to performing the title role of *Hedda Gabler*, Cima writes:

The Ibsen actor’s task, as she saw it, was to reveal the two lines of action simultaneously, both Hedda’s motivation within her private melodrama and her action in the realistic play of which she is a part. To negotiate that divide was to suggest a consciousness of performance, which in turn offered subversive potential (46).

Performing subtext, therefore, also offered “subversive potential” for the late Victorian actress. By making explicit in performance a split between a female character’s public persona and her inner drives, the Ibsen actress potentially disrupts the assumption of equality between a woman’s gender-defined social role and her personal beliefs and behaviors.

Building on Cima’s argument, I want to foreground the process by which such performance choices are determined: namely, through Robins’ careful interpretive attention to the dialogue, stage directions and the contradictions between the two. In short, Robins’ experience as an Ibsen actress taught her to construct a subject from the language—or dialogue and stage directions—in a dramatic text. This acting-based approach to character is central to my reading of Robins’ own dramas. Despite

differences in their central notions of subjectivity and their dramaturgical representations of female consciousness, *Alan's Wife* and *Votes for Women* both foreground the role of language in the construction of identity.

Robins and Bell's drama *Alan's Wife* is the crucial text for understanding the relationship between Robins' acting approach and her representations of female subjectivity. Most notably, the closing scene includes several pages of silent 'dialogue' for the female protagonist: the stage directions make clear that these complex meanings are to remain unspoken, performed through facial expression and gesture. In my reading of *Alan's Wife*, this unusual theatrical feature does more than suggest the limitation of language for expressing the consciousness of a female protagonist alienated within a sexist justice system: the contrast between spoken and unspoken text makes explicit the actress's process of constructing a subject from the sometimes conflicting languages of a play's text and subtext.

In her suffrage play *Votes for Women* Robins explores an increasingly sophisticated and modernist understanding of female subjectivity. Specifically, Robins reveals her subjects as constituted through their participation in social discourse. These fluid forms of political subjectivity emerge in Act I through self-conscious performances of identity, in Act II through pro- and anti-suffrage rhetoric and the Crowd, and in Act III through the use of the *quid pro quo* theatrical device to upend a conventional interpretation of the final scene.

Alan's Wife: Early Feminist Melodrama and Modernism

Elizabeth Robins' controversial first play *Alan's Wife*, based on a short story by Swedish author Elin Ameen and co-written with Florence Bell, was first performed in London on April 28, 1893.⁶⁸ Robins and Bell had submitted the anonymously authored play to producer J.T. Grein, who accepted what he later called "One of the truest tragedies ever written by an Englishman (120)".⁶⁹ The play was produced at Grein's Independent Theatre, an experimental venue made famous (and infamous) by staging the first English production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. One indication of Robins influence within the progressive drama circles of the day—as a champion and translator of Ibsen and respected actress—was the fact that Grein allowed Robins to choose the company of actors for *Alan's Wife*. (Robins herself played the title role, to outstanding reviews). Not suspecting that his friend Elizabeth Robins and her colleague Florence Bell were the co-authors of the anonymous piece, Henry James referred to *Alan's Wife* as a "dramatic gem" (*TF* 118). . Yet as their contemporary St. John Ervine pointed out, Robins and Bell's tragedy "caused a terrific rumpus". According to Robins' theatrical memoirs,

terms as fierce as those that had been applied to Ibsen's *Ghosts* after its first appearance in London were applied to the piece...Certainly it furnished ground for a spirited encounter among the Three Musketeers of the Drama of that day –

⁶⁸ In his long introduction to the published text of *Alan's Wife*, William Archer explained that Elizabeth Robins discovered a German translation of the story *Befriad* (by Swedish author Elin Ameen), which had been published in a Swedish magazine *Ur Dagens Kronika* in January 1891. Maintaining Robins' and Bell's request for anonymity, Archer implied that he had given the story—and his suggestions for adaptation—to another (male) playwright. See *Alan's Wife: A Dramatic Study in Three Scenes*, with an introduction by William Archer, London: Heinemann, 1893.

⁶⁹ It was thirty-six years later, at a banquet honoring the founding of the Independent Theatre, that Lady Bell and Elizabeth Robins offered Grein "thanks long overdue, for his enterprise, his gallant enthusiasm, in giving a hearing to a nameless work" – and privately confessed that they had penned the play. Robins, Elizabeth. *Theatre and Friendship: Some Henry James Letters with a Commentary by Elizabeth Robins*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1932 (120). Henceforth, *TF*.

Walkley, Archer and Shaw. Controversy raged round the question of authorship of the play, and ink continued to be spilt on the dreadfulness of the theme (*TF* 118).

The “dreadful theme” of *Alan’s Wife* is infanticide.⁷⁰ The play’s primary conflict is the alienation of Jean Creyke from the patriarchal social structures of family, church and the legal system. As Elin Diamond has noted, *Alan’s Wife* “reads like a Nietzschean morality tale” (35); the final line of “Morality as Anti-Nature”, summarizes the essential conflict of the play: “an attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life: the practice of the church is *hostile to life*”.⁷¹

At the opening of Scene I, Jean Creyke is represented as a lively and independent young woman, newly pregnant and happily in love with her rugged husband Alan. Instead of marrying Jaimie, the bookish and physically weak town curate favored by Jean’s mother, Jean had chosen “a husband who is brave and strong, a man who is my master as well as other folks’; who loves the hills and the heather, and loves to feel the strong wind blowing in his face and the blood rushing through his veins!” (9). More vigorous and robust than the other characters, Jean and Alan are well-matched in their vitality and love of nature. However, the harsh reality of industrial modernity abruptly shatters their life together: Alan suffers a horrific death in a work-related machine accident and the sight of his mutilated body traumatizes Jean. At the beginning of Scene II, Jean is despondent over the fact that her son Alan, named after his father, has been born a cripple. Jean’s mother, a neighbor and the town curate Jamie only offer rigid

⁷⁰ For an extended discussion of this theme, see Catherine Wiley, ‘Staging Infanticide: The Refusal of Representation in Elizabeth Robins’ *Alan’s Wife*,’ *Theatre Journal* 42:4 (1990), pp. 432-446.

⁷¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, “Morality as Anti-Nature”, *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), qtd. in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Ed. and Trans Walter Kaufmann, New York: Viking, 1968, 487, cited in Diamond 35.

religious platitudes, further alienating the distraught young widow and new mother.

Once alone, Jean reveals her desire to mercifully protect her deformed son from future difficulties. After an extended soliloquy in which Jean enacts a baptism ceremony for young Alan, the curtain drops as she moves to smother her infant son.

Scene III is set in a prison, where Jean awaits trial for the murder of her son. Although the Colonel in charge feels certain that “there must be some extenuating circumstance” in the legal case, Jean refuses to verbally respond to his questions throughout most of the scene. Similarly, Jean’s mother and Jamie Warren (the town curate)—representatives of society and the church, respectively—also seem convinced that a spoken confession or verbal explanation of the “impulse that led to her terrible crime” might vindicate Jean’s actions before the law (42). Yet rather than speak to relieve the guilt of her crime, Jean refuses to use words and the promise of judicial and spiritual mercy that may have followed them. In an odd and powerful choice, the play text requires that the actress performing the role remains silent through much of the scene, while Jean’s thoughts are communicated through dialogue-like stage directions. At the close of the scene, Jean finally speaks – but she does so in order to resist, rather than provide, the confession and explanation of her actions that the other characters request. Before she is led off to be executed, Jean insists, “I showed him the only true mercy, and that is what the law shows me!” (48). Embracing the legal punishment for her crime, but resisting the moral judgment against the infanticide she has committed, Jean bids farewell to her mother and exits the stage as the curtain falls.

Despite the fact that her major acting successes on the British stage were in her managed productions and starring roles as Ibsen-heroines (35), Robins’ anonymously co-

authored play *Alan's Wife* differs significantly from Ibsen's plays in its form of realism and representation of female psychology. In "Hysteria's Realism", Elin Diamond argues that the realistic dramas of Ibsen and his male British admirers⁷² represent a female hysteric's symptoms as a surface truth that points to a deeper hidden reality of sexual trauma. In English Ibsenite works, the underlying "secret" truth of the woman with a past can and *must be* expunged through confession, either that of Freudian abreaction or religious confession.⁷³ However not only does *Alan's Wife* resist the rationalization of sexual trauma as the basis for Jean's behavior, but the play "rejects entirely the formal arrangement of retrospective action, the process whereby the past remembered produces or explains a hysteria, its necessary confession and its cure" (Diamond 35). Jean Creyke's refusal to speak, or verbally unlock any "trauma" hidden beneath her hysterical symptoms and intentional infanticide, empowers her to resist the patriarchal authorities of society, the law and the church—represented in her mother, Jaime and Colonel Stuart in the final scene. Although the on-stage representation of infanticide was itself troubling for late Victorian audiences, the most disruptive theatrical move was Jean Creyke's refusal to confess and explain a trauma that led to the murder. The resultant absence of an accessible conventional psychological motive for Jean's actions, as Diamond notes, leaves open a space for reading a historical or political motive (39).

I argue that in *Alan's Wife*, the historical-political motive is one best understood in light of Robins and Bell's feminist concerns. The rage and despair of a young widow,

⁷² Such as Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Jones.

⁷³ Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974. Freud and Breuer claim that when the event that produced a hysteric's original trauma is remembered and articulated, the accompanying affective (or hysterical) symptoms will be released, or 'abreacted' (7-10), cited in Diamond 15.

distraught rather than overjoyed at her son's birth and tormented by his projected suffering, is in fact a relentlessly "realistic" psychological portrait. When the other characters insist that Jean find comfort in religious platitudes and the birth of her son, they reveal that patriarchal familial, legal and religious structures offer no place for the emotional truth of Jean's uniquely female suffering. The issue of emotional and psychological breakdowns surrounding the loss of an unborn child or infant was a recurring theme in Robins' work, perhaps reflective of her own family history of post-partum depression.⁷⁴ However, Robins' insistence on representing these stories on stage should be linked to her feminist commitments to raise awareness about women's issues through various types of writing, including tracts, newspaper editorials, novels and nonfiction prose pieces. Likewise, her subsequent commitment to suffragist causes was a means of provoking legal changes that would better equip society to address the needs of women and children. The primary conflict of *Alan's Wife* is the radical disconnect between the suffering of a once proud and vibrant woman, and the patriarchal institutions and ideologies that have no space for the embodied and psychological traumas experienced by women like Jean Creyke.

In *Alan's Wife*, Robins deploys melodramatic aesthetics to project protagonist Jean Creyke's consciousness into the theatre space. These melodramatic features include heightened emotional and ethical conflicts, the moral testimony of the body (through eyes, affect and gesture), and the use of tableau (still images of grouped characters that

⁷⁴ Robins' biographers Angela John and Joanne E. Gates both address this issue. After the birth of her youngest son Raymond, Elizabeth Robins' mother Hannah fell into severe post-natal depression and remained in a perilous mental state (John 16). Elizabeth Robins' grandmother warned her of a family history of a deteriorated mental state associated with "matrimony which may plunge you into a sea of difficulty where you may sink to rise no more!" (JHR to ER, December 7, 1883, qtd. in Gates 17).

represent in physical and spatial form the conflicts of the play).⁷⁵ The closing of Act I, for example, employed melodramatic devices to powerful, if unexpected, effect. After the crowd members announce Alan's death, they bring in a stretcher with a body covered by a sheet. Resisting the townspeople's repeated warnings to avoid the "sore sight", Jean insists on lifting the cover to view her husband's body. Traumatized by the sight of his mutilated form, she falls back with a cry; the scene ends with this typically tragic melodramatic tableau. Surprisingly, even though there was no physical representation of Alan's mutilated body on stage, theatre critic A.B. Walkley objected to the on-stage revelation of "the stretcher, *the mangled corpse*, the child" (50-*italics mine*).⁷⁶ Moreover, Walkley insisted that he and another audience member both witnessed an actor's head and shoulders "streaked with paint to indicate some hideous disfigurement"—even though the actors and director testified that no such makeup was used. The reported experience of these audience members in response to the hypnotic suggestion of the infanticide scene suggests an unusually powerful transmission of the "interiority of hysteria"⁷⁷ from Robins and Bell to the audiences of *Alan's Wife*.

While melodramatic in form, *Alan's Wife* shares several thematic concerns and theatrical conventions with early expressionist drama. For example, the three scene structure of *Alan's Wife* recalls the scenes or stages of certain expressionist plays where

⁷⁵ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

⁷⁶ In Appendix I to *Alan's Wife*: Extract from article signed "A.B.W." in *The Speaker*, May 6th, 1893. The published version of *Alan's Wife* included a lengthy introduction by theater critic William Archer, who defended the production from these criticisms of vulgar stage representation of a bloodied body. Cited in Diamond 37.

⁷⁷ Diamond argues that in this moment Walkley "is not simply assuming the behavior of the hysteric..., he has become hysterical, hallucinating a world that is not there" (37).

the protagonist is increasingly alienated from society.⁷⁸ The complete breakdown of verbal communication in the third act emphasizes Jean Creyke's ultimate alienation from Jean's mother, Colonel Stuart and the town curate Jamie Warren (representing the social institutions of family, legal system and church, respectively).⁷⁹ *Alan's Wife* also anticipates expressionist theatre's anxious preoccupation with the threatening forces of modernity and industrialization.⁸⁰ Act I closes with the disturbing news that Jean's husband has been killed in a work-related machine accident. A crowd of workers and townspeople intrudes into the stage space, bearing a cot with Alan's mangled body covered by a sheet. The onstage crowd in *Alan's Wife* is a theatrical figure standing in for threatening forces of modernization and industrialization; the crowd carries Alan Creyke's dead body, killed by a machine at work. The link between the crowd and the corpse suggests the potential of modernization to destroy human life.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *From Morn to Midnight: a modern mystery play in seven scenes* (1912) by Georg Kaiser, the most prolific of Expressionist playwrights, is perhaps the most well-known example in which a protagonist's "soul journey" is divided into seven scenes, or stations.

⁷⁹ These proto-Expressionist elements emerge with particular distinctness when *Alan's Wife* is contrasted with Sophie Treadwell's American Expressionist play *Machinal* (1928). *Machinal* features an unnamed young female protagonist alienated within her mechanical, rapid paced, de-humanized work place. Pressured by the financial need and the conventional expectations of her mother, she marries a wealthy man who is repulsive to her. After the birth of her daughter, the young woman's severe depression remains completely ignored by her husband and untreated by her doctor, a product of the masculinist medical establishment. The protagonist eventually has an extramarital affair and in a desperate attempt to "break free" of the prison of her marriage, murders her husband. The young woman is betrayed by her lover, tried and convicted for her crime and sent to execution at the close of the play. Both *Alan's Wife* and *Machinal* feature a young female protagonist alienated from the figures and forces that dominate their lives: controlling, "conventional" mothers, a cruel modern workplaces (symbolized in *Alan's Wife* by Alan's off-stage machine-related death), an uncomprehending clergyman, and a patriarchal legal justice system hostile to the psychological suffering of women.

⁸⁰ Fritz Lang's classic film *Metropolis* is perhaps the most famous and thoroughly realized exploration of this typical expressionist theme.

⁸¹ This is similar to Ibsen's later symbolic play *The Master Builder*, in which the on-stage crowd is a figure linked with other abstracted and threatening forces of encroaching modernity, including the images of "youth knocking at the door" (epitomized by Hilda Wangel) and urbanization. Elizabeth Robins would have been intimately familiar with Ibsen's use of the crowd in this play: Immediately before she performed the title role in *Alan's Wife*, Robins both directed and starred as Hilda Wangel in the first British production of *The Master Builder* (February – March 1893).

Moreover, Jean's perverse decision to murder her infant son in *Alan's Wife* can be read through modernist concepts of individual *choice* and *will*. Related to both Kierkegaardian existentialism and Nietzschean philosophy, choice and will were crucial to expressionist ideology. In *Alan's Wife*, as with later expressionist dramas, the protagonist is ultimately judged in a court of law. However, the final scene shows a post-trial interrogation in a prison; as the stage directions indicate "*Jean's sentences are given as a stage direction of what she is silently to convey, but she does not speak until nearly the end of the Act*" (41). Jean Creyke exerts her individual will to commit infanticide and later, even more strikingly, refuses to speak a confession renouncing this crucial choice. In this respect, as well as the earlier characterization of Alan and Jean's vigor and robustness, Robins' representation of Jean Creyke echoes Nietzsche's glorification of the *Übermensch*.⁸² Robins later revised this position in her lecture *Ibsen and the Actress*; her rejection of Nietzschean individualism radically affected the representation of subjectivity in her later suffrage drama *Votes for Women*, as I discuss later in the chapter.

II. Feminist Politicization: Reimagining Theatre

Suffrage Activism and the "Theatre of the Future"

After Ibsenite dramaturgy and its psychologically-minded characterization, the second major influence on Robins' playwriting was her increasing politicization along feminist and socialist lines.⁸³ Since the famous interruption of the Liberal Party meeting

⁸² See Elin Diamond's discussion in the "Hysteria's Realism" chapter of *Unmaking Mimesis*, 35-39.

⁸³ Following her decade of successes directing and performing in Ibsen dramas (the 1890s), Robins began to turn her attention increasingly to writing. In 1902, Robins gave up acting altogether, as she wrote "without bitterness, without even the decency of sharp regret" (*TF* 212). Her later autobiographical works about her theatrical career suggest, however, that Robins' continued identification with her previous work

in Manchester in October of 1905, suffrage activists had become increasingly visible to the English public. They staged protests, demonstrations and marches in the streets, parks and public buildings of London; Robins provided a description of this increasingly visible suffrage agitation in “Time Table: October, 1905 – December, 1906”.⁸⁴ In “The Feministe Movement in England” (1907), Elizabeth Robins described her initial resistance, and subsequent conversion, to the suffrage cause.⁸⁵ Until “comparatively recently” an “ignorant opponent of Woman Suffrage”, Robins believed that women needed more education and discipline rather than liberty, “not realizing that the higher discipline can come only through liberty” (WS 40). All of this changed for Robins, after a certain memorable afternoon in Trafalgar Square when I first heard women talking politics in public. I went out of shamefaced curiosity, my head full of masculine criticism as to woman’s limitations, her well-known inability to stick to the point, her poverty in logic and in humour, and the impossibility, in any case, of her coping with the mob (WS 40).

Despite her initial reservations and prejudices, Robins became convinced of the justice of women’s suffrage once she heard the compelling arguments presented by the female speakers: “on that Sunday afternoon, in front of Nelson’s Monument, a new chapter was begun for me in the lesson of faith in the capacities of women” (WS 40). Robins went on to pen numerous essays and lectures on the suffrage question as well as other pressing

as a professional actress [see *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928), *Theatre and Friendship* (1932), and *Both Sides of the Curtain* (1940)] (Farfan 123).

⁸⁴Originally published by the *Garden City Press*, Letchworth, England and later republished in Robins’ collection of suffrage essays and speeches entitled *Way Stations*. See Elizabeth Robins. *Way Stations*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as WS.

⁸⁵ “The Feministe Movement in England” was initially published in *Collier’s Weekly*, 29 June 1907 and was later published in *Way Stations* (1913).

feminist issues.⁸⁶ Robins had tried her hand at writing fiction and drama before, including, of course, the 1893 drama *Alan's Wife* which she and Florence Bell adapted from a short story by Swedish author Elin Ameen. However with *Votes for Women*—the first work Robins wrote “under the pressure of a strong moral conviction”—the former Ibsen actress felt she had found her niche as a writer.⁸⁷

Robins' engagement with suffrage activism had implications for her working practices in professional theatre, as well as her later explorations of modernist subjectivity. In her unpublished memoir *Wither and How*, Robins critiqued the gender and economic inequities of the West End Theatre establishment, offering a new feminist-socialist vision of a “theatre of the future”.⁸⁸ In the dominant actor-manager system of her day, theatres were operated almost exclusively by male stars who only produced plays with male leading roles. These practices radically limited acting opportunities for women and resulted in a small pool of dramatic work produced on the London stage. Robins had encountered this problem first hand when she and Marion Lea attempted to persuade numerous West End actor-managers to allow them to produce *Hedda Gabler* in their theatres. These actor-managers were completely resistant to producing this “woman's play”, as their incredulous responses made clear (IA 16). Ultimately, Robins and Lea themselves raised the 300 £ required to produce the play and rent the theatre (by pawning their own jewelry and a wedding present). As a response to the systematic gender inequalities she identified in the commercial theatres, Robins offered her vision

⁸⁶ See Robins' collection of suffrage essays and speeches entitled *Way Stations*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Robins to Millicent Fawcett, 1 November 1906, qtd. In Gates, “Sometimes Suppressed and Sometimes Embroidered”, 316.

⁸⁸ *Wither and How*, manuscript in Fales Library, NYU, chp. 22., 11.

for a 'Theatre of the Future'. She proposed a theatre composed of "an association of workers," not owned by any individual and thus not bound to advance a single person's economic and professional interests: "Our aim...doing work of the highest kind without money and without price – other than an earnest spirit and a generous love of our calling and of one another" (11).⁸⁹ While she did not live to see a theatre organization built on these socialist and feminist principles, Robins managed her own career as a producer so as to benefit, rather than exploit, the workers who acted in her productions.⁹⁰

Feminist Critique of Ibsen

Moreover, despite gaining a greater feminist sensibility through her portrayals of Ibsen's strong-willed heroines, the increasingly politicized Robins grew critical of parts of Ibsen's philosophy and dramaturgy which she felt to be counter-productive to a modern move forward into political reform (Farfan 6, 12).⁹¹ In a 1908 lecture she delivered before the Philosophic Institute in Edinburgh entitled *Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen*, Robins offered a prescient feminist analysis of Ibsen's philosophy and dramatic practices.⁹² First, Robins criticized what she considered Ibsen's major philosophical

⁸⁹ See Kerry Powell's chapter "Elizabeth Robins, Oscar Wilde and the 'Theatre of the Future' in *Women and Victorian Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Powell argues that Robins should be revalued for her critical role in theorizing a noncommercial National Theatre in Britain, which was established well after Robins' own theatrical efforts as an actress, director, playwright and manager (151).

⁹⁰ Robins' socialist-inspired view of actors as workers anticipates the modernist theatre theories of Bertolt Brecht.

⁹¹ See Penny Farfan's chapter "From *Hedda Gabler* to *Votes for Women*: Elizabeth Robins' Early Feminist Critique of Ibsen" in *Women, Modernism and Performance*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 11-33.

⁹² *Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen: Lecture delivered before The Philosophical Institute, Edinburgh. October 27, 1908*. Elizabeth Robins Papers. Fales Library, New York University. (A shorter version of this transcript, entitled simply "Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen", is also held in this collection). The longer version (from which I am quoting) begins with a biographical sketch of Ibsen and discusses his female characters at greater length. Henceforth, references to this longer version will be cited parenthetically in the text as SA.

weakness—his glorification of the individual will: “Ibsen’s bias towards individualism leads him into the pitfall of the incurable hero-worshipper, belief in the Superman, which is nothing but a revamped Romanticism returned to us in another guise” (SA11). Robins’ position here, a stance also demonstrated in her 1907 play *Votes for Women*, differs radically from the Nietzschean will-to-power valorized in *Alan’s Wife*. Robins’ intervening experiences with the mass movement of suffrage activism, with its emphasis on collective social action to effect political change, had altered her understanding of the relationships between individual and social forces, personal experience and public action.

Second, Robins addressed how Ibsen’s glorification of the individual will limited his dramatic practices. Robins believed that Ibsen’s “naive and retrograde belief [in the Superman]” negatively affected his dramaturgy, arguing that “he does not correct and rationalize his vision [of the powerful individual will] by relating it scientifically to other wills” (SA 16-17). For example in Ibsen’s *Brand*, Robins found unconvincing the character Agnes’ choice to submit to risk her child’s life in order to submit to the wishes of her superman-husband. Robins argued that “not only tender Agnes, but any mother worthy of the name” would have chosen to allow the child to recover his health and later met her husband (SA 17, qtd. in Farfan 20). As Farfan has argued, Robins believed Ibsen’s overly-focused interest in his protagonist (Brand) resulted in a careless plot choice: Agnes’s fatal decision “[outrages] reason and dramatic probability” (SA 17, Farfan 20). In other words, Robins believed that an ideology which glorifies unfettered individualism thwarts a “realistic” dramatic representation of how the individual functions within a complex web of social relationships that constitutes him or her as a subject.

Finally, in this lecture Robins took issue with Ibsen's rendering of his female protagonists and their dramatic plight (Farfan 20). Nearly a decade earlier, Robins had been particularly disturbed by *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), with its dominant image of a woman as a mere muse to be used up by the male artist.⁹³ In a letter to Florence Bell, Robins expressed her dismay with Ibsen's final drama:

The interest of 10 years is ended and as I think of the nightmare the play really is, with its jumble of Hilda, Hedda, Borkman, Peer Gynt, etc.; it's as tho' in the loosening of that mind from its moorings one kept seeing swept by on the flood marred pieces of mighty work done in days of vigor – wreckage on a giant scale.⁹⁴

Upon reading *When We Dead Awaken*, Robins may have newly realized the recurring problematic gender dynamics in Ibsen's drama (Farfan 18). Likewise, Michael Meyers has noted Ibsen's repeated theme of "a man who sacrifices the happiness of his wife or a woman that he loves for the sake of a cause or personal ambition" (1980: 205).⁹⁵

In any case, Robins' feminist politicization took place in the years between her initial comments on this final Ibsen play and her 1908 lecture *Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen*. In her re-evaluation of his oeuvre, Robins denied that Ibsen had a "profound understanding of women" which earned him the "right to be considered a thinker" (SA 18). In fact, with the exception of Nora in *A Doll House*, Robins argued Ibsen was "not so much profound in his judgments of women as vivid in his power of transferring

⁹³ Robins said that *When We Dead Awaken* "was matter almost for tears" in her memoir *Raymond and I*. Elizabeth Robins. *Raymond and I*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), 47.

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Robins to Florence Bell, 12 December 1899, qtd. in Joanne E. Gates "Sometimes Suppressed and Sometimes Embroidered": the Life and Writing of Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952," diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1987, 211.

⁹⁵ See Brand, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Master Builder*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Penny Farfan has observed the corollary theme of "the woman who seeks a male channel for her ambition and creativity" in *Hedda Gabler*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Master Builder* (18).

materials for judgment to the mimic scene” (SA 24). Specifically, Robins grew frustrated with Ibsen’s dramaturgical presentation of the unraveling of a pathological female heroine; or, conversely, his representation of a strong willed heroine ‘trapped’ and doomed to death by the repressive social mores of her culture. Ibsen’s most famous female character Hedda Gabler, though fiery and unconventional, was ultimately doomed by her own passivity in the face of repressive social mores. As a participant in the suffrage movement, Robins found Ibsen’s portrait of Hedda to be overly passive given the range of political choices such a woman might engage in to confront social inequalities.

In contrast, Robins’ passionate engagement as an apologist for the suffrage movement propelled her to write a new kind of heroine in her timely drama *Votes for Women* (1907). The contemporary references to public figures and suffrage activities in the play were so recent that she feared another playwright might capitalize on the pressing public attention for the issue if her play were not produced as quickly as possible. In a personal letter dated 17 January 1907, Robins wrote “I think we would find it hard to forgive ourselves if the thing were delayed till someone else had time to snatch the theme from us and carry off the kudos of its first use”.⁹⁶ In Penny Farfan’s reading of *Votes for Women*, Robins’ heroine Vida Levering offers an alternate vision of a

⁹⁶ Robins’ letter describes her potential competition in the race to produce *Votes for Women*: “You remember it was publicly announced and much commented on at a widely reported public dinner. Mrs. Fawcett told us of the buzzing of the newspaper men round her during the following days. Then we have two such men as Shaw and Barrie frank in admitting the appositeness of the matter, and as widely different a person as Henry James saying he had been contemplating a play on these identical lines! Then there was the other man – the first I heard of – who called at the Women’s Social and Political Union at least a couple of months ago to get local colour and “deputation details.” Although so many people know of our Play and its theme, you and I know nothing of what some at least equally alive person may be planning. We might pick up a paper any morning and see any announcement that would cut the ground from under our feet....” (Series 8: Theatre Productions; Subseries A; Box 1; Folder !2: Letters / Correspondence related to *Votes for Women* Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University).

politically empowered Ibsenite heroine: “where Ibsen occasionally subordinated dramatic probability to dramatic effect, [Robins] herself carefully develops her suffrage theme as the logical and perhaps inevitable outcome of her heroine’s past circumstances” (24). Liberated through political choices to affiliate with feminist and socialist movements, Robins' heroine Vida Levering carves out a radically different life path from that of Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler. Vida Levering’s activist commitments to the suffrage cause takes into account the needs of less privileged women as well as her own psychic, emotional *and* political well-being. Farfan’s argument regarding Robins’ development of a “suffrage theme” as her alternative to Ibsen’s dramaturgy is a useful starting point for my discussion. However my reading of *Votes for Women* will focus instead on the structure of the play and experimental theatrical conventions as the primary means by which Robins’ dramaturgy reveals her feminist resistance to Ibsen’s ‘trapped’ heroines. Elizabeth Robins’ considerable body of writing on her professional experiences as an actress and director, as well as her pro-suffrage and socialist writings, are crucial for understanding her dramatic innovations and experiments with representations of the female subject.

III. *Votes for Women* and Political Subjectivity

In her suffrage play *Votes for Women*, Robins’ feminism drove her to explore in theatrical terms a new type of realism in keeping with her own changing ideological understanding of subjectivity. Rejecting Ibsenite individualism in favor of the collectivity and intersubjectivity of the suffrage movement, Robins created a heroine shaped more by the political and social forces of her historical moment than by Ibsen’s

heroines' traumatic psychological past. In her full-length suffrage drama *Votes for Women*, Robins employs a range of theatrical techniques to flesh out these ideas. Specifically, this section focuses on the productive tensions and dissonances produced by the presence of multiple protagonists and an unusual mixture of theatrical genres. A number of critics have pointed out the dual protagonists of *Votes for Women*: the traditional dramatic heroine Vida Levering and the Cause of women's suffrage.⁹⁷ However, the third figure driving the action of *Votes for Women* was the ambivalent urban Crowd—alternately a source of anxiety and progressive political potential for modernists and suffragettes alike. The Crowd of Act II functioned as a complex theatrical construct that represented the circulation of discourses surrounding the suffrage question. In its exploration of political subjectivity, *Votes for Women* also blended a variety of traditional and experimental theatrical languages and brought some into the bourgeois theater space for the first time. Robins' play utilized dialogue in the style of Ibsen and Wilde, the structure of the well-made play and the theatrical spectacularity of the mass suffrage movement. *Votes for Women* as a whole teases out ideas concerning a socially constructed political subjectivity that is produced by language and materially embodied in the modernist figure of the Crowd.

Drawing Room Feminism

Robins paid homage to Ibsen's psychological approach and impressive dramaturgical skill, even while engaging in a feminist critique of his philosophy and dramaturgy. The opening act of *Votes for Women* resembled that of an Ibsenite domestic

⁹⁷ See Jane Marcus (1980) and Joanna Townsend (2000).

drama, or a Wildean comedy—both of which had their structural roots in the form of the well-made play. Set in the interior drawing room of aristocratic Lord and Lady John Wynnstay, the stage is gradually inhabited by characters who introduce the two most charismatic characters Vida Levering and Geoffrey Stonor. Robins initially manipulated the theatrical conventions of the Wildean comedy of manners, establishing a comfortable and familiar tone and humor, before she introduced the more radical speeches and formal innovations of Act II. Vida's characterization as a witty and spirited young woman resembled Wilde's comic heroines (such as Mabel Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, Gwendolyn in *The Importance of Being Earnest*). Also, in Wildean fashion, the opening scene of *Votes for Women* gently satirized the social niceties—and hypocrisies—of the upper class characters. For example, although Jean was initially displeased to see guests through window, she quickly feigned delight at meeting them (particularly her disagreeable aunt, Mrs. Heriot (44-45)). These early, amusing moments—familiar to the bourgeois West End audience of *Votes for Women*—suggested a palatable, light-hearted and familiar type of play. At the same time, the scene was packed with telling details that introduced the political conflict at the heart of the play: What is to be done about the Suffrage Question?

The topicality of Robins' drama is evident not only in its suffrage theme, but also in the ways the representation of characters and their dialogue reflected the range of ideas associated with feminists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. From the earliest inception in British newsprint, fiction, and the stage in the 1870s, the New Woman was a controversial and continually contested figure of female emancipation. This late Victorian "type" was closely associated with contemporaneous debates

regarding women's higher education, professional employment, equality within marriage, the right to property ownership and voting rights. Satirists and cartoonists in publications such as *Punch* and *Pall Mall Gazette* capitalized upon images of women smoking, wearing rational (masculine) dress and bicycling, thereby creating and exploiting the powerful visual iconography of the New Woman. On the other hand, early feminist authors also appropriated the pervasive cultural stereotype, penning over one hundred pro-New Woman novels between 1883 and 1900 in order to promote advances in the social, economic and political status of women. Writers of this body of pro-feminist novels contested a wide range of attitudes and priorities for the New Woman and society at large. Nevertheless, from the various competing definitions of the New Woman, certain common features emerge: "her perceived newness, her autonomous self-definition and her determination to set her own agenda in developing an alternative vision of the future" (Richardson and Willis 12).

In Act I of *Votes for Women*, Robins theatricalized some of these competing discourses surrounding the New Woman and that figure's relation to the suffrage movement. For example, the upper class characters evoke the negative and satirical visual iconography of the New Woman—particularly highlighting the stereotype of the "mannish" and unattractive old maid—in order to negate the legitimacy of the militant suffrage movement. However, as the Act I conversation reaches the pinnacle of unified anti-suffragette sentiment, New Woman heroine Vida Levering finally comes on stage. Robins' detailed stage directions characterize Vida in the following terms:

She (parasol over the shoulder), an attractive essentially feminine, and rather 'smart' woman of thirty-two, with a somewhat foreign grace; the kind of whom

men and women alike say: ‘What’s her story? Why doesn’t she marry?’ (46) Clearly, Robins was emphasizing traditional, class-coded notions of femininity in her representation of Vida. While this might seem problematic and even politically reactionary in light of contemporary notions about the socially constructed nature of gender identity, Robins’ choices in describing and casting the role of a feminine Vida must be understood in light of contemporary debates surrounding the figure of the New Woman. As a challenge to the negative and satirizing visual iconography of the New Woman parroted by the upper class male characters, Robins used the multiple languages of the theatre, from dialogue to visual representation, to present the conventionally attractive, well-dressed and wittily-spoken figure of Vida Levering. Robins’ aim here, like that of the fashion-conscious leaders of various suffrage organizations, was to promote an image of an attractive feminist activist that cannot be easily dismissed, even by the bourgeois theatre-going audience’s notions of an appealing leading lady.⁹⁸

Initially, Vida is well-liked by the men of the group and is supported by the hostess, her friend Lady John. Vida Levering and Lady John share a commitment to women’s causes: they are working to establish shelters for homeless and working class women. However, Robins’ dialogue eventually reveals that Vida has lived a distinctly different life from that of the other aristocratic women. Vida assumes the discourse of the female urban reformer or charity worker, a subtype of the metropolitan New Woman figure who was able to follow male social explorers into urban slums to report on and change existing conditions (Ledger 156). Vida *knows* first-hand the sexual danger

⁹⁸ See: Kaplan, Joel H. and Sheila Stowell. *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 and Barbara Green’s chapter on Ornamental Dress in *Spectacular Confessions : Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage, 1905—1938*. London: Macmillan, 1997.

experienced by lower class women. To the horror of snobbish Mrs. Heriot and the shock of innocent Jean, Vida describes her “pilgrimage to the underworld”, facilitated by a simple disguise (“an old gown and a tawdry hat”): “You’ll never know how many things are hidden from a woman in good clothes. The bold, free look of a man at a woman he believes to be destitute – you must *feel* that look on you before you can understand – a good half of history” (50). Vida is clearly committed to understanding the struggles of working class women and serving as a bridge between them and the wealthy women who have the means to build shelters and work for social change. Yet Vida protects her audiences—on stage and in the theatre by not telling the full horrors of prostitutes’ experiences. As she explains to Jean: “It’s so much worse I dare not tell about it—even if you weren’t here I couldn’t” (50). Yet Vida’s self-censoring here also serves as a potent rhetorical device; her silence on the subject underscores the significance of the unspeakable horrors of suffering women.

As the scene progresses, however, Vida not only describes the struggles of other poor women via undercover investigation, but also unashamedly describes her own compromised experiences. “I do know something about the possible fate of homeless girls” (50). Vida is careful to acknowledge the advantages afforded to her—“Why do I waste time over myself? I belonged to the little class of armed women. My body wasn’t born weak, and my spirit wasn’t broken by the *habit* of slavery” (50). She nevertheless argues that the collective lot of women should interest women of every class, including those whose status and family background presumably protect them from the plight of sexual vulnerability. As an upper-class character that speaks from personal experience of the plight of destitute women, Vida Levering brings the social problems of sexual

inequality into the bourgeois stage. “That is why *every* woman ought to take an interest in this – every girl too” (50).

The dialogue of this scene illustrates *Votes for Women*’s concern with the personal history of its female protagonist in a manner reminiscent of Ibsen’s psychological portraits of women. Ibsen appropriated the dramatic techniques of the well-made-play to create psychological portraits of his hysterical female subjects. In the well-made play, a subtle physical clue, such as a dropped handkerchief, would signal important information previously hidden to the characters. This physical clue would then become the hinge upon which the plot would turn and eventually unfold. Ibsen’s social problem plays anticipated the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis: in Ibsen’s dramaturgy of “retrospective action”, a dropped word, glance, or allusion substituted for the dropped handkerchief in the turning of the psychologically driven plot. In *Votes for Women*, Robins utilized similar techniques of unfolding to reveal the history of Vida Levering’s past and allow the audience (and other characters) to discover the contours of her current subjectivity. Robins accomplished this through carefully dropped references to Vida’s past experiences and present political commitments, made by the protagonists and other characters.

However, Robins employed the hysteria trope in *Votes for Women*, most notably in Mrs. Freddy’s anti-suffrage speech in Act I and in Jean Dunbarton’s conversion to the suffrage cause in Act II. Although hysteria functions differently in these two accounts, in both cases Robins avoided resolving the hysteria through the typical processes of

confession and cure. In Act I Mrs. Freddy, a conservative suffragist,⁹⁹ uses theatrical metaphors to describe the intrusion of the young militant suffragettes into the House of Commons:

MRS. FREDDY: The scene in the House has put back the reform a generation....

JEAN: I wish I'd been there.

MRS. FREDDY: I *was*.

JEAN: Oh, was it like the papers said?

MRS. FREDDY: Worse. I've never been so moved in public. No tragedy, no great opera ever gripped an audience as the situation in the House did that night. There we all sat breathless – with everything more favourable to us than it had been within the memory of women. Another five minutes and the Resolution would have passed. Then...all in a moment—

LORD JOHN (*to* MRS. HERIOT): Listen – they're talking about the female hooligans.

MRS. HERIOT: No, thank you! (*Sits apart with the 'Church Times.'*)

MRS. FREDDY (*excitedly*): All in a moment a horrible dingy little flag was poked through the grille of the Woman's Gallery – cries—insults—scuffling—the police—the ignominious turning out of the women—*us* as well as the – Oh, I can't *think* of it without..." *Jumps up and walks to and fro.* (56-57)

Mrs. Freddy's likens the events in the House of Commons to a "tragedy" or "great opera"—with the respectable ladies of the Women's Gallery as the immediate "audience" of the protest spectacle. The other characters also describe the effect of the newspaper

⁹⁹ Suffragists worked for the Cause through formal petitions and letter writing campaigns. They often disapproved of Suffragettes, who advocated militant protest tactics.

accounts of this spectacular scene; the suffragettes' interruption into parliament alternately horrified, inspired and fascinated all of Britain. Mrs. Freddy's description of the "scene in the House" reflects the performative nature of the militant suffragettes' guerilla-style tactics. Tellingly, the independent, staunchly single suffragette Vida is referred to as "Miss Levering"; meanwhile Lady John and Mrs. Freddy, who oppose the suffragette's militant action, are identified by their husbands' first names.

Mrs. Freddy's description of the spectacular scene of militant suffragette protest in Parliament is an example of the kind of pro- and anti-suffrage discourse that emerged in various print sources and cycled through various genres of writing in the period (journalism, suffrage novels, plays, political tracts, etc.). However, more fascinating is the fact that—at the very thought of the events—Mrs. Freddy breaks off her speech and she "jumps up and walks to and fro". Despite her overt protests, Mrs. Freddy's reaction suggests a hysterical identification with the wild suffragettes who interrupted Parliament with their "horrible dingy little flag" (57). Mrs. Freddy's visceral reaction to re-telling the events of the radical performance suggests the long-term, psychically disruptive power of the militant suffrage spectacle. Through staging this re-telling of the suffragette's radical protest within the conventional domestic space of Act I, Robins introduced the trope and theatrical practice of melding public and private realisms.¹⁰⁰

Agit-Prop Theatre, Suffrage Rhetoric and the Modernist Urban Crowd

In contrast to the familiar domestic drama setting and dialogue of Act I, the innovative staging of the Suffrage Rally in Act II forcefully placed the public politics of

¹⁰⁰ In my later discussion of the Trafalgar Square rally scene of Act II, I will consider the role of hysterical identification in Jean's conversion to the suffrage Cause.

the suffrage mass movement into the bourgeois space of the West End theatre where *Votes for Women* was performed. The full title of Robins suffrage play: *Votes for Women: A Dramatic Tract in Three Acts* reflected her concern with the political agency of women in society. The reference to a “tract” in the title as well as the militant techniques of the suffragettes discussed within the play, immediately suggested an intentional propagandistic element to the work itself, and a unique theatrical project. In the much-discussed second act, Robins introduced spectacular elements of suffrage pageants: authentic suffrage rally speeches and one of the first, largest and rowdiest on-stage crowds in early twentieth century theatre. Robins’ notes on a Trafalgar Square suffrage rally she attended in October of 1906 provided the basis for the stage directions of Act II as well as snippets of a number of the character’s speeches.¹⁰¹ Robins’ incorporation of women’s forceful political speech and the large crowd proved to be a politically radical and aesthetically prescient move within the public, but otherwise domesticated, West End theatre space.

Through both the formal experimentation and the rhetoric employed in the spectacular Trafalgar Square rally scene, Robins again incorporated competing arguments and positions for and against women’s suffrage. First, she placed women and men

¹⁰¹ From *Suffrage Notes* file, Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University: “The big red banner either against the column in Trafalgar Square or in Hyde Park. The words in large white letters ‘Votes for women’, only that much (being the lower part of the inscription) need be seen by the audience. This on October 7th was mounted between two large poles which were held in place by an extremely groggy-looking tramp sort of person on one side, and a small and grimy young gentleman on the other – the latter looking about eight.

Voices in the crowd. One of the speakers mentions unemployment...

Something about women working for next to nothing, about women being sweated in the trades...

Voices in the crowd. A cheerful big sandy man in front of me, young with long flowing mustachios and probably not quite sober, keeps saying at intervals to the men round him: ‘Are we down ‘hearted?’ as though the meeting had been called, not for the purpose of raising interest in the question of woman’s share in the public work of the world, but as though its object were to humiliate and disfranchise the men. But his exclamation, repeated at inappropriate intervals, came in as a sort of refrain to the rest of the proceedings....” See also Jane Marcus’ “Introduction” to *The Convert* by Elizabeth Robins.

characters from varying social classes onto the suffrage rally podium—diversifying a discourse of the public sphere historically reserved for upper class men. For example, the first official speaker at the suffrage rally is the “Working Woman”, whose arguments and dialect were derived from similar figures in the monologues and one-act plays produced by the Actress Franchise League of which Robins was a part.¹⁰² An emblematic figure with rich theatrical and propagandist potential, the nameless Working Woman is identified solely in terms of her class and gender. Accordingly, Working Woman stresses the plight of poor women who are required to work at grueling and low-paying jobs in addition to fulfilling their unpaid ‘womanly’ responsibilities of domestic service and childcare in their own homes. She criticizes the ignorance of middle class male critics of the movement, who choose to ignore the social and political realities of women and poverty: “You won’t even *think* about the overworked women and the underfed children and the hovels they live in. And you want that we shouldn’t think neither” (62). Through Working Women and other characters, Robins represented different positions on a range of women’s issues and introduced class-specific arguments for including women in the political process.

Some contemporary historians have argued that the suffrage movement in 1907 was increasingly oriented towards promoting an ideal of ‘womanly womanhood’ agreeable to opponents of the movement; in order to gain acceptance, some suffrage leaders compensated by presenting a conventionally feminine middle-class front to the

¹⁰² For more on the Actress Franchise League, see: Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*. London: Virago, 1981.

movement.¹⁰³ Yet Robins' inclusion of 'Working Woman' in the stage play of *Votes for Women* complicates that claim. Working woman's speech also reflected Robins' socialist sympathies in that it intertwined gender and economic social critiques to make arguments for extending the vote to women. Not only does the Working Woman's speech represent the interests of lower class women workers, but she also identifies the benefits of universal suffrage for workers of both sexes: "And w'en we got our rights, a woman's flesh and blood won't be so much cheaper than a man's that employers can get rich on keepin' you out 'o work and sweatin'. If you men only could see I, we got the *syme* cause, and if you helped us you'd be 'helpin yerselves" (63). Moreover, Working Woman stresses the interdependence of all sexes and classes, suggesting that each citizen shares responsibility to provide for the needs of the next generation: "But we women are not satisfied. We don't only want better things for our own children. We want better things for all. *Every* child is our child. We know in our 'earts we oughtn't to rest till we've mothered 'em, every one" (62-63). By emphasizing that "*every* child is our child", Working Woman steps outside of the specific concerns of her own class and gendered position to stress the notion of collectivity central to the suffrage movement. Moreover, in Working Woman's rhetorical formulation, women or 'the woman' signifies a universal position based on rights and on maternity.

The representation of the suffrage crowd in *Votes for Women* incorporates a range of arguments for and against the cause of women's suffrage, thus illuminating a crucial dimension of Robins' feminist vision of political subjectivity. Robins takes care to recreate with accuracy the vehement reactions (heckling, shouting, coarse laughter) of the

¹⁰³ For example, Stowell and Kaplan's book *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (1994) discusses how WSPU leaders promoted certain clothing choices for suffrage activists.

mostly male crowd in her dramatization of a suffrage rally.¹⁰⁴ The heckling interruptions of the crowd of *Votes for Women*—while ostensibly upsetting the speakers—had a constructive function. The jostling of voices and bodies within the crowd represented competing positions and arguments around the suffrage question: the ultimate result was the production of a different type of meaning within the play’s argument.

The forward-looking achievement of Robins’ dialogue is that it enabled the onstage crowd to disrupt and shape perceptions of gender and class realities by shouting out their own alternative responses to the suffrage speakers. The suffragette speakers then either ignored, shouted over, or incorporated these perspectives through rhetorical repetition of the phrases or by reframing crowd members’ statements into questions, which they then answered. The occasional incorporation of crowd members’ questions and objections was a more democratic use of the public platform for genuine dialogue instead of privileged speech.¹⁰⁵ Thus, by utilizing the interrupting crowd as an active locus of meaning-making in the Trafalgar Square rally scene, Robins’ formally emphasized the value of multiple and dissenting viewpoints in the process of forging

¹⁰⁴ Robins’ use of disruption and interruption the crowd scene in *Votes for Women!* may also be compared with certain strains within avant-garde modernism. The aggressive heckling of the crowd Robins’ 1907 play historically predates, and in some ways anticipates, later Dadaist attempts to introduce disruption, shouting and dissonant noise as part of their anti-theatrical performances. However, the function of these interruptions and the aesthetic of fragmentation is different in *Votes for Women* than in the other avant-garde theatrical experiments. In the destructive, and arguably nihilistic, aesthetics of dada and surrealist formal interruption, the avant-garde artists attempted to inflame their complacent bourgeois audiences into violent outbursts. For more on links between suffrage discourse and activism and the modernist avant-garde, see Janet Lyons “Militant Discourse, Strange Bedfellows: Suffragettes and Vorticists Before the War.” *Differences*. 4:2 (Summer 1992). Lyons has already convincingly argued for a similarity between the rhetoric and tactics of futurist and vorticist avant-garde manifestos and those of the militant suffrage movement (102).

¹⁰⁵ Penny Farfan has taken a different tactic in arguing for the “democratic” elements of this crowd scene by contrasting Vida’s speech in Act II of Robins’ *Votes for Women* to the Stockmann’s speech in the crowd scene of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (72). Farfan’s useful argument focuses on the role of the formal speakers on the suffrage stage, while my analysis centers on the incorporation of dissenting voices from the crowd into the suffrage rhetoric.

women's citizenship. The valuing of these varied and occasionally contradictory of viewpoints was a particularly poignant aspect of a movement initiated by and for women, a historically marginalized and disenfranchised group. Robins showed that the suffragettes were capable of valuing what seemed to be unruly disruptions from the crowd and included marginalized voices as part of the overarching dialogue that they hoped would benefit them all.

Robins' Mixed Form: "Public and Private Realisms"

The overall structure of Robins' *Votes for Women* depends on another kind of formal interruption: the intrusion of the Act II crowd scene itself in the midst of an otherwise traditional drawing room problem play. A number of Robins' male contemporaries (most notably Henry James and Bernard Shaw) praised the spectacular realism of the second act, but suggested that she reduce or eliminate the first and third problem play acts in which she explored the personal dimensions of the women and men involved in the suffrage question. Robins, while taking some of their suggestions, refused to cut the first and third acts. Her ostensible reason was in keeping with one of the major themes of *Votes for Women*: the "private" personal stories of women are directly connected to the political systems under which they live. Robins' use of this mixed formal structure (combining domestic problem play and suffrage spectacle) is a distinctly feminist form of resistance to the dominant modes of formal unity in the dramatic realism associated with Ibsen and Ibsenite individualism.

Robins' manipulation of a hyper-realistic theatre which incorporated scenes of street spectacle as well as domestic drama pushed the limits of realism for political aims,

to the point of moving into a more experimental staging technique of agit-prop theatre. By placing the crowd immediately in front of the audience, facing the suffrage platform, Robins had the suffrage speakers *directly* address the play's audience as well as the unruly crowd onstage. In so doing, Robins moved toward breaking the fourth wall by consciously recognizing the paying theatre audience as a crowd in itself, with political agency that the suffrage movement could directly woo. As Barbara Green points out:

What seemed to delight the reviewers of *Votes for Women* was not just the novelty of a mass audience on the stage, but the realism of the representation—the scenes of mass spectacle were so convincing that they transformed the theatre into an open-air meeting, and audience members into potential converts (50).

The experimental staging of the suffrage rally scene in *Votes for Women* challenges the traditional relationship between spectator and spectacle, audience and actors, viewers and participants.

Notably, Robins' achievement in Act II of her 1907 West End production *Votes for Women* anticipated by several decades the experimental techniques of the political dramas produced by the United States' Federal Theater Project. The Works Progress Administration-funded Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s and 40s moved into the kind of political, aesthetic and gender reform that Robins had dreamed about in her writings about "the theatre of the future". Administratively led by a woman, Halle Flanagan, the Federal Theatre Project produced works that explored pressing social and ethical questions of the day through "living newspapers" or documentary-style plays. The left-leaning Federal Theater Project brought together some of America's most luminous stage talents—including Orson Welles, Clifford Odets and Paul Robeson—to write, direct and

perform in experimental and highly acclaimed dramas. On an aesthetic and thematic level, *Votes for Women* can be seen as a theatrical predecessor to Clifford Odets' most famous propagandistic piece for the Federal Theatre Project: *Waiting for Lefty*.¹⁰⁶ In *Waiting for Lefty*, the domestic drama elements (personal stories of struggles of working class individuals and couples) are set within the frame of a public and political debate over whether or not a taxicab union should go on strike. The mini plays-within-a-play in *Waiting for Lefty* constitute a kind of mixed form of "public and private realisms" similar to the drawing room and public square scenes of Robins' *Votes for Women*. The critical aims of both plays are also similar: they emphasize the interrelationship between public and private, personal and political choices and experiences. Moreover, *Waiting for Lefty*, like *Votes for Women*, is a documentary-style drama in that the subject matter and rhetoric are derived from contemporaneous and pressing political and social problems. Finally, the staging of the famous union debate scene at the close of Odets' play destabilizes the audience-performer relationship.¹⁰⁷ Robins' earlier confrontational staging of the suffrage rally scene in *Votes for Women* makes the West End theatre audience witnesses to a lively political event. The radically innovative staging of *Votes for Women* suggests that the mass movement of women's suffrage contributed to the modernist theatrical forms of documentary and agit-prop theatre as early as 1907.

Finally, analysis of the "public and private realisms" exemplified in the Trafalgar Square suffrage rally scene demands a discussion of protagonist Vida Levering's

¹⁰⁶ Odets, Clifford. "Waiting for Lefty" in *Six Plays*. New York: Random House, 1939.

¹⁰⁷ Famously, audiences of *Waiting for Lefty* rose to their feet at the close of the union debate scene to shout "Strike! Strike!" along with the characters on stage. *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*. Eds. John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown. Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978.

compelling speech. Perhaps most notably, Vida's rhetoric during the suffrage rally of Act II illustrates the relationship between autobiography and spectacle that was central to the performative activism of the suffrage movement. As Barbara Green has argued: "Autobiography opens spectacle to a discussion of the concept of experience, and to the possibility of resistance within the spectacularity. Spectacle opens autobiography, the singular speech-act of an individual woman, to collectivity, group-action and intersubjectivity" (8). In *Votes for Women*, Vida Levering's speech exemplifies the dialectical relationship between the "confessional" accounts of suffragettes and the public spectacles in which they wrote and spoke. In the spectacular and public setting of the suffrage rally, Vida reveals a past private experience of suffering following the unwanted abortion of the child she conceived with Geoffrey. The ultimate goal of this autobiographical revelation is to create a sense of identification with other women, and mobilize them for action. Specifically, Vida draws upon the language of collective subjectivity to establish her personal connection to the "hour of darkness" experienced by many women after childbirth:

In that great agony when...many a woman falls into temporary mania, and not a few go down to death...what man can be the fit judge of her deeds in the awful moment of half-crazed temptation. Women know of these things as those know-burning-who have walked through the fire. (72)

By using generalized language in this moment ("many a woman", "not a few", "women know of these things"), Vida hints at her personal history, without fully claiming it as her own. Nevertheless a number of clues about Vida and Geoffrey's past that were dropped in Act I, and Jean Dunbarton's reaction to Vida's speech at the rally in Act II, confirm

that Robins intended the audience to understand Vida's speech as autobiographical.

Rather than merely dwelling on the struggles of herself and many women, Vida uses her confessional account to springboard into a call for action. She stresses the need to change existing social structures—particularly through elevating the political status of women: “I would say in conclusion to the women here, it's not enough to be sorry for these unfortunate sisters. We must get the conditions of life made fairer. We women must organize. We must learn to work together” (72-73). This rhetorical turn, typical in suffrage speeches of the day, also functions within the play to underscore the double plot. In this confessional moment, the protagonist evokes the familiar fallen woman storyline of melodrama: Vida herself was one of the “unfortunate sisters”. Yet Vida's speech also simultaneously serves as part of the play's larger political argument about the need for women's activism, political mobilization and access to the vote.

(Re)producing and Representing ‘Political Subjectivity’

Discussion of the relationship between autobiography and spectacle in the play becomes particularly fascinating when we remember that much of the language and action of *Votes for Women* is taken from Robins' own conversion to ‘the Cause’ and subsequent social activism. As mentioned earlier, Robins' notes from a suffrage rally she attended in October 1906 informed the stage directions and provided material for some of the speeches. Moreover, a number of critics have noted the similarities between some of the characters in *Votes for Women* and individuals in Robins' own circle. The physically beautiful, independent-spirited Vida Levering has been likened to Elizabeth Robins

herself.¹⁰⁸ Several suffrage speakers in *Votes for Women* resembled key figures of the movement. A revealing letter from suffrage leader Emmeline Pankhurst to Robins (dated 19 November 1906) suggests that Robins modeled Vida's speech on one given by Emmeline's sister Christabel Pankhurst, another key leader of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Emmeline was greatly concerned that the audience might draw too many parallels between Vida Levering and her sister since, it seems, the character of Vida was originally given a name similar to Christabel's in an earlier draft of the play.¹⁰⁹ Lady John (the conservative hostess of Act I) has been likened to Lady Bell, Robins' close friend and collaborator on the play *Alan's Wife*; Robins' and Bell's political differences on the question of women's suffrage strained their friendship at points.¹¹⁰

What might be considered the autobiographical impulse in Robins' *Votes for Women* is complicated by the fact that the playwright's corresponding experiences are displaced into two characters, the protagonist Vida Levering and young convert Jean Dunbarton. These two characters represent different stages in the development of political subjectivity: that of the convert figure and the later committed suffragette. In a

¹⁰⁸ Corbett, Mary Jean. "Performing Identities: Actresses and Autobiography." *Biography* 24.1 (2001) 15-23. See also Green (1997) and Townsend (2000).

¹⁰⁹ "I have been thinking a great deal about the play & I hope you will forgive me if I put two points of view as to the heroine which did not strike me at first & which I am sure you have not thought of. First the personal one. The heroine has a past – she is no worse for that – perhaps she is better for in such experiences....but her name suggests Christabel's. Now Christabel has no past still many people might connect the imaginary with the real & say that [Christiana's] story is Christabel's. We should not like this to happen should we? I don't think therefore there should be such likeness of name. Second. I don't think she should be an actual member of the W.S.P.U. but a sympathizer & drawn to it by the [insurgent?] work of its members. I think you treat her as a newcomer do you not? This could be emphasized by her in her speech. Don't think me squeamish but our work is so difficult as it is without paragraphs in the papers when the play appears suggesting that this person or that is the original of the heroine. These points only came to me after I left you on Friday. Tell me what you think of [it]. You know what a world this is & how advocates of a Cause must be like Caesar's wife. ... Kindest Regards, sincerely yours, Emmeline Pankhurst" (Elizabeth Robins Box, Suffrage Correspondence, Emmeline Pankhurst file, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin).

¹¹⁰ See Gates (1994) and John (1995)

puzzling move, Robins employed the trope of hysteria negatively associated with suffragette activism (through Mrs. Freddy's account in Act I), to represent the process of Jean's conversion to the suffrage cause at the close of Act II. However, whereas Mrs. Freddy's acted-out report of the militant women's intrusion into the House of Parliament comes out of her conservative politics, Jean's hysterical moment is part of an otherwise progressive scene of political affiliation with the suffrage movement. The peculiarity of this choice, in which Robins represented Jean's conversion to suffrage through the symptomology of hysteria, merits close attention to this scene and its significance to the play as a whole.

In the climax of this scene, Vida Levering delivers a rousing speech in which she references a recent court case featured in the newspapers in order to call all women to political action to redress the wrongs suffered by women within a sexist legal system. Vida describes the case of a young orphaned working girl who "crawled with the dead body of her new born child to her master's back door...left the baby there...dragged herself a little way off and fainted" (71). The young girl's boss, a married man who actually fathered the child, reported the crime; while the young mother was convicted and sentenced to Strangeways Gaol; the father went "scot free" because the law did not hold him responsible in any way (71). In her speech critiquing the existing legal system, Vida also obliquely references her own experiences of pregnancy and abortion.

As she meditates on the double meaning of "labour", Vida makes an explicit connection between her own history, the socialist arguments earlier raised by the Working Woman and the suffrage movement: "Every woman who has born a child is a Labour woman. No man among you can judge what she goes through in her hour of

darkness (72). Although Vida uses vague terms to describe her own experiences of pregnancy and abortion, Jean understands that Vida's speech also communicates a personal and intimate past experience. Jean's moment of realization is dramatically represented through carefully choreographed stage directions, reminiscent of an Ibsenite psychological drama. Likewise, the psychological dynamic between Jean, Geoffrey and Vida begin to play out on stage in through symptomatic hysterical display:

JEAN (*with frightened eyes on her lover's set, white face, whispers*): Geoffrey STONOR makes a motion towards JEAN and she turns away fronting the audience.

Her hands go up to her throat as though she suffered a choking sensation. It is in her face that she 'knows' (72).

In response to Vida's rhetorical performance and the dawning awareness that Vida was Geoffrey Stonor's former lover, Jean involuntarily clutches her own throat. In this moment of hysterical identification, Jean's speech is cut off yet her facial expression and choking gesture testify to her as-yet-unvoiced knowledge of Vida and Geoffrey's sexual past. Jean's symptom of clutching her throat invites comparison to Freud's famous case study of "Dora" (1905), in which Freud speculated that a young girl's hysterical symptom of coughing—in drawing attention to the throat—indicates unconscious, repressed sexual desire.¹¹¹ The stage directions above emphasize that Jean's break away from Geoffrey

¹¹¹ See Sigmund Freud's "Fragment of An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (Dora's Case, 1905). Given the link to Freud's discussion, it might be productive to later explore Jean's identification with Vida's sexual history with Stonor. Although they were not all yet translated into English, a number of Freud's earliest and most important works had been widely discussed in the Anglophone world by 1907. These included the early essay with Breuer *On Hysteria* (1895; check out trans. date in Standard Edition), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (trans. into English 1913, but available in bits and pieces before and widely known), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1904; the concepts such as "Freudian Slip," and various ways in which the unconscious penetrates our everyday behavior and discourse; check out the trans. date in

simultaneously leads her to physically confront the audience in a posture reminiscent of both classical soliloquy and the type of direct address associated with breaking the fourth wall of naturalism.

While Jean's hysterical symptom of clutching her throat signifies the moment of unconscious identification with protagonist Vida Levering and her sexual history, the subsequent stage action theatricalizes Jean's political conversion to the Cause of women's suffrage. After Vida completes her rousing speech, pandemonium breaks loose. As the stage directions indicate: "She retires in a tumult. The others on the platform close about her. The CHAIRMAN tries in vain to get a hearing from the excited crowd" (73). This description of the scene emphasizes both the chaos and the organic quality of the public gathering; as Vida retires, the others on the platform "close about" her, potentially obscuring her from sight.

Similarly, Jean's decisive moment of commitment to the suffrage movement is signaled by her disappearance into the unruly crowd. Note the symbolic resonances in the final, critical exchange between Jean Dunbarton and Geoffrey Stonor:

JEAN *tries to make her way through the knot of people surging round her*

Stonor (calls): Here—Follow me!

Jean: No – no – I

Stonor: You're going the wrong way.

Jean: *This* is the way I must go.

Stonor: You can get out quicker on this side.

Standard Edition), *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905; the same extended to the role of jokes and literature), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905; the notion of "normal perversion"; homosexuality; the child as a polymorphous pervert; the stages in psychic development; narcissism; and many other issues.)

Jean: I don't *want* to get out.

Stonor: What? Where are you going?

Jean: To ask that woman to let me have the honour of working with her.

She disappears in the crowd.

Curtain. (73 – close of Act II).

By refusing to “follow” Stonor and resolutely heading “the wrong way”, Jean first declares and then physically manifests her commitment to work with Vida in the suffrage movement. Threatening and ambiguous as the crowd is, Jean chooses not to “get out” but rather subsumes herself in the collective frenzy. In her intentional identification with both Vida and the suffrage cause, Jean’s body is no longer a distinct, separate figure on the stage. Here the material aspects of the scene—the bodies of the actresses playing Jean and Vida on stage, the space between the audience and the stage action and, most importantly, the massive figure of the on-stage crowd—take on new significance in the formation of the political subject. It is through her physical incorporation into the crowd that Jean becomes one with the alternately threatening and empowering mass collective of the suffrage movement. In other words, her secular conversion to the suffrage Cause is confirmed by her baptism, or complete immersion, within a sea of bodies representing the contending discourses and political potential of the urban crowd.

Joanna Townsend also takes up a discussion of ‘political subjectivity’ in *Votes for Women*, although our projects differ in several distinct ways; most notably, we have differing concepts of what constitutes ‘political subjectivity’ for the characters in Robins’

play.¹¹² According to Townsend, Vida's political subjectivity emerges when she publicly speaks about the dark secrets of her past with Stonor and verbally articulates her commitment to political activism. Townsend's argument relies on the notion that *confessional* speech enables Vida—and consequently Jean—to become political subjects. Townsend writes

By adopting and developing the multi-layered rhetoric that is the process of conversion and cure for the hysteric, by staging the discourse of the body as well as that of speech, Robins can be seen to have negotiated a more complex, and more powerful, position from which woman can speak. Working in the 'in-between' of speech and body, text and action, she revealed different possibilities and potentials to her audiences. (103)

The relationship between language and the female body is central to Robins' representation of a historically and socially located political female subjectivity.

However, Townsend's reading problematically links the concept of the hysteric's cure—rooted in the ideology and theatrical form of Ibsenite psychological realism—with political agency. Political subjectivity is established essentially through a re-working of the 'hysterics talking cure': in this case, the listening crowd (and audience) takes the place of the analyst in the process of Freudian abreaction. In other words, in Townsend's reading Vida must confess her secret past history with Stonor (albeit reframed in political terms) in order to be "healed" and constituted a political subject. Yet as I have earlier

¹¹² Joanna Townsend "Elizabeth Robins: Hysteria, Politics and Performance" in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*. Ed Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner. New York: Manchester UP, 2000, p. 102-120. Townsend discusses the significance of 'hysteria' over the course of Elizabeth Robins' theatrical career. She traces a link between Robins' performance techniques as an actress playing Hedda Gabler to what she considers to be Vida Levering's move from hysteria to political subjectivity through her confessional, pro-suffrage speech at the rally.

argued, in *Votes for Women*, as in *Alan's Wife*, Robins refuses to work within the logic of English Ibsenite plays, which seek to cure the female hysteric through psychological confession. Instead, the material aspects of the scene—the bodies of the actresses playing Jean and Vida on stage, the on-stage crowd and the space between the audience and the stage action—take on new significance in the formation of the political subject. Townsend's analysis does not fully take into account the significance of the material and theatrical construct of the massive Act II crowd in the formation of Jean's political subjectivity.

Townsend's argument instead focuses on Jean's "moment of hysterical bodily revelation," when she recognizes "the connection between Vida's description of childbirth, every woman's 'hour of darkness,' and her own fiancé Geoffrey Stonor". Townsend rightly notes that the plot of *Votes for Women* significantly moves *beyond* this moment of hysteria and unarticulated knowledge. However, she then goes on to argue that "instead the power of the body, and its numerous betrayals, is put to political use in the last Act, where Beatrice [Jean]¹¹³ and Vida work together to force Stonor to repay the debt he owes to women, and enlist his support for the suffrage cause" (117). While I agree that the Jean's hysterical body does not triumph in the traditional way in this play, Townsend's reading of the action of Act III gives too much agency to Jean Dunbarton as a political subject.

Far from confirming Jean's status as a fully politicized suffragette, the beginning

¹¹³ During performances of *Votes for Women*, this character was referred to as Beatrice Dunbarton; I use the name "Jean" Dunbarton to remain consistent with Robins' published play text, which is quoted throughout. The playwright's choice to use the name "Jean" for *Votes for Women*'s publication is of critical interest for Elizabeth Robins scholars, given that "Jean" was also the first name of the heroine from Robins and Bell's earlier, anonymously written play *Alan's Wife* (1893).

of Act III calls into question Jean's reliability after her hysterical identification with Vida at the suffrage rally. Jean's error is primarily one of misinterpretation. As she confronts her fiancé Geoffrey about his past involvement and child with Vida Levering, Jean mistakenly—and insistently—interprets the conflict in terms of the melodramatic fallen woman narrative. Jean urges Geoffrey to “right that old wrong now” by offering to marry Vida; Jean insists “You cared for her once. You’ll care about her again. She is beautiful and brilliant...everything. I’ve heard she could win any man she set herself to...” (77-78). However, throughout *Votes for Women*, Robins carefully resisted representing Vida as the traditional fallen woman figure from melodrama and Ibsenite woman-problem plays. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in Act III, when Lady John questions Vida as to any lingering feelings for Geoffrey, or desire for personal reparation for his past wrongs against her. Vida responds:

Geoffrey Stonor! For me he's simply one of the far back links in a chain of evidence. It's certain I think a hundred times of other women's unhappiness, to once that I remember that old unhappiness of mine that's past....I don't suffer from that old wrong as Jean thinks I do, but I shall coin her sympathy into gold for a greater cause than mine (80).

Here Vida explicitly rejects the emotional script of “suffering from that old wrong,” while simultaneously acknowledging Jean's misinterpretation of Vida's role as that of a melodramatic fallen woman. These details suggest Robins' far more sophisticated representation of Vida's political subjectivity than can be accounted for by interpreting Act III as merely the resolution of a melodramatic love triangle.

Upending Melodramatic Resolution: the *Quidproquo* and Political Power Plays

In fact, many of Robins' contemporaries and numerous modern critics have assumed a straightforward ending to *Votes for Women*, and dismissed the final scene as one of the weaknesses of the play. In particular, Act III has been misunderstood to be the attempted resolution of a "fallen woman" narrative.¹¹⁴ For example, Dennis Kennedy writes:

[But] the act is soured by melodramatic devices: coincidences, a dropped handkerchief with an embroidered initial, eyes meeting by chance, significant silences. The resolution is equally unsatisfying, involving a conversion of Stonor to the feminist movement. ... When Stonor acknowledges that he owes a debt to women because of his treatment of Vida, we may reasonably conclude that a social problem has been solved by a dramatic fantasy – as if Helmer suddenly understood Nora and vowed to change his ways in the future (58)¹¹⁵.

However, the details of the Act III plot resolution should be understood within the broader historical context of nineteenth century dramatic traditions of domestic melodrama and the well-made play. Robins' final scene successfully incorporates earlier theatrical conventions to very different ideological ends than those generally associated with these forms.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, Kennedy, Dennis. *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985 (pp. 57-61). "Even after rewriting, *Votes for Women!* remained imperfect. Despite its topicality and one marvelous scene, it was a type of play overly familiar in the nineteenth century, a late version of the Woman with a Past drama that ran from *Camille* to *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* and beyond (58).

¹¹⁵ Kennedy continues: "But for some members of the original audience the happy resolution at least served a legitimate function of fiction, for it suggested that an improvement in women's status was possible and that it could be accomplished by changing the minds of a few powerful men. If this seems improbably now, knowing the LIBERAL Party's dithering with female suffrage, in 1907 it remained one of the chief hopes of the movement" (Kennedy 58 – 59).

Ostensibly, the final scene between Vida Levering and Geoffrey Stonor provides resolution to the melodramatic ‘fallen woman’ plot established earlier in *Votes for Women*. The dialogue confirms that Geoffrey and Vida were lovers many years earlier and she became pregnant with his child. Believing his father would not approve of the marriage (and fearing for his inheritance), Geoffrey pressured Vida to have an abortion. Vida had the abortion to her later regret, and broke off the relationship with Geoffrey despite his protests. In Act III, the melodramatic discourse of debt abounds, as Vida demands that he make reparation for his personal debt to one woman through a political act that will benefit all women. At the close of the scene, Geoffrey repents of his past callousness and promises to use his position as MP and future cabinet member to influence the government’s stance on granting the vote to women. Geoffrey seems to acquiesce to Vida by presenting a telegram that announces to the newspapers his supposed new-found convictions in support of women’s suffrage. Thus the closing scene accomplishes both the resolution of the melodramatic fallen woman plot and connects the personal history of Vida and Stonor to the play’s political emphasis on the need for women’s enfranchisement.

However, several aspects of this final scene complicate the seeming resolution of the melodramatic fallen woman plot of Vida and Stonor’s past sexual history. Earlier in Act III, both Vida Levering and Geoffrey Stonor revealed differing motives and approaches to their final interaction; this should lead the audience to a radically different interpretation of their final exchange. For example, in an earlier conversation with Lady John, Vida Levering reveals that she no longer feels any sense of connection to Geoffrey; nor does she harbor any personal pain in relation to their past. Yet she intends

to exploit Geoffrey's guilt by using the melodramatic discourse of personal debt. Vida's ultimate goal is to leverage Geoffrey's influence as a politically powerful public figure in order to gain broader support for women's suffrage. Meanwhile Geoffrey Stonor is also shown to have self-interestedly political, rather than personal, motives, for his final declaration of support for women's suffrage. Before Vida's entrance, Geoffrey (a conservative MP) was informed that his Liberal opponent is gaining ground in the electoral race. It was also revealed that Geoffrey's brother Lord Windlesham feared that "defeat is inevitable" unless Geoffrey "can 'manufacture some political dynamite within the next few hours'" (74). Geoffrey's response is to muse on the political efficacy of granting suffrage to "women the property qualification would bring in", conservative women who—unlike those of the lower classes—have not yet been "inoculated by the Socialist virus" (75). These elements suggest, I argue, that the dialogue of the final scene is not about a resolution of the melodramatic fallen woman plot; nor is it about Geoffrey's genuine conversion to the cause of women's suffrage. The final scene is actually Vida and Geoffrey's battle of political power, where both characters skillfully deploy the language and tropes of melodrama in order to pursue—or protect—their different political interests.¹¹⁶

Consider also that Geoffrey pens the telegram stating his public support for the suffrage bill *before* Vida ever enters the stage and *before* the two enter into their

¹¹⁶ In two of director Harley Granville-Barker's letters to Elizabeth Robins (dated 20 March 1907 and 25 March 1907), Granville-Barker expresses his desire that Robins change the Act III script to show that Stonor risks more of a 'cost' to his political career by writing the pro-suffrage letter. If accepted, this change would have presented Stonor as a more sympathetic character and would have implied a more earnest conversion to the suffrage cause—or at least suggested that Stonor was genuinely swayed by Levering's discourse of 'personal debt'. However Robins' resistance to this change is consistent with my reading of Stonor's self-interested political motivation. (From Collection: MS Robins, E. Recip Author: Granville-Barker, Harley 1907 Feb – April. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. University of Texas at Austin.

emotionally-charged conversation about their previous love affair, Vida's abortion of their child and Geoffrey's 'debt' to her—and therefore to all women—for his mistreatment of her. Thus, the telegram that appears to seal the connection between the melodramatic and realist plots also serves an alternate function in the play: it subverts the apparent resolution of the naturalist and melodramatic fallen woman plot. The stage function of the telegram in the final interchange between Geoffrey and Vida is best understood as the *quiproquo* of the well-made play. The *quiproquo* is a central misunderstanding in which two or more characters interpret a word or situation in different ways, all the time assuming that their interpretations are the same. This conflict of interpretation is made obvious to the spectator, but withheld from the participants and is a key moment upon which the plot hinges.¹¹⁷

Robins' use of the *quiproquo*, however, functioned as a modernist twist on a traditional nineteenth century theatrical construct. Namely, the gap between Stonor and Vida's interpretation of the meaning of the object is exposed to the spectators of the play: a move seemingly designed to assuage Stonor's personal 'guilt' and appease Vida's demand for justice can also be read as rhetorical maneuvering and political posturing on the parts of both Vida and Stonor. The interchange over the telegram is interpreted differently by both parties, maintaining the dramatic function of the *quiproquo*. However, the spectators' access to the multiple meanings of this moment invites a more nuanced and politically-oriented interpretive response from the audience. Specifically, the multiply signifying object of the telegram links the final moment of seeming dramatic resolution to Robins' larger project in *Votes for Women*: an exploration of the role of

¹¹⁷ Stanton, Stephen S. "Introduction: The Well-Made Play and Modern Theatre" in *Camille and Other Plays*.

discourse in not only the construction of ideology, but also the formation of political subjectivity.

Conclusion

As president of the newly formed Women Writers' Suffrage League in 1909, Elizabeth Robins had advocated "the use of the pen" (WS 112) to gain the vote and "to correct the false ideas about women which many writers of the past have fostered" (WS 116). Two years prior, through penning her suffrage drama *Votes for Women*, she had already taken the opportunity to counteract the "false ideas about women" in the plays of the writer with which she was most familiar—Henrik Ibsen.¹¹⁸ Although she appreciated the opportunity to develop her craft afforded by roles such as Hedda Gabler in Ibsen's dramas, Robins had reassessed Ibsen's social position as a champion of first wave feminism. As Robins argued in *Ibsen and the Actress*, "If we had been thinking politically, concerning ourselves about the emancipation of women, we would not have given the Ibsen plays the particular kind of wholehearted, enchanted devotion we did give" (1928: 31).

Even as early as 1893, Robins had broken away from English Ibsenite dramatists' obsession with the female hysteric's 'confession and cure' to produce the early feminist subject Jean Creyke in *Alan's Wife*. Robins' and Bell's insertion of written text (intended to be communicated as 'silent dialogue') indicated a growing awareness, of the private—and incommunicable—'truth' of female experience in a patriarchal system. On the other

¹¹⁸ As Penny Farfan observed, Robins herself wittily signaled her intention to 'rewrite' the Ibsen heroine. In the novel version of *Votes for Women*, which Robins titled *The Convert* (1907), a suffragist character is referred to as "Hilda [Wangel, of *The Master Builder*], harnessed to a purpose." (Robins 253).

hand, Jean Creyke's silent dialogue suggested the impossibility of an audience's authoritative interpretation of motives as read through Jean Creyke's opaque and, ultimately, undecipherable figure.

Robins' later critique of Ibsen's 'extreme individualism' and the dramatic plight of his 'trapped' female characters propelled her to experiment with a dramaturgy that reflected a new, empowered, and politicized female subject as well as the collectivism of the suffrage movement. Nevertheless, Robins also drew upon the dramaturgical structures of melodrama and the well-made play, much as Ibsen had in his earlier psychologically complex depictions of the female individual. Robins remained indebted to Ibsen for her formative experiences teasing out interpretations and performing the nuanced and conflicted characters in his dramas; these practices taught Robins to produce a human subject by and through language. In *Votes for Women*, Robins both foregrounded the suffrage movement's central concern with the political representation of women through the vote and began to experiment further with representing a new kind of female consciousness. This type of subjectivity is not the fixed and unitary subject of Ibsenite drama and psychological realism, but rather is a subject that is explicitly politically constructed.

Votes for Women teased out and interrogated ideas regarding a political subjectivity produced through language and the crowd. To represent a new kind of empowered modernist female subject, Robins incorporated a fascinating mixture of theatrical conventions, blending them into a hybrid form of private and public realisms. In the Act I drawing room scene, Robins utilized the devices of the well-made play to drop clues about protagonist Vida Levering's sexual past. Yet Vida Levering later

frames this in explicitly and self-consciously political terms. Moreover, in Act I, Robins began to stage feminist politics within the drawing room setting. Through Vida's recounting the plight of women on the street, Robins inserted the discourse of the New Woman 'urban reformer'. And through conservative suffragist Mrs. Freddy's hysterical identification with the radical suffrage protestors in the House of Commons, Robins showed that the militant spectacles of the movement were making their way into the imagination—and private spaces—of British citizens. In the radically realistic Act II Trafalgar Square scene, Robins thrust the chaotic crowd and political agitation of a suffrage rally onto the bourgeois space of a West End theatre stage. The authentic suffrage rhetoric employed—taken verbatim as notes from Robins' attendance at a similar rally—established the suffrage activists' understanding of women's plight as 'non subjects' in the current political system. These hyper-realistic speeches also made explicit material changes they demanded to address the subsequent problems for all women, men and children. The urban Crowd of Act II is a modernist figure essential to the formation of 'political subjectivity', as evidenced by Jean Dunbarton's transformation to the cause. Strikingly, Robins placed anti-suffrage voices in the crowd and had the speakers of the suffrage rally incorporate those dissensions into their own arguments. The Crowd functioned as the theatrical construct representing Jean Dunbarton's 'conversion' to the suffrage cause as her body was, literally, incorporated into the mass of bodies on stage.

To the confusion of many of her male contemporaries, Robins not only disrupted the private story of Vida Levering's tragic past and hopeful future with a public rally full of rhetorical arguments for women's suffrage and the transformation of society—she also

later returned to the drawing room to hammer out the ‘personal’ implications of these hoped-for changes. In Act III of *Votes for Women*, the story of Stonor and Vida’s romantic past uneasily collides with their political tête-à-tête around the suffrage question. Robins deployed the well-made play’s device of the *quiproquo* in the closing scene, but she did so in a manner that upends a conventional reading of the plot’s closure: Stonor’s letter represents not a genuine conversion to the suffrage cause, but rather a calculated political maneuver. Similarly, in contrast to Jean Dunbarton’s naïve misunderstanding, Vida Levering is not the fallen woman of melodrama. Vida strategically deploys the melodramatic rhetoric of debt to negotiate with Geoffrey Stonor, but she does so as an active political subject with agency. In her quest to create her theatrical counterpoint to Ibsen’s ‘trapped’ heroines, Robins experimented with an alternate narrative structure and created new theatrical constructs to show how this burgeoning politicized/feminist female consciousness could be forged and revealed. Through the “public and private realisms” of *Votes for Women*, blending the dramaturgical structure of the well-made play with the spectacular aesthetics of the suffrage movement, Robins both posits the formation of a modernist political subjectivity and develops a new hybrid form of agit-prop political theatre.

3. Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players:

British Feminism and International Avant-Garde Performance

Introduction

Theatre director and suffrage activist Edith Craig (1869-1947) enjoyed a varied and prolific career during her nearly sixty years of professional theatre work. Beginning as an actress, Craig also built a costume design business and worked as a stage manager and set designer before making the contributions for which she is best remembered: that of play director, pageant producer and champion for drama education and regional repertory theatre. Craig spearheaded the activist organization the Actress Franchise League (1908-1914), commissioning suffrage propaganda plays and directing productions which were mounted throughout Great Britain in conjunction with meetings and mass spectacles of the suffrage movement.¹¹⁹ As an outgrowth of the Actress Franchise League, Craig founded the subscription theatre society the Pioneer Players (1911 – 1920, 1925), staging more than 150 plays in 10 years.¹²⁰ Craig later advocated for the Little Theatre movement,¹²¹ supported training for amateur dramatists,¹²² and gained further fame for her work directing historical pageants.¹²³

¹¹⁹ For an account of the Actress Franchise League, see “Kisses or Votes: The AFL 1908-10” in Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers, Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, London: Virago, 1981. (Henceforth, *IF*) and for copies of some plays commissioned by Craig and produced by the AFL, see *How the Vote Was Won*, (eds) Dale Spender and Carol Hayman. See also Lisa Tickner’s study *The Spectacle of Women* for a discussion of Craig and the AFL’s role in the mass spectacles of the suffrage movement.

¹²⁰ *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage* by Katharine Cockin is the most extensive study of the material and artistic culture of the Pioneer Players. The Pioneer Players records are part of the Edith Craig Archive held at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum (Smallhythe Place, Tenterden, Kent). I am grateful to Katharine Cockin for her generous assistance in locating items in the Edith Craig Archive. See Katharine Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: the Pioneer Players, 1911-1925*, New York: Palgrave, 2001. (Henceforth, *WAT*).

¹²¹ See Chapter 6: “The Call of the Suburbs: The Little Theatre Movement 1920-28” in Katharine Cockin. *Edith Craig (1869-1947), Dramatic Lives*. Cassell, London: 1998. Henceforth *EC*.

Although they have been largely overlooked by most theatre histories of the period, the Pioneer Players' dramatic experiments during their mature art theatre period (1915-1925) established them as a formidable avant-garde presence within British modernist theatre. This chapter will focus primarily on Craig's innovations in her directing and producing work with the feminist theatre company the Pioneer Players. However, since Craig is a relatively understudied figure, I will introduce key aspects of her biography and historical context. In Section I, I will discuss Edith Craig's family influences, formal education and professional theatre work, in order to understand their impact on her directorial contributions to British modernist theatre. Craig's varied background in the professional theatre—which included acting, dramaturgy, costume design and stage management—shaped her interdisciplinary approach to directing. Close attention will be paid to her collaboration with other theatre artists, her early theorizations of the role of lighting design, and her vision for the role of the modern director. Section II centers on Edith Craig's feminist commitments and activism on behalf of the suffrage movement. Craig's engagement with the suffrage movement took many forms, but she was best known for her key role in the development of mass suffrage spectacles--including pageants, marches and dramas produced by the Actress Franchise League. Craig's organizational gifts—as evidenced in both theatre administration and on behalf of the suffrage campaign--contributed to her success in founding the Pioneer Players theatre society. As the visionary artistic director of the Pioneer Players, Edith Craig drove the

¹²²See Chapter 7: "The Art of Amateur Theatre (1928-47)" in *EC*.

¹²³Craig's influence via her direction of pageants may have influenced modernist culture beyond the direct participants and audiences for these productions. Jane Marcus contends that Edith Craig was the prototype for the character of Miss LaTrobe in Virginia Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts*. See Jane Marcus, "Some Sources for *Between the Acts*", *A Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, Vol. 6, Winter 1977.

society's shift into an experimental 'Art Theatre' period (1915-1925), in which they produced some of the most innovative work produced on the British stage at that time. While Craig's collaborative approach to theatre-making reflected the values of the British suffrage movement, her directing and producing work with the Pioneer Players should be understood as part of—and in conversation with—the explosion of avant-garde theatrical experimentation in Europe.

To that end, I will discuss two experimental plays that Edith Craig directed and produced during the Pioneer Player's Art Theatre period: *Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov (1915) and *Kanawa* by Torahiko Kori (1917). In Section III, my methodology will include both analysis of the plays and attention to historical context and archival materials pertaining to Craig's productions.¹²⁴ Written in vastly different styles and representing an international sensibility—Russian symbolism and Japanese marionette drama (derived from Noh theatre)¹²⁵—these two productions allowed Edith Craig to push the boundaries of her theatrical intelligence. Moreover, both works take up the quintessential avant-garde project of deconstructing the individual. Although her work has been largely ignored or mischaracterized in most British theatre histories, Edith Craig's contemporaries viewed her work as innovative and radical—even surpassing that of her much more famous brother, designer/director/theorist Edward Gordon Craig. Through my close reading of the plays and attention to archival materials pertaining to her productions, I will argue that Edith Craig's directorial work with the Pioneer Players

¹²⁴ For this chapter, I consulted the following archives: the British Library – Manuscript Room and Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection, the Theatre Museum Archive–London, the Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection (Jerwood Library of the Performing Arts, Old Royal Navy College, Greenwich, UK), the Women's Library–London, the UCLA Manuscript Collection, and the Edith Craig Archive at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum (Smallhythe, Kent).

¹²⁵ Noh, a major form of classical Japanese musical drama, has been performed since the 14th century. Many characters are masked, with men playing both male and female roles.

constitutes a significant tributary of avant-garde experimentation within British and European modernism.

I. Biography and Professional Theatre Work

Family Influences

Edith Craig was born in Hertfordshire in 1869 to artistic parents with theatrical ambitions. Her mother, Ellen Terry (1847-1928), was born into a famous theatrical family and began performing on stage alongside her siblings and parents while she was a child. Arguably the most famous Victorian actress, Terry achieved celebrity for her work and commanded an impressive salary.¹²⁶ Craig's father, architect and designer Edward William Godwin (1833-86), theorized the use of historically accurate scenery, staging and costume in theatrical production¹²⁷ (*EC* 14). Godwin and Terry eloped on 10 October 1868 and though they never married, their seven-year relationship produced two children: Edith and her younger brother, Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), who also went on to become a celebrated theatre director, theorist and set designer.¹²⁸

Raised almost exclusively by her talented and successful actress mother, Edith Craig benefitted from an early role model for female professional, artistic and financial success. Ellen Terry's unique status as a theatre artist allowed her to carve out her own career path and make unconventional life choices, both personally and professionally. As the leading lady of Henry Irving's Lyceum Theatre Company, Ellen Terry was renowned

¹²⁶ Notable biographies of Ellen Terry include those by Nina Auerbach, Edward Gordon Craig, Roger Manvell, Joy Melville, Margaret Webster, Christopher St. John and Edith Craig. See also Terry's own autobiographies *The Story of My Life* (1908) and the re-edited version *Ellen Terry's Memoirs* (1933).

¹²⁷ See John Fletcher's *The Faithfull Shepherdess*, performed in 1885 (*EC* 186).

¹²⁸ See Craig's autobiography *Gordon Craig* and his selected and published letters, *Edward Gordon Craig: The Last Eight Years 1958-1966*.

for her performances of Shakespeare's heroines. Terry was widely acknowledged as an expert on Shakespeare's female characters, as demonstrated by the popularity of her lecture series on this subject.¹²⁹ Terry's enthusiastic promotion of Edith Craig's dramatic work—and her financial underwriting of many of Craig's theatrical ventures—proved vital to Craig's freedom in artistic experimentation.¹³⁰ Moreover, as an early advocate for women's suffrage, Ellen Terry significantly shaped Craig's early feminist ideals, which had both political and artistic implications for Craig's life and work. However, according to biographer Joy Melville, the two differed in their approach to suffrage activism: while Craig and St. John supported militant tactics, "Ellen still preferred the approach to be feminine rather than feminist" (223).

Edith Craig's chosen family included her partner, playwright and translator Christopher St. John (pseudonym for Christabel Marshall), with whom she lived from 1899 until her death.¹³¹ Craig and St. John worked together on behalf of the suffrage movement and also collaborated on a number of theatrical and literary projects. In 1916, the artist Clare (Tony) Atwood (1866-1962) joined the Craig/St. John household in London and remained with Craig and St. John until their deaths (in 1947 and 1960, respectively). Chris St. John and Tony Atwood worked in various capacities with Edith Craig's theatre company the Pioneer Players (Atwood primarily in scenic design and set construction).¹³²

¹²⁹ This lecture series was later collected and published. See St. John, Christopher, (ed.), *Ellen Terry: Four Lectures on Shakespeare* (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1932).

¹³⁰ Both Edy and her partner Christopher St. John (Christabel Marshall) lived on Ellen's allowance (Melville 220).

¹³¹ Christopher St. John, 'Close-up,' in Adlard, *Edy* p. 21 St. John, Christopher 'Close-Up', in Eleanor Adlard (ed.), *Edy: Recollections of Edith Craig* (London: Frederick Muller, 1949), p. 21 Henceforth *CU*.

¹³² In Chapter 4, I discuss in greater depth the relationships between Craig, St. John and Atwood—and especially between Craig and St. John.

Formal Education

Edith Craig's formal education also served to solidify her commitment to political and social equality for women and uniquely equipped her for her extensive career in theatre. In 1883, Craig studied as a boarder at Mrs. Cole's School, Earl's Court London and was later educated privately at Dixton Manor Hall, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire by Mrs. Cole's sister, Elizabeth Malleson (*EC* 31-34). Malleson, a retired educator and influential role model for Craig, had been active in the women's suffrage movement since 1854.¹³³ In a newspaper interview, Craig recalled these formative educational experiences: "'When I was at school,' she said, 'I lived in a house of Suffrage workers, and at regular periods the task of organizing Suffrage petitions kept everybody busy....I certainly grew up quite firmly certain that no self-respecting woman could be other than a Suffragist.'¹³⁴

An accomplished musician, Craig studied piano with Alexis Hollander in Berlin from 1887-1890. Although she initially failed her university entrance exams, Craig went on to study piano performance at the Royal Academy of Music and passed the piano exam at Trinity College London in March 1890.¹³⁵ However, at age twenty her musical career was cut short by rheumatoid arthritis, a medical condition Craig suffered from for the rest of her life (*ODNB*). However, Craig drew upon her early musical training in her later career as a director/producer, often arranging music for her productions.

¹³³Elizabeth Malleson was a founding member of the London committee for woman suffrage—an organization of which John Stewart Mill served as president. Malleson also campaigned against contagious diseases act and the movement to provide education for female and working class students (*EC* 32).

¹³⁴'Helpers at the Scottish Exhibition 1. — Miss Edith Craig', *Votes for Women*, 15 April 1910, p. 455, qtd. in *EC* 82.

¹³⁵Cockin, Katherine. "Edith Craig" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography in association with the British Academy: from the earliest times to the year 2000*. Edited by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Henceforth *ODNB*.

A Director Prepares / On the Boards

Edith Craig's on-the-job theatrical training commenced when she became a regular member of Henry Irving's Lyceum Theatre Company in 1890.¹³⁶ She played many small roles in these productions over the next ten years, performing with--and observing the work of--premier actors Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. Craig's acting performances with the Lyceum Company garnered positive critical attention from a number of her contemporaries. Theatre critic and playwright George Bernard Shaw approved of Craig's performance as "a rather sinister maid-servant" in A.W. Pinero's *Bygones* (1895). Harcourt Williams also expressed admiration for Craig's acting work in Pinero's *Bygones*: "To me she projected a strange and intriguing personality across the footlights. Her voice had an individual timbre, not at all like her mother's" (46). The famous Italian actress Eleonora Duse was also impressed with Edith Craig's performance as Niece to the Postmaster in Charles Reade's *The Lyons Mail* (1895). (According to Laurence Tadema's report, "after Craig had said the line, 'That's the man I served with the rum,' Duse got quite excited. 'Who's that girl? She's the best actress in the company'"; Craig's chuckling response was characteristically understated: "I need hardly say mother didn't act in *The Lyons Mail*" (CU 23-24). In Leopold Lewis' immensely popular melodrama *The Bells*, Craig played the daughter Sozel to Henry Irving's celebrated anti-hero Matthias (1895-6). When asked in later years why she had not pursued greater acting roles given her talent, Craig claimed she had the bad fault of

¹³⁶ Craig's onstage debut had actually occurred earlier in *Olivia* at the Court Theatre (1878) when Edith was 9 years old. She also performed the role of Polly Flamborough in *Olivia* at the Grand Theatre, Islington (1890).

being ‘audience-shy’, although she admitted she was ‘rather good’ in small character roles (*CU* 23).

Craig gained further acting experience on tours with Cora Brown-Potter and with the touring company for the Independent Theatre Society in 1897, under the direction of actress Janet Achurch (1864-1916) (famous for her Ibsen performances) and her husband Charles Charrington (1854-1926). George Bernard Shaw had arranged for Craig to perform the roles of Miss Prossy in his play *Candida* and Mrs. Linde in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* on this tour. At this time, the Independent Theatre Society was a vanguard theatre for the production of literary, intellectual, and often controversial naturalist plays.¹³⁷ While Shaw had offered to sit in on rehearsals and help Edy in any way, he believed her to be completely capable—not only in the quality of her acting, but also in her professionalism among the other company members (Melville 165). Although he had once offered the underhanded compliment, that [Craig] was “too clever for her profession” (Collis 55), Shaw assured Ellen Terry of her daughter’s competence in a letter, writing:

She has inherited your social powers and would be worth 20 [pounds] a week in the company even if she didn’t act at all. And she has lots of acting in her, though she has been much neglected technically by an unnatural mother...she is perfectly easy and unguarded and spontaneous in her ways. So you may leave her to

¹³⁷ J.T. Grein’s Independent Theatre Society (1891-7), a private subscription theatre society, specialized in the new foreign and British dramas avoided by commercially-driven West End theatre establishments (Luckhurst *Dramaturgy* 68-69). Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell’s play *Alan’s Wife*, discussed in Chapter 2, was produced at the Independent Theatre in 1893. See also Chothia (1996) for a detailed description of the Independent Theatre.

herself with perfect tranquility: she's the only member of the company that needs no looking after.¹³⁸

However Ellen Terry anxiously reported to Shaw that her friend had said that if [Edy] stayed long with the Independent Theatre Company, "she will get dull, heavy, conceited, frowsy, trollopy, and *dirty!* In fact will look *moth-eaten!* And *no* one will see her act, because nobody goes to their Theatre."¹³⁹ Unsurprisingly, while Ellen Terry admired her daughter's performance in *A Doll's House*, she was disappointed to learn that Craig planned to stay with the Charringtons' touring company instead of rejoining the more established Lyceum Theatre.

In June-July 1898, Edith Craig also performed alongside Stella (Mrs. Patrick) Campbell in one of the first major symbolist productions in late nineteenth-century England: Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas and Mélisande* at the Prince of Wales Theatre (EC 218). Although Craig's role in the production was small, the exposure to this avant-garde production was undoubtedly a useful expansion of her repertoire.¹⁴⁰ In fact, it was the range of acting experiences that refined not only Craig's own skill as an actress, but they also strengthened her ability to direct actors in a variety of performance styles. In her essay "Close Up", Chris St. John observed the ways Craig's background as an actress informed her later directorial work: "When Edy found another vocation as a play-

¹³⁸ Christopher St. John (ed.), *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*. New York: Constable, 1931.

¹³⁹ Christopher St. John (ed.), *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: a correspondence*, qtd. In Melville 164.

¹⁴⁰ *Pelléas and Mélisande* premiered on 17 May 1893 at the Bouffes-Parisiens under the direction of Aurélien Lugné-Poe. In contrast to the realist staging popular in French theatre at the time, Lugné-Poe sought to give the performance a dream-like effect: he used very little lighting on the stage, removed the footlights and placed a gauze veil across the stage (Knapp 67-76). Earlier, in 1895, J.T. Grein had invited Lugné-Poe to the Independent Theatre in London to present a season of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder* and Maeterlinck's symbolist dramas *L'Intruse* and *Pelléas and Mélisande*.

producer, and I watched her at rehearsals, demonstrating on the stage how something she wanted a player to do could best be done, I wondered why anyone who could act as well as that had not met with more success” (24). St. John declared “Edy’s long experience as an actress was of great value to her as a producer. Her suggestions and criticisms at rehearsal carried far more weight with her cast because they knew she knew what she was talking about” (24). In 1898, Craig eventually did return to act with the Lyceum Theatre Company. She also performed with other companies: for example in 1900, Craig reprised her role as Prossy in *Candida* on its London debut for the Stage Society, another vanguard theatre organization (EC 72).

New Theatrical Roles: Directing Studies, Costumes, Masquers, Stage Management

Upon her return to the Lyceum, Craig was afforded opportunities to develop skills and gain exposure to international theatre, which would later help her career as a director. According to St. John’s recollections, “in 1898, when Irving was considering the production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, he sent Edy to Paris at Coquelin’s invitation to make a prompt-book of the play. Night after night she sat in the O.P. corner¹⁴¹ at the Porte St. Martin, taking notes” (CU 24). Craig also studied French stage technique when she joined Sarah Bernhardt’s company as a “super”¹⁴² during one of Bernhardt’s seasons in London (CU 24). Beginning with Irving’s *Robespierre* in April 1899, Craig also designed and constructed costumes for Lyceum productions, which became her predominant theatre work from 1900 to 1906.(EC 218). She subsequently established her

¹⁴¹ The “O.P.”, or “opposite prompt”, corner is an area near the stage where a stage hand manipulated the guide ropes that moved the theatre’s large roller curtain.

¹⁴² A ‘ Super’, or supernumerary, is an extra, walk-on part, who usually speaks no words.

own costumier business, Edith Craig & Co, in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden in 1901 (EC 42). Craig was committed to historical accuracy in every detail of the costuming; Tony Atwood likened Edith Craig's approach to costume design to that of her father, Edward Godwin, who had designed costumes for the production of John Fletcher's pastoral play, *The Faithfull Shepherdess*, in 1885 (EC 42). Craig expounded her views on theatrical costume in articles she published in *The Kensington*¹⁴³ and *Fortnightly Review*¹⁴⁴ (EC 41). Craig's costume design talents proved invaluable in her later directing and producing work with the Actress Franchise League and the Pioneer Players.

In March 1903—along with Y.B. Yeats, Gilbert Murray and Walter Crane—Craig helped to found a short-lived theatre society called The Masquers.¹⁴⁵ The group was formed at a meeting held in Craig's costumier and the offices of the society were run from her flat at 7 Smith Square.¹⁴⁶ The Masquers sought to produce a range of types of performance, including ballets, ceremonies, Greek tragedies, symbolist and poetic drama and translated plays—all of which were meant to convey 'a sentiment of beauty' (EC 74). Yeats hoped that the Masquers would become the 'theatre of beauty' which he theorized.¹⁴⁷ Although she was less well-known than many of the other founders, Craig was a key member in the society.¹⁴⁸ Due to a combination of factors—including financial concerns and committee members' conflicting ideas about the goals of the society—the

¹⁴³ A.C. (Edith Craig), 'Notes on the Costume', *The Kensington*, p. 139; G180 ECD, qtd. in EC 192.

¹⁴⁴ Edward Gordon Craig referred to his sister's *Fortnightly Review* column, qtd. in Auerbach, *Ellen Terry*, p. 307.

¹⁴⁵ Masquers Leaflet in ETMM – ECA.

¹⁴⁶ Ronald Schuchard, 'W.B. Yeats and the London Theatre Societies 1901-1904', *The Review of English Studies*, XXIX, 1978, pp. 415-46, cited in EC 73.

¹⁴⁷ See Wayne K. Chapman, 'Yeats's "Theatre of Beauty" and the Masque Tradition', *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, VII, 1989, pp. 42-56.

¹⁴⁸ Craig's correspondence file shows that she fielded questions from regular members and the Masquers' other founders regarding subscriptions, the opening ceremony and suggestions for performances (EC 74).

Masquers disbanded before producing any performances (*EC* 74-75). Nevertheless, through her work with the Masquers Craig gained useful experience with the inner workings of a subscription-based theatre society: both of Craig's future theatre companies—the Pioneer Players and the Barn Theatre Society—were run on members' subscriptions (*EC* 77).

When Ellen Terry left her position as leading actress of the Lyceum to become a theatre producer in 1903, Edith Craig joined her mother's production team at the Imperial Theatre. Terry's first produced play --Ibsen's *The Vikings of Helgeland*, a tragedy based on Icelandic saga—was recommended by her son Edward Gordon Craig. Production of this historic, epic drama proved to be a family enterprise: Edward Gordon Craig directed and designed the sets, Edith Craig supervised costumes and Ellen Terry played the role of Hiordis, the warrior queen (*EC* 42). This undertaking signaled Terry's first ambitious foray into a modernist project, as she discussed in her autobiography,: “I hope it will be remembered, when I am spoken of after my death as a ‘Victorian’ actress, lacking in enterprise, an actress belonging to the ‘old school’ that I produced a spectacular play of Ibsen's in a manner which possibly anticipated the scenic ideas of the future by a century”.¹⁴⁹ Ellen Terry's 1903 season at the Imperial Theatre also included Christopher St. John's translation (from the Dutch) of Herman Heijerman's *The Good Hope*. Edith Craig also acted in Ibsen's final drama *When We Dead Awaken* (written in 1899) at the Imperial Theatre in 1903; however, that play was not produced by Ellen Terry. Theatre critic Harcourt Williams considered Edith Craig's role as Saart in this production of *The Good Hope* to be “first rate”; Williams also highly regarded Craig's performance as the

¹⁴⁹ *Ellen Terry's Memoirs* Ellen Terry, with preface, notes and additional biographical chapters by Edith Craig and Christopher St John (Victor Gollancz, 1933).

bishop's wife in George Bernard Shaw's *Getting Married* (1908) (47). While the Terry-Craig season at the Imperial Theatre was artistically ambitious and critically acclaimed, it remained commercially unprofitable; for example, the production of *The Vikings* lasted less than a month due to lack of advertising (Melville 186-187).

Moreover, this season proved to be the last theatrical collaboration between Edith and her brother Edward Gordon Craig. After they tried working together at the Imperial, the relationship between Edith and her brother became strained (Collis 58). One possible source for the ensuing tension between Edith and her brother was a brief, failed romance between Edith and Gordon Craig's friend, musician Martin Shaw who composed the music for *The Vikings* (Melville 186). Gordon Craig's journal in 1903 noted that Martin Shaw had proposed to Edy and that Ellen Terry was disturbed by this and wanted Teddy [Edward Gordon Craig] to help break it up. Apparently, Ellen Terry and Gordon Craig didn't believe that Edith and Martin were 'truly' in love (Melville 187). Edith Craig's partner Christopher St. John (Christabel Marshall) was living with Craig during this time and attempted suicide when she realized that Edith was considering accepting Shaw's marriage proposal. Edith Craig and Martin Shaw eventually broke off their relationship. According to Melville, this situation caused a rift between Edith and Edward Gordon Craig (189). Immediately after this, Gordon Craig went to live and work abroad while Edith went onto work as stage manager for Ellen Terry's tours in the English provinces and America. During the 1903 regional tour of plays Ellen Terry ran to make up the financial losses of the Imperial Theatre, Edith Craig gained valuable stage management skills.

Becoming a Director: Vision for the ‘Total Work of Art’, Lighting Design, Collaboration

However, it was during Terry’s 1907 tour of America that Edith Craig’s job description significantly changed. Whereas previously she had served as an unofficial assistant, adviser and costume designer, Craig was officially designated stage manager/director for the touring production of Herman Heijerman’s *The Good Hope*. Craig’s article in *Munsey’s Magazine* entitled ‘Producing a Play’ described this new professional role.¹⁵⁰ In it, Craig refers to journalists’ claims for her: “the revolutionary role of first female stage-manger, pioneer of a new departure in theatre, a new profession for women” (EC 78). The journalists’ description of Craig as the first female stage manager was not exactly correct: by the late-nineteenth century, several leading actresses owned and/or stage managed theatres.¹⁵¹ However, as Katharine Cockin has argued, the differences between Craig’s self-description in the *Munsey’s Magazine* article—and the editor’s choice of terms for describing Craig’s work in the article’s title—reflects a shift in the roles of theatre personnel in the early twentieth century. Cockin writes:

the slippage of terms in the article reflects on the changing role which Craig is claiming, even helping to develop, in the theatre. The title of the article refers to ‘producing’ a play. The subtitle cites Craig as ‘the “first woman stage-manager on record,”’ while Craig in the first sentence, refers to her work on the American tour as ‘stage-director’. The relationships between these different roles – producer, stage-manger, director – were becoming differentiated. Craig later claimed to loathe the term ‘producer’, more commonly choosing the title ‘stage

¹⁵⁰ Edith Craig, ‘Producing a Play’, *Munsey’s Magazine*, June 1907; Theatre Museum, cited in EC 78.

¹⁵¹ For example, Madame Vestris managed the Olympic Theatre as early as 1831 (see Fletcher 9-33)

director'. In this article she notes that whereas the stage-manager often acts merely as a prompter, the role she has in mind is a person 'who has control of the stage' (*EC* 79).

Edith Craig's definition of her new role in the theatre—as one “who has control of the stage”—parallels the types of positions held by male directors, such as Max Reinhardt and Konstantin Stanislavsky, in European and British theatres in the early twentieth century (*EC* 79). Like many of her male counterparts, Craig had a strong technical background, which fed into her overall aesthetic as a director. In her article “Producing a Play”, Craig criticized “the mania for lighting a scene like a saloon bar”; instead, her lighting approach was characterized by “subdued footlights”, a technique she developed “as a means of helping the acting”.¹⁵² Craig's priority was to represent both the “pictorial effect” and “dramatic situation: since, she argued, every play had “certain pictorial moments” which needed to be enhanced.¹⁵³ For Herman Heijerman's *The Good Hope*, Craig used somber lighting with shadowy corners for the cottage interior (where the women talk about their lives in the fishing village), but lit the actors subtly to suggest lamplight (*EC* 78). Craig also emphasized the ways that costume, like lighting, could affect both an actor's performance and the overall aesthetic of the play. She believed that inappropriate costume could also interfere with the actor's performance and “kill his efforts” if the colours “are working against him”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Edith Craig, ‘Producing a Play’, *Munsey's Magazine*, June 1907; Theatre Museum, qtd., in *EC* 78-79.

¹⁵³ Edith Craig, ‘Producing a Play’, *Munsey's Magazine*, June 1907; Theatre Museum, qtd. in *EC* 78.

¹⁵⁴ Craig referred to “a high authority on archaeological costumes in London” who paid for expensive purple fabric only to discover that on stage, the final effect was a dull brown (‘Producing a Play’, *Munsey's Magazine*, cited in *EC* 78-79).

In the *Munsey's Magazine* article, Craig also explained her approach to directing, which in many ways reflects broader trends in the development for modernist drama. In particular, she emphasized the importance of a stage director's clear, controlling vision and attention to detail. For example, Craig stressed the significance of "appropriate stage setting, costume, music and the pictorial use of small, representative groups of 'supers' rather than the distracting, counter-productive crowds of extras".¹⁵⁵ Craig's extensive training and professional background in set design, costume design and construction, musical arrangement and stage blocking would have equipped her to attend to the details of the various parts in her interpretation of the whole drama. Yet her emphasis on these interdisciplinary elements as central to the work of art can also be understood as part of a broader trend away from the actor-centered, text-based emphasis of naturalist drama and toward a director-driven approach more typical of modernist theatre.

While Edith Craig's article stressed the importance of the director's overall vision in the production of a play, Craig also valued the contributions of different theatre artists to the overall work. She praised director Henry Irving's democratic demands that each individual involved in a production both think and contribute to the play; Irving is contrasted to Edward Gordon Craig, who Craig described as "a root and branch reformer" intent on controlling even the minds of the actors.¹⁵⁶ Like Irving—and in contrast to Edward Gordon Craig—Edith Craig valued the role of actors as artists and collaborators in the interpretation of the play, claiming that "the play is in the hands of the actors".¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Craig, 'Producing a Play', *Munsey's Magazine*., cited in EC 78-79.

¹⁵⁶ Craig, 'Producing a Play', *Munsey's Magazine*., cited in EC 78-79

¹⁵⁷ Craig, 'Producing a Play', *Munsey's Magazine*, qtd., in EC 78-79.

On a related note, Edith Craig wanted to avoid mindless routines in which theatre staff knew what switches to throw for stage effects (to create a sunset, for example), but were unable to improvise if there was a mechanical failure (*EC* 78). Craig believed that theatre designers and technicians should also be fully engaged in the work, since “everyone ought to contribute a little bit of life to the performance”.¹⁵⁸ Clearly, Edith Craig endorsed a more democratic, collaborative approach to working with actors and other theatre artists than her famous brother, Edward Gordon Craig. As will be discussed in the following section, this collaborative approach to theatre-making reflected the values of the women’s suffrage movement, to which Craig had long been committed.

II. From Suffrage Spectacle to Art Theatre

Suffrage Activism

From 1903-1908, Edith Craig continued to remain active in multiple theatrical endeavors throughout Britain—from costume design to stage management, acting to scenic design.¹⁵⁹ Also, following her experience as a stage director on tour in America in 1907, Craig also sought to expand her repertoire as a director. In 1908 she directed Christopher St. John’s play *On the East Side* for a charity event at the Royal Court Theatre in July 1908; Craig also directed St. John’s play *The Wilson Trial* at the Royal Court Theatre on 14 December 1909 (*EC* 84). Yet however busy her professional theatre career, by 1909 Edith Craig’s energies were also largely directed toward the struggle for women’s suffrage. Craig’s activism at the height of the movement took many forms.

¹⁵⁸ Craig, ‘Producing a Play’, *Munsey’s Magazine*., cited in *EC* 78-79

¹⁵⁹ See Appendix A for a timeline of Edith Craig’s theatrical work as an actress, costume designer, stage manager, scenic designer, and stage director/producer.

She sold suffrage newspapers in the street and actively promoted “the Cause” in conversations she struck up there. In an interview, Craig said of these her experiences agitation for suffrage:

I love it. But I’m always getting moved on. You see, I generally sell the paper outside the Eustace Miles Restaurant, and I offer it verbally to every soul that passes. If they refuse, I say something to them. Most of them reply, others come up, and we collect a little crowd until I’m told to let the people into the restaurant, and move on. Then I begin all over again.¹⁶⁰

Craig also volunteered her home to house the International Suffrage Shop—a feminist publisher, bookseller, and cultural center—when Sime Seruya first it opened in 1910.¹⁶¹

Actively involved in at least eight pro-suffrage groups, Craig served as a unique connecting figure between the smaller organizations working for the vote. Regarding her involvement in these pro-suffrage groups, Craig stated “When one considers all the cause means, one cannot belong to too many”.¹⁶² Among these, Craig was a member of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the Women’s Freedom League (WFL), many of whose members were arrested at demonstrations and jailed in Holloway Prison. Craig and her partner St. John opened their Bedford Street flat as a ‘safe house’ for suffragettes who were hiding from the police or recently released from prison (Collis 58). Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Honorary Treasurer of the WSPU, visited Craig and St.

¹⁶⁰ *Votes for Women*, 15 April 1910, p. 455. (qtd. in *EC* 86)

¹⁶¹ The Suffrage Shop facilitated printing and bookbinding; it also housed a lending library and hosted lectures and meetings, including the famous debate between Cicely Hamilton and G.K. Chesterton and the W. T. Stead Memorial Meeting (*EC* 87).

¹⁶² See interviews in the *Vote*, 12 March 1910, and *Votes for Women*, 15 April 1910; Eleanor Adlard (ed.), *Edy: Recollections of Edith Craig*, with a biographical note by Christopher St John, Frederick Muller, London, 1949; Ellen Terry, *The Story of my Life*, Hutchinson, London [undated]; Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, Virago, London, 1981, qtd. in Tickner 224.

John in 1909, four months after her release from prison (*EC* 81). Christopher St. John was reportedly more militant in some of her tactics than Edith Craig: St. John heckled politicians, chalked ‘Votes for Women’ on the pavement and was arrested for seizing a police horse’s bridle (Collis 58). In her keynote speech at the 1937 Glasgow Equal Citizenship Dinner, Edith Craig expressed regret that she herself had not been imprisoned.¹⁶³ Yet Craig’s statements of regret should not minimize Craig’s many expressions of commitment to the Cause. In particular, Edith Craig left her mark with impressive contributions to the theatrical and spectacular performances of the suffrage movement.

Suffrage Spectacles: Plays, Pageants and Mass Marches

In *The Spectacle of Women*, Lisa Tickner argued that the women’s suffrage movement in England utilized and drew upon innovative work of artists in a previously unprecedented manner.¹⁶⁴ As playwright and activist Cicely Hamilton wrote, the suffrage movement “was the first political agitation to organize the arts in its aid”.¹⁶⁵ Tickner’s study explores the ways in which the suffrage movement marshaled the arts—visual, literary, and dramatic—to political ends. Craig was particularly active in two arts-related suffrage groups: the Suffrage Atelier and the Actress Franchise League. The Suffrage Atelier was a group of artists whose goals included “training in the arts and

¹⁶³ Craig was keynote speaker at the Glasgow Equal Citizenship Dinner, commemorating the Representation of the People Act 1918, held on 6 February 1937. Edith Craig quoted in *Glasgow Herald*, 8 February 1937. See Ann Escott, ‘True Valour’, in Kevin McCarra and Hamish Whyte (eds) *A Glasgow Collection: Essays in Honour of Joe Fisher*, Glasgow: Glasgow Libraries, 1990, cited in *EC* 106.

¹⁶⁴ Lisa Tickner. *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign* (1907-1914). London: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

¹⁶⁵ Cicely Hamilton, *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909). Foreword to the 1948 reprint for The Suffragette Fellowship, 7.

crafts of effective picture propaganda for the Suffrage” and “forwarding the women’s movement by supplying pictorial Advertisements, Banners and Decorations”.¹⁶⁶ With the Suffrage Atelier, Craig designed a number of banners and decorative schemes for the processions of 1910 (Tickner 24). The Actress Franchise League produced pro-suffrage dramas at key rallies throughout Great Britain (Hollidge 2). On behalf of the AFL, Craig both directed and commissioned suffrage plays, getting many published and making them available for production.¹⁶⁷ Craig unabashedly promoted the propagandistic influence of suffrage dramas:

I do think plays have done such a lot for the Suffrage. They get hold of naïve frivolous people who would die sooner than go in cold blood to meetings. But they see the plays, and get interested, and then we can rope them in for meetings. All Suffrage writers ought to write Suffrage plays as hard as they can. It’s a great work.¹⁶⁸

As a result of Craig’s efforts, both new and established women playwrights gained opportunities to see their new work published and performed on stage. During this period, Edith Craig also forged strong working relationships with other women theatre artists who were actively involved in the suffrage movement, including actress-director-playwright Elizabeth Robins¹⁶⁹ and playwright Cicely Hamilton.

Edith Craig directed Cicely Hamilton’s immensely popular and influential suffrage propaganda piece *A Pageant of Great Women*. This sensational production,

¹⁶⁶ The *Common Cause*, 24 June 1909, 144, qtd. in Tickner 20.

¹⁶⁷ Craig owned performance rights to three of the Women Writers’ Suffrage League (WWSL) published plays: *A Pageant of Great Women*, *How the Vote Was Won* and *Lady Geraldine’s Speech* (EC 89).

¹⁶⁸ *Votes for Women*, 15 April 1910, 455, qtd. in EC 90.

¹⁶⁹ Elizabeth Robins play *Votes for Women*, which was discussed in Chapter 2, had been produced on the West End, directed by Harley Granville Barker in April 1907. Robins served as president of the Actress Franchise League; Craig directed many of the AFL’s productions.

referred to as the *Pageant* in suffrage circles, was performed throughout Britain between 1909 and 1911.¹⁷⁰ *A Pageant of Great Woman* was often produced along with other pro-suffrage plays as part of enormous political rallies.¹⁷¹ Hamilton and Craig considered this production a collaborative creative project on behalf of the suffrage campaign.¹⁷² Rather than adopting the realist style typical of suffrage dramas, Hamilton and Craig conceptualized this production as a pageant. Cicely Hamilton developed the *Pageant* from several tableaux of famous women which Edith Craig had organized for the WFL¹⁷³ (Tickner 171). Edith Craig's tableaux, in turn, were inspired by a cartoon image by the artist W.H. Margetson depicting Woman, Justice and Prejudice.¹⁷⁴

In most cases, professional actresses performed the main speaking roles of three allegorical figures: Justice, Prejudice and Woman. Craig usually recruited activists from local suffrage organizations to fill in the roles of the "great women" from history, these figures were grouped into six categories: the learned women, the artists, the saintly women, the heroic women, the rulers, and—the largest group—the warriors (*CHW* 527). Craig herself regularly performed the role of artist Rosa Bonheur and her mother Ellen Terry played the only speaking part among the 'great women', that of eighteenth-century actress Nance Oldfield (Hollidge 70). Due to the required cast size of fifty-three to

¹⁷⁰ For detailed historical background on the development, adaptation and performances of this play—and its relation to local suffrage activism, including public spectacle, metropolitan activity and sensational acts of militant law-breaking—see Katherine Cockin's article "Cicely Hamilton's Warriors: dramatic reinventions of militancy in the British women's suffrage movement" *Women's History Review*, Volume 14, Numbers 3 & 4, 2005. Henceforth *CHW*.

¹⁷¹ For more details regarding the production, see *EC* 94-107.

¹⁷² In the published text, Cicely Hamilton's dedication states: 'To Edith Craig whose ideas these lines were written to illustrate' (*EC* 95).

¹⁷³ Women's Freedom League's Green, White and Gold Fair at the Caxton Hall, Westminster on 15-17 April 1909 (Cited in *CHW* 530).

¹⁷⁴ Margetson's cartoon was printed on postcards and sold by the Women Writers' Suffrage League at the Scala Theatre production of *A Pageant of Great Women* (*CHW* 531).

ninety great women, The *Pageant* generally appeared only in large halls or open outdoor venues and it reached several thousand spectators at a time all over Britain.¹⁷⁵ To compile the backgrounds for the many characters of the *Pageant*, suffrage activists completed what amounted to a major research project in women's history (*CHW* 527).¹⁷⁶ As Katharine Cockin has convincingly argued the *Pageant of Great Women* promoted the creation of women's histories as much as it did women's suffrage (*CHW* 527).

As a long-time supporter of feminist causes and a well-trained theatre professional, Edith Craig also proved a key player in the production of large-scale spectacles of mass marches for the Cause. Between 1907 and 1913, suffragists organized an impressive and unprecedented sequence of public demonstrations in an attempt to prove to the country that a large majority of women were interested in gaining the vote (Tickner 56). In so doing, Lisa Tickner has argued, "the suffragists developed a new kind of political spectacle in which they dramatized the cause by means of costume, narrative, embroidery, performance, and all the developing skills of public entertainment at their disposal" (56). Edith Craig's varied talents and theatrical work experiences made her "just the sort of person, with exactly the kind of skills, that the suffrage movement needed to turn a political argument into a carefully orchestrated spectacle" (Tickner 24). In addition to her work designing banners for marches with the Suffrage Atelier, Craig lent her theatrical training to the cause by designing the West procession with Laurence Housman for the WSPU demonstration of 23 July 1910. Since this march followed

¹⁷⁵ Also see Cockin's discussion of productions of the *Pageant* in *EC* 94-107.

¹⁷⁶ Cockin argues that practices of women's history-making were embedded in the cultural practices of the women's suffrage movement (*CHW* 533). She cites, as just one example among many, the fact that a review of Edgcumbe Staley's book on famous women of Florence was printed alongside an advertisement for *A Pageant of Great Women* in the WSPU newspaper *Votes for Women* (*Votes for Women*, 19 August 1910, 765).

shortly after the June 18 procession, Craig and Housman strove for originality; they drew up an elaborate and entirely new “Roman” scheme, focused on the twin themes of Victory and Justice. Between 12,000 and 20,000 participants processed in two groups (East and West), converging on Hyde Park to the strains of the Marseillaise at half past five. There were 150 speakers at four platforms and thousands of onlookers crowded between (Tickner 118-119).¹⁷⁷ The significance of these suffrage spectacles to the changing public consciousness cannot be overemphasized.¹⁷⁸

Edith Craig’s training and multiple professional roles theatre—from costume and set design to acting, stage management and a ‘sense of spectacle’ from her years at the Lyceum—proved useful to the mass suffrage campaign. Craig’s unique blend of artistic and organizational skills benefitted the AFL pageants she directed (on a massive scale) as well as her organization of mass marches. At the same time, Craig’s involvement in the suffrage movement can be said to have significantly shaped the future direction of her theatrical career. Craig’s activities on behalf of the women’s suffrage campaign provided the impetus—and the opportunity—to fully transition to the professional role of director/producer for which she became best known.

¹⁷⁷ For more details on this and other suffrage demonstrations, see Lisa Tickner’s excellent book. *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

¹⁷⁸ For example, the *Sunday Times* reported on the spectacular effect and massive numbers of banners during the NUWSS Demonstration of 13 June 1908: “There seemed to be thousands of them, every fourth or fifth woman carrying something in the shape of an ensign”. Each contingent carried its own device, and embroidered tributes to queens, scientists, artists, writers, musicians, saints and suffrage pioneers were distributed the length and breadth of the march. But what impressed the onlookers and the newspapers more, as Tickner has pointed out, was the fact that the women carried themselves (86).

Introducing the Pioneer Players

Despite the fact that a number of male playwrights were sympathetic to the concerns of first wave feminism, there remained a dearth of quality writing for the stage regarding women's issues. Craig's partner Christopher St. John articulated her frustration about this situation in an interview in the suffrage newspaper *Votes for Women*:

There is not one play on the London stage at the present time which takes any account of women except on the level of housekeeping machines or bridge players—the actual or potential property of some man valuable or worthless as the case may be. It is strange to go out of the world, where women are fighting for freedom and showing unparalleled courage when most despised and rejected, into the theatre where the dramatist appears unaffected by this new Renaissance.¹⁷⁹

As mentioned earlier, Edith Craig had begun to address this problem by commissioning plays for the Actress Franchise League. However, Edith Craig addressed not only the problem of sexism in the theatre, but also the broader problem of the stagnant British theatre establishment, by founding a new theatre company: the Pioneer Players (1911-1920, 1925).

The Pioneer Players began as an outgrowth of Edith Craig's work with the Actress Franchise League, in that their early repertoire featured plays that engaged directly or obliquely with suffrage or other aspects of 'the woman question'.¹⁸⁰ For example, their first performance—a triple bill—included Christopher St. John's play *The*

¹⁷⁹ *Votes for Women* 12 November 1909, qtd. in Melville 214.

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Webster, *The Same Only Different: Five Generations of a Great Theatre Family*, London: Gollancz, 1969, 249.

First Actress (1911), which explored the theatrical legacy of actresses on the British stage from the eighteenth century to the twentieth; the play's argument that women play female roles on the public stage (as opposed to the earlier practices of casting "boy-actress") paralleled the argument for women's enfranchisement. As playwright Christopher St. John intended, the drama also showcased Edith Craig's talents as a costumier as well as a producer (Melville 215).¹⁸¹ However the Pioneer Players was never intended to produce solely suffrage dramas. Rather, they were formed "to produce plays dealing with all kinds of movements of interest at the moment" and "to assist social, political, and other Societies by providing them with plays as a means of raising funds."¹⁸² Remarkably, the Pioneer Players were one of only two theatre societies based in London to survive through World War I (*EC* 108).

On one hand, as Katharine Cockin has argued, the Pioneer Players has been undervalued as a mere footnote in theatre histories of the period; alternately, it has been misrepresented in a number of ways: as only concerned with 'suffrage' drama, as a 'women's' theatre, and as 'owned' by Edith Craig (*EC* 109). As early as its first year, the Pioneer Players refuted the assumption that their only purpose was suffrage propaganda.¹⁸³ The early dramas produced by the Pioneer Players, while written in a

¹⁸¹ I analyze *The First Actress* in depth in Chapter 4 on Christopher St. John.

¹⁸² Pioneer Players Annual Reports, 1911-12, 3, [PPAR] ECD, qtd. in *EC* 108.

¹⁸³ "It has more than once been suggested in the Press that we are a Society formed for the purpose of suffragist propaganda only; but this suggestion is a misleading one. It is obviously quite impossible nowadays to produce thoughtful plays written by thoughtful people who do not bear some traces of the influence of the feminist movement – an influence which no modern writer, however much he may wish it, can entirely escape. But those responsible for the selection of the plays that we have performed have never had either the wish or the intention of narrowing their choice to works dealing with one phase only of modern thought. All we ask of a play is that it shall be interesting; and if many of those who have sent us plays have found inspiration in various aspects of the feminist movement, we must conclude that it is because the feminist movement is, in itself, not without dramatic interest" Pioneer Players Reports, 1911, Ellen Terry Memorial Museum, Smallhythe Place.

variety of styles, were predominantly naturalistic “plays of ideas” that took up pressing social questions, similar to those produced by the Independent Theatre and the Stage Society.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, the representation of the Pioneer Players as a ‘women’s theatre’ is inaccurate: while there was a consistent majority of women at all levels of the societies membership, men were also present as members at all levels (*EC* 111). Finally, while Edith Craig founded the Pioneer Players, and acted as the company’s Director, she did not “own” the society or exercise complete control over its activities. Craig worked with an Executive Committee, which included Ellen Terry (President)¹⁸⁵, Christopher St. John, Gabrielle Enthoven¹⁸⁶ and Olive Terry¹⁸⁷ (*EC* 110). Moreover Craig did not unilaterally choose plays and cast lists; much of this work was done by casting committees (*EC* 110).

The Pioneer Players was structured as a theatre subscription society, in which members’ annual subscriptions formed the group’s income (*EC* 109). This form of organization was used by a number of European avant-garde theatres, including Marya Chéliga’s Théâtre Féministe¹⁸⁸ and André Antoine’s Théâtre-Libre in Paris and the Mummerys, the Independent Theatre and the Stage Society in London (*EC* 109). One of the benefits of this system is that subscription performances were considered private and not public; therefore, the Pioneer Players were not required to submit the plays they

¹⁸⁴ For example, early on the Pioneer Players produced Margaret Nevinston’s *In the Workhouse* (May 1911) and Herman Heijermans’s *The Good Hope* (Nov 1912).

¹⁸⁵ Ellen Terry remained more than a figurehead as President, performing in several of the society’s plays; for example, Terry played the Abbess in Hrotsvit’s *Paphnutius*. Terry also performed her well-publicized lecture on ‘Shakespeare’s Triumphant Women’ for the Pioneer Players (*EC* 110).

¹⁸⁶ Gabrielle Enthoven (1868-1950) was a dramatist, theatre historian and close friend of Craig and St. John. Enthoven donated her collection of theatrical memorabilia to the V & A in 1924, now held by the Theatre Museum where the research room is named in her memory. In 1948 she was the first president of the Society for Theatre Research (*EC* 204).

¹⁸⁷ Olive Terry was Edith Craig’s cousin.

¹⁸⁸ Elaine Aston *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, London: Routledge, 1995, 31.

intended to produce to the Lord Chamberlain's office for approval.¹⁸⁹ By exploiting this loophole, the Pioneer Players were free to experiment with radical works, such as Evreinov's *The Theatre of the Soul*.¹⁹⁰

Other details of the Pioneer Players organizational structure reveal Edith Craig's commitment to honoring other theatre professionals, collaborating with others on her dramatic productions and recruiting new talent. The Pioneer Players' document 'Notes to Authors' explained their terms for accepting plays and working with authors and translators; these guidelines protected the interests of authors and the financial liability of the Pioneer Players (*EC* 110)¹⁹¹. Moreover, the Casting Committee invited the playwright's suggestions for casting and the play producer was required to carry out the author's wishes in the production (*EC* 110). While Craig was respectful in her dealings with playwrights, the Pioneer Players was primarily an actors' society: actors were provided with special low subscription rates and a number of up-and-coming as well as well-known actors wanted to work with Craig on Pioneer Players productions. Sybil Thorndike considered her performance as Synge in Craig's 1919 production of Paul Claudel's *The Hostage* to be her finest work (79). New actors applied in hope of being cast in any role in upcoming productions.¹⁹² A frequent theatergoer, Craig used every opportunity to scout for new acting talent: her theatre programs were frequently annotated with a code of crosses and dashes next to cast members' names, sometimes

¹⁸⁹ The Lord Chamberlain functioned as a government censor and could prohibit plays from performance or require that they be revised before they were granted a license for public performance.

¹⁹⁰ Yet despite their ability to fly under the radar (as a private subscription society) the Pioneer Players took the lead in various censorship debates of the time. This was the case with the cancelled Alhambra Theatre production of *Theatre of the Soul*, discussed later in Chapter 4 on Christopher St. John.

¹⁹¹ C67 ECD .

¹⁹² Unpublished letter from Basil Rathbone to Edith Craig, 13 November 1919; 3.551 ECCF, cited in *EC* 116.

explicitly marked with ‘good’ or ‘very good’ (*EC* 116-117).¹⁹³ The Pioneer Players consisted primarily of theatre artists, writers and political activists (*EC* 116). Virginia Woolf, George Bernard Shaw and Sybil Thorndike are a few of the individuals who attended, performed in, or reviewed Craig’s plays with the Pioneer Players. Also Rebecca West at age twenty published a critical review of Craig’s production of Florence Edgar Hobson’s play *A Modern Crusader*.¹⁹⁴ While membership was small, disproportionate numbers of influential theater critics, actors, artists and writers participated, attended and reviewed Pioneer Player productions.

Art Theatre Stage

When World War I broke out, Craig had just finished directing the production for which the Pioneer Players is best known to theatre historians: Christopher St. John’s translation of the medieval play *Paphnutius*, written by the first woman dramatist, a German nun named Hrotsvit (Roswitha).¹⁹⁵ World War I brought significant financial challenges to London’s theatres as well as increased pressures to pander to nationalistic and occasionally xenophobic attitudes (*EC* 117-118). While the Stage Society (the Pioneer Players’ main competitor) deliberately suspended its production of new and

¹⁹³ When Craig attended the Academy of Dramatic Art performance on 3 April 1914, she noticed actors Colette O’Niel, J. Leslie Frith, Miles Malleon and Fabia Drake, all of whom later became prominent performers for the Pioneer Players. ADA, 3 April 1914; D146 ECD, cited in *EC* 117.

¹⁹⁴ Rebecca West ‘A Modern Crusader’, *The Freewoman*, 23 May 1912, 8-10.

¹⁹⁵ The Pioneer Players’ production of *Paphnutius* was “historic in an international context”, “attracted many reviewers” and received acclaim (*EC* 115). St. John’s translation of *Paphnutius* was published in *The Plays of Roswitha* (1923). In Chapter 4, I discuss this production and St. John’s role (Roswitha’s) recovery.

controversial plays in favor of inoffensive comedies and revivals, the Pioneer Players remained committed to addressing sensitive contemporary issues.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, in December 1915 the Pioneer Players made a subtle but significant change in their agenda from their original goal to produce the ‘play of ideas’. In the play program for the December 1915 production of Evreinov’s *The Theatre of the Soul*, the Pioneer Players announced their intention to establish an “art theatre” in London (WAT 166). The Pioneer Players advertisement in the play program for this production welcomes new members and presents the society’s aims in different terms from those given in its annual reports (WAT 179):

In their choice of plays the Society have always tried to avoid limiting their field of action to any particular school, and have refrained from proclaiming that revolutionary aesthetic formulae, as such, have any value. What they ask of any play which they produce is some dramatic quality, and they attempt to give it a *mise-en-scène* which shall create a dramatic atmosphere by means of colour, form and lighting.¹⁹⁷

The Pioneer Players’ announcement of their transition to an ‘art theatre’ prominently features the modern term ‘*mise-en-scène*’; the introduction of this concept suggests Edith Craig’s familiarity with the work of Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), a Swiss architect and scenic lighting and design theorist. Appia believed that the director and the designer were primarily responsible for achieving artistic unity in a theatrical work; this should be achieved by integrating light, space and the human form to create a unified *mise-en-scène*’ (Brockett 1994). Appia considered light as the primary element which fused

¹⁹⁶ SSAR 1916-17,10, cited in EC 118.

¹⁹⁷ Play programme, 3 December 1915, Shaftesbury Theatre; ECD.

together all aspects of a production; he consistently attempted to unify musical and movement elements of the text and score to the more mystical and symbolic aspects of light.¹⁹⁸ Appia's theories were published in the late nineteenth century ("La mise en scène du théâtre Wagnerien" Paris, 1891 and "Musique et mise en scène", 1897) and continued to have tremendous influence throughout the twentieth century. Edith Craig's commitment to experiment with "colour, form and lighting" to producing *mise en scene* throughout a variety of stage productions places her within the stream of modernist avant-garde theatre experimentation.

Edith Craig intended for the Pioneer Players to become England's principle art theatre, despite the fact that the society lacked a permanent theatre and comprised only a couple of hundred members (*EC* 122). To that end, the Pioneer Players developed their repertoire of international works—even throughout World War I. Craig's company translated and performed plays from a range of cultures, including those of France, Belgium, Russia, Holland, Spain, the United States and Japan (*EC* 119). Edith Craig's company produced many of these plays the first time on the English stage. This diverse selection of plays allowed the Pioneer Players to represent the variety of experiments initiated abroad, including works now associated with various international avant-garde movements, including symbolism, expressionism and futurism. The activities of the Pioneer Players belie characterizations of British theatre as cut off from European performative experiments. In fact, Edith Craig was well-informed about developments in

¹⁹⁸ Appia was one of the first designers to understand the potential of stage lighting to do more than merely illuminate actors and painted scenery. For Appia and for his productions, the *mise en scene* and the totality or unity of the performance experience was primary; he believed that these elements drove movement and initiated action more than anything else (Johnston 1972).

many European theatres due to her reading, travel and personal contacts.¹⁹⁹

Edith Craig and the International Avant-Garde

Edith Craig shared many of the values, commitments and deals expressed by key theorists and directors at other European art theatres as well as other avant-garde movements. One persistent feature among the varied avant-garde performance groups of the early twentieth century was a commitment to formal experimentation beyond the conventional limits of naturalist drama. Playwrights and artists associated with the symbolist, futurist and early dada movements incorporated a range of genres and performance styles into their theatrical works. Particularly during the Pioneer Players' 'art theatre' period, Edith Craig's directorial work shared elements with a number of the following movements. Beginning in the 1890s, French symbolist dramatists introduced an anti-realist performance style which entailed a cold, distant, dream-like style of acting with monotonous tones and choppy movements (Gordon 9). Russian symbolists of the early twentieth century—such as novelist, poet and literary critic Andrey Bely (1880-1934), painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944) and pianist-composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)—promoted a synthetic fusion of all arts (music, poetry,

¹⁹⁹ Craig's papers include programs from the Moscow Art Theatre's Play Festival, she traveled to Paris and worked with European theatre artists in London (including Maeterlinck and Bernhardt). Torahiko Kori (the Japanese playwright discussed in the next section) sent reports to Craig of theatre news abroad: "On the whole, however, German theatres are disappointing when one thinks of their pre-war days, although they still have some dignified theatres alone among European countries, & dramas as far as writers are concerned only exist there. For the present Hauptmann & his literary plays are enjoying a sort of revival, but the main current of the movement of the younger generation is unmistakably classic in its severest sense (not that kind of dilettante lyricism of 20 years ago a la Hofmannsthal) in curious conformity with other art movements in Paris & elsewhere" (Unpublished letter from Torahiko Kori to Edith Craig, 16 June [?]; 3.411, ECCF)

dancing, colours and scents) on the stage.²⁰⁰ Italian Futurists performances included experiments with sound effects and radical disruptions of the fourth wall of naturalism, with the aim to create a shared “common experience” uniting actors and spectators in an “immediate sensation of a new and dynamic reality” (Bergaus 8). Early dada cabaret performances incorporated a mix of elements and genres: music, poetry, dance numbers, cabaret singing, recitations from Voltaire and, of course, shouting (Gordon 11-19).²⁰¹

Likewise, director Edith Craig was interested in exploring a range of theatrical styles and developing innovative staging techniques and her correspondences, writings and stage aesthetic all suggest that she was aware of many of these developments throughout Europe and Russia. Craig’s productions of French symbolist plays featured the dream-like, denaturalized performance style associated with that movement. She directed two of Russian symbolist Evreinov’s monodrama works and incorporated sound design with innovative noise effects into her production of *The Theatre of the Soul* (which I discuss in the next section). The numerous translated plays performed by the Pioneer Players offered Edith Craig opportunities to experiment with an eclectic mixture of genres and performance styles; these included verse form, atmospheric lighting, dance, music, minimalistic props and stage sets (WAT 171). Edith Craig also challenged the traditional relationship between the audience and performers, the subject and object of performance. She critiqued fourth wall naturalism and argued for new theatres spaces

²⁰⁰ Key Russian symbolist theatre theorists/practitioners and performances included Nikolai Evreinov’s monodrama works and theories (1905) (discussed later in this chapter), Meyerhold’s production of Blok’s *Puppet Show* (1906), Constantin Stanislavski’s staging of Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Blue Bird* at the Moscow Art Theatre (1908), and Stanislavski and Edward Gordon Craig’s 1911-1912 production of *Hamlet* (which experimented with symbolist monodrama).

²⁰¹ The earliest dada movements corresponded historically to Craig’s work with the Pioneer Players: Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, 1916-17 and Berlin Dada (1919-20). However, though possibly influenced by the innovations and theorizations of the more informal and flexible futurist and Dadaist performances, Craig primarily directed full theatrical productions (albeit in a range of styles).

which might remove the divide between performer and audience. Craig stated “The audience should be an integral part of the play, and feel that it is in it, and not merely looking on”.²⁰² This desire should be understood in light of her explicitly propagandistic theatre work with the AFL, in which play audiences were not only patrons, but also active political subjects—and potential “converts” to the suffrage cause—with a stake in the suffrage questions represented both onstage and in the public sphere.²⁰³

The plays directed by Craig during the Pioneer Player’s Art Theatre period also shared thematic concerns with those produced by European avant-garde and art theatres. Like many modernist avant-garde groups throughout Europe, the Pioneer Players were interested in plays and performance styles that deconstructed the bourgeois subject. As Cockin has noted, “by the 1920s the [Pioneer Players] society was, for Virginia Woolf, associated with the exploration of subjectivity” (WAT 181). However, as a theatre society with an interest in women’s enfranchisement and social change, the Pioneer Players had built-in ideological constraints and political commitments that prevented the extreme devolution into nihilism which characterized certain avant-garde groups. For example, unlike the Zurich Dada performers at the Cabaret Voltaire, Craig and her company members were not responding to the horrors of the front lines of World War I, nor were they launching an all-out “war on art”. The more aggressive and provocative

²⁰² ‘Troubles of the Theatre’, *Liverpool Post*, 1 March 1935; ECD

²⁰³ In some respects, Craig’s unabashed promotion of plays as propaganda and her commitment to reframing the audience-performer relationship in theatre (with all its attendant political implications) can be understood as a kind of feminist precursor to Bertolt Brecht’s ideas.

dada techniques—such as reciting from the nihilistic tract ‘Final Dissolution’,²⁰⁴ heckling audience members,²⁰⁵ or pretending to urinate on a portrait painting²⁰⁶—fit Dada’s “vision of absolute negativity, of complete and willful derision against a world destroying itself” (Gordon 14). Craig’s productions often explored the nature of subjectivity (even deconstructing it), incorporated a range of performance elements (music, poetry, dance, etc.) and offered a harsh critique of oppressive social structures; yet the Pioneer Players dramas maintained a relatively coherent view of the individual and hopefulness about the power of theatre to spark new ideas and social change.

As the Pioneer Players entered into their mature ‘art theatre’ period, Edith Craig was uniquely equipped to provide create the “*mise-en-scène* which shall create a dramatic atmosphere by means of colour, form and lighting”²⁰⁷. Drawing upon a broad range of theatrical training and experience—most notably in the areas of set and lighting design, acting and stage choreography/blocking—Craig provided vital, innovative artistic direction in this new stage of the Pioneer Player’s work. As Mary Watson has argued “whereas the most conspicuous feature of the Stage Society’s performances had been the acting, the great strength of the Pioneer Players’ work lay in the overall presentation of the play, in the production” (134).²⁰⁸ Craig’s distinctive directorial style in her work with

²⁰⁴ Cited in Hans Richter’s account of Walter Serner’s closing action during the Zurich Dadaists final performance at the Cabaret Voltaire on 9 April 1919. (Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*).

²⁰⁵ As with German medical student Richard Huelsenbeck’s performance at the first Berlin dada performance, an art and poetry evening at the Graphisches Kabinett on 8 February 1918. Huelsenbeck shouted out that the Dadas were in favor of war and the last one was not bloody enough. After a veteran with a wooden leg stood up and left (and the audience subsequently responded with applause), Huelsenbeck shouted more vociferously, also attacking the Cubists and Futurists (Gordon 17).

²⁰⁶ At the same first performance of Berlin dada (8 February 1918) at the Graphisches Kabinett, painter George Grosz recited his works (rhymed insults), clutched his groin, violently paced before some Expressionist paintings before feigning urination on stage (Gordon 17).

²⁰⁷ Play programme, 3 December 1915, Shaftesbury Theatre; ECD, qtd. in WAT 179.

²⁰⁸ Cited in WAT 171.

the Pioneer Players was noted by her contemporaries, as well as the few theatre historians who have considered her oeuvre.

In this sense, Craig and the Pioneer Players' shift into the art theatre period should be understood in relationship to modernist theatre's trend to privilege the director's vision or "whole work" over that of the playwright or actors.²⁰⁹ As mentioned previously, Edith Craig took a democratic approach to collaboration with other theatre artists, which was rooted, among other things, in her involvement in the collaborative suffrage movement. Nevertheless, this value for the contributions of actors and other professional colleagues was always held in tension with Craig's own emphasis on her responsibility to oversee the design of the stage sets, costumes, music and blocking/choreography to ensure a coherent vision for the complete production.²¹⁰ Craig's promotion of these interdisciplinary elements as central to the work of art can also be understood as part of a broader trend away from the actor-centered, text-based emphasis of naturalist drama and toward a director-driven, materialist type of modernist theatre. The diverse collection of plays and performances which fall under the broad heading of modern drama follow a general trend away from an emphasis on language/text and toward the physical and embodied 'event' aspects of performance. For this reason, the role of theatre director gained prominence in the early twentieth century and vanguard art theatres in Britain and Europe were increasingly known for the director's aesthetic (Max Reinhold in Germany, Constantine Stanislavsky with the Moscow Art Theatre, etc.). Edith Craig's career during the Pioneer Player's art theatre stage fits in with this broader trend. Moreover,

²⁰⁹ Modern theatre directors Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia also emphasized this approach (WAT 171).

²¹⁰ Craig, 'Producing a Play', *Munsey's Magazine*., cited in EC 78-79.

many of the plays produced by the Pioneer Players were translated into English by company members for production only; many of these plays were never distributed through publication. For these reasons, understanding Edith Craig's work as director—shaping the overall experience of the performed plays—is crucial to understanding/accessing the meanings of the plays produced by the Pioneer Players for English audiences.

III Modernist Performance Analysis

Methodology

While understanding Craig's directorial work during the art theatre stage of the Pioneer Players is essential to grasping the meaning of the performed dramatic texts they produced, certain challenges are inherent to the process of discussing dramas as modernist texts. First, since many of the plays were never published, audiences of many Pioneer Player productions directed by Edith Craig only experienced those dramas as performed texts. Moreover, many of the plays—including the two I discuss later in this chapter—moved into experimental forms of theatre which emphasized certain physical aspects of performance only hinted at in the dramatic texts. These two factors put additional pressure on the performance itself—and in particular, Edith Craig's interpretation as director—in communicating the meaning of the plays to audiences. However, the ephemeral nature of performance makes it particularly challenging to talk about what British audiences may have seen and the various ways in which they might have received the plays.

New critical scholarship—influenced by the dictates of prototypical modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—engages in a kind of textual analysis that seeks to separate out the work from outside cultural influences. This is simply not possible with an art form—such as drama—which is not reproducible to the degree that published poetry or fiction might be. Two other related issues are also a challenge to understanding these plays as modernist texts: the limitations of physical/material culture of performance (including the limitations of the stage space) and the fact that theatre as a communal/social form resists the individual artist identity favored in modernist studies.²¹¹ For these reasons, my methodology entails both analysis of the two play texts and production history details. In terms of production history, my discussions will include archival materials such as the advertising history, performance reviews, promptbooks, director's notes, and correspondence concerning the productions. As much as possible, I will highlight details that demonstrate Edith Craig's interpretive contribution to the meaning of the plays.

With the Pioneer Players, Edith Craig directed over 150 plays in 10 years ranging from naturalist problem plays to dramas attuned to avant-garde movements to the poetic religious dramas of Paul Claudel. Of these, I have chosen to analyze two productions from the Pioneer Player's art theatre phase: Nikolai Evreinov's *Theatre of the Soul* (1915) and Torahiko Kori's *Kanawa* (1917). These two very different productions share several distinctive traits which, I argue, helps to locate Edith Craig's directorial work as a tributary of avant-garde theatrical experimentation in Britain. First, both are international

²¹¹ Christopher Innes discusses the challenges of discussion drama/performance within the nexus of modernist studies in his chapter "Modernism in Drama" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Ed by Michael Levenson).

works produced at the height of WWI and post-WWI nationalism, reflecting strikingly progressive politics on the part of Craig and the Pioneer Players. Craig's direction of these—and other international avant-garde works—flies in the face of accounts which mischaracterize the work of Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players as primarily suffrage propaganda or women's theatre.²¹² Second, as a Russian symbolist drama and a Japanese marionette play, these two works exemplify director Edith Craig's commitment to push the boundaries of theatrical experimentation—in very different styles. Thematically, both plays take up the quintessential avant-garde project of exploring subjectivity and deconstructing the concept of the “individual”—a topic of great interest to modernist artists and feminist activist alike. Both plays were directed for the first time in England by Edith Craig. These playwrights had great respect for Craig and continued working relationships with her; Craig went on to direct Evreinov's *A Merry Death* in 1908 and Kori's *The Toils of Yoshimoto* in 1922.

The Theatre of the Soul: Russian Symbolism on the English Stage

Edith Craig's innovative production of Nikolai Evreinov's *The Theatre of the Soul* (March 1915—written 1913) marked the beginning of the Pioneer Player's art theatre period (1915-1925). Craig's London-based theatre company signaled its intention to engage with international, avant-garde movements by choosing to produce the work of Nikolai Evreinov, a Russian symbolist dramatist. On behalf of the Pioneer Players, Edith Craig's partner Christopher St. John—along with Marie Potapenko²¹³—first translated

²¹² See Holledge (1981), Spender and Hayman (1985), Gardner (1985), Wolf (1989) and Stowell (1992).

²¹³ Marie Potapenko was the model for Anton Chekhov's Irina Arkadin in *The Seagull*; Ronald Hingley, *A Life of Chekhov* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 192-5, cited in EC 206.

Theatre of the Soul from Russian into English.²¹⁴ Nikolai Nikolayevich Evreinov (1879-1953) was a producer, dramatist and theatre theorist. His work reflected the philosophical influence of Bergson, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and incorporated commedia dell'arte and symbolist aesthetics.²¹⁵ Nikolai Evreinov's career paralleled Edith Craig's in several respects. Evreinov trained in music at the Moscow Conservatory (with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov) and applied his composition skills to his theatre work (Golub 354-55). Also like Craig, Evreinov directed medieval plays and was a prolific producer, staging over one hundred plays at St. Petersburg's Parody Theatre (False Mirror Theatre). Edith Craig's production of *Theatre of the Soul* was the first Evreinov play to be performed on a British stage.

Like many modernist works, *The Theatre of the Soul* is concerned both thematically and formally with an exploration of the nature of human subjectivity. A monodrama, the play theatricalizes the psychic and physiological processes of its male protagonist as he struggles with the decision of whether or not to leave his wife (the mother of his children) for his mistress, a dancer with whom he is in love.²¹⁶ The forces at work in the male protagonist's divided psyche are his Rational self (informed by social propriety and moral absolutes) and his Emotional self (characterized by romantic ideals and his sexual drives). These two selves are portrayed by two separate onstage

²¹⁴ St. John and Potapenko's English translation of Evreinov's *Theatre of the Soul* was published by Henderson's, the bookseller and publisher, which identified its publications with missiles, advertising itself as 'the bomb shop'.

²¹⁵ Today, Evreinov is best known for his spectacular production of *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920), a recreation of the October Revolution on its three-year anniversary. The mass spectacle form took the pre-revolutionary Symbolist utopias of "ritual theatre" and recast their 'people' as the proletariat (Golub 1998:354-355).

²¹⁶ In his 1909 work *Introduction to Monodrama*, Evreinov theorized that the future of theatre lied with monodrama, "a dramatic performance that strives to convey to the spectator a protagonist's frame of mind. At any given moment, the spectator should hear, see and feel what the hears, sees and feels. The task of the monodramatist is thus to turn the spectator into an 'imagined' character" (Cody and Sprinchorn 919).

characters, underscoring the fundamental split between these aspects of the human subject. Since the emotional and rational selves' have different perceptions of the two women in their lives, different actresses portray these four distinct versions of the female characters of Wife and Mistress.

The English title given to Evreinov's play by translators Christopher St. John and Marie Potapenko—*The Theatre of the Soul*—might initially suggest that the action of the drama—the theatricalized interplay between the rational self and the emotional self—is what constitutes the soul of man. However, the drama's cast list includes a separate character related to the psyche of the protagonist: a third male character called 'the Soul', is shown visibly sleeping on stage throughout most of the drama. After the protagonist commits suicide, the Soul rouses in the final moments of the production and boards a train for "Everyman Town". Thus, in an ironic twist, the titular figure of the Soul remains completely passive through most of the play. The play's original title in Russian—*The Soul*—suggests either greater significance for this sleeping figure—or, more likely, an ironic homage to this distinctly *unspiritual* vision of human nature..

Theatre of the Soul sets forth a materialist view of the human subject which mingles scientific/psychological ideas, social criticism and a pervasive nihilistic philosophy/ideology. Specifically, the play draws upon early twentieth century psychological ideas about the split subject, social theory concerning relativistic notions of morality and a nihilistic understanding of human will.²¹⁷ Evreinov's text and Craig's direction employ a range of experimental techniques and theatrical constructs to illustrate this materialist view of the human subject. The drama's playful attempt to deconstruct

²¹⁷ Even though *Theatre of the Soul* was written prior to WWI, these ideas regarding the human condition would have resonated with notions of shattered psyches in response to the traumas of WWI

the bourgeois individual begins with the “prologue”—a pseudo-scientific psychology lecture delivered by a character called “the Professor”—which precedes the monodrama. The opening stage directions locate the Professor’s lecture in the prologue in a self-consciously theatrical space: “Before the curtain. A blackboard. Chalk. The Professor enters from the wings, stops before the blackboard, and after having bowed to the audience, takes his chalk and begins his demonstration” (1). This setting recalls the parallels between the theatrical stage and the performative—and presumably authoritative—space of the scientific lecture site. However, given that the play is an exploration of the subjectivity of one man on the verge of a breakdown, the staging of this pre-show lecture in front of the curtain emphasizes the visible aspects of human nature. In contrast, the later action takes place behind the curtain—the space there signifying the ‘interior’ truth of the human condition.

The Professor directly addresses the theatre audience in an ironic lecture, breaking the fourth wall of naturalism in a metatheatrical moment.²¹⁸ The scientifically-minded Professor claims he is “agreeably surprised” that the drama about to be presented “is a genuinely scientific work, in every respect abreast with the latest developments in psychophysiology” (1). The Professor asserts that “the researchers of Wundt, Freud, Theophile Ribot and others have proved in the most conclusive way that the human soul is not indivisible but on the contrary is composed of several selves [sic], the natures of which are different” (1). Thus, the Professor provides a seemingly enthusiastic endorsement of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century “psycho-physiological” project.

²¹⁸ This self-consciously metatheatrical moment is a typical construct of modernist dramatists ranging from Pirandello to Brecht, and including the pageants discussed in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

However the trope of psychophysiology invoked in the Prologue has two key—and yet contrasting—functions within the play. First, and most importantly, the Professor’s psychophysiological description of the “not indivisible”—and in fact, sharply divided—human subject provides the basic conceptual structure of the drama. This idea of the internally-conflicted human subject is represented in the monodrama through a range of experimental theatrical techniques. For example, the monodrama occurs inside the protagonist’s body/mind and the action/conflict occurs within a span of eighteen seconds²¹⁹; this defamiliarization of location and time is established through a minimalist stage set and shadowy lighting. Also, different actors play different parts of the protagonist, as well as the concepts of other characters held by the protagonists (such as different views of his Wife and Mistress). The conflicts that occur between the characters on stage—including conflicts represented through physical action/fights—represent the idea that rational thought and emotional impulses vie for power over any person’s actions. In addition, the failed connection between the psychology and physiology of a divided human subject is represented through a broken nervous system; the jangling sound of percussion instruments signifies the activity of a conflicted nervous system, which eventually fails the protagonist of the play.²²⁰ Thus, the formal experimentation of this dramatic production all centers on exploring—via new theatrical conventions—this understanding of human subjectivity as divided.

Second, the prologue establishes the play’s ironic tone. On one hand, the Professor’s use of a scientific paradigm to test the validity of the play’s action invites the

²¹⁹ Another version of the play says within a span of half a second .

²²⁰ Cockin compares this to the futurists’ interest in noise (WAT 180). See Russolo in *The Art of Noises* manifesto (1913).

audience to assume an analytical mode of engaging with the performance about to begin in the monodrama portion of the piece. His allusion to the scientific authority figures--Wundt, Freud, and Theophile Ribot were all respected psycho-physiologists of the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—seemingly adds credibility to this scientific, rational approach to interpreting the play. Yet at the same time, the Professor's positivistic confidence regarding psychology's "conclusive" understanding of the human soul registers as a bit over the top. The give-away is the Professor's claims for the ethical or moral (or emotional) benefits of applied science: "Science does not confine itself to explaining things. *It also offers us consolation*" (2 – *italics mine*). The bizarre and comical stage action which later ensues in the monodrama portion of the play comically undermines the Professor's claims that scientific understanding of the human subject offers either control or "consolation". The antics of the onstage characters slyly belie the rational schema set forth in the Prologue, providing a skeptical and ironic upending of the psycho-scientific commonplaces upon which the conceptual framework of the play relies.

As the monodrama portion of the play begins, the audience is introduced to the three versions of the man's soul or psyche: the Rational self, the Emotional self and the sleeping, voiceless figure we later learn is the eternal Soul.²²¹ Costuming is significant, as the three actors are meant to look similar, but have different hairstyles, clothing and affects to emphasize their uniqueness and roles in the psyche of the man.²²² The bodily

²²¹ In the playscript, the "rational self" is denoted as M1, the "emotional self" is denoted as M2 and the "eternal soul" is denoted as M3.

²²² From the stage directions: "On the scene, that is to say on the Diaphragm, the three entities, who bear a close resemblance to each other, are discovered. All three are dressed in black, but their costumes differ. M1 wears a frock-coat. M2 an artist's blouse and a red tie. M3 a well worn travelling dress. The other differences between the three entities are indicated as follows: M1 is a person who wears spectacles and has a quiet, sober manner. His hair is slightly gray and carefully brushed. His lips are thin. M2 has a very youthful manner. His gestures and movements are quick, lively and a little exaggerated. His hair is untidy,

aspects of the man's being are represented by a glowing, pulsating heart at the back of the stage and set pieces which represent nerves that flow from the heart into the lower stage area. As the conflict between the Rational and Emotional entities escalates, both characters "pass their hands over the nerves" on the set; each time the nerves are touched a low jingling sound is heard (4). It is clear from the two characters' reactions that their shared nerves are set on edge—expressing the protagonists' psychophysiological distress. The play's sensitivity to the importance of the nervous system—and the potential damage done to nerves through psychological trauma—may well have resonated with English audiences concerned about male hysteria, the shell shock encountered by men on the front lines of World War I. This anxiety about the protagonist's nervous system breakdown is one more way in which the concept of an ordered, unified self is disrupted in the play.

The battles that occur within the protagonist's psyche between the Rational and Emotional selves result in an impotence of action—neither self is able to effectively communicate with the body in order to take action. This is demonstrated through the theatrical device of onstage telephones that are meant to communicate the "will" or intent of one of the selves to the man's body. In an attempt to calm their shattered nerves, the Emotional and Rational selves grab the phone from one another shouting into the mouthpiece, demanding alternately Brandy or Valerian (5).²²³ However neither character succeeds in getting the body to retrieve what the protagonist demands. These

his lips are full and red. M3 wears a black mask. He slumbers in the foreground, his bag under his arm, in the attitude of a traveler, worn-out by fatigue" (3).

²²³ Valerian is an herbal remedy for anxiety and insomnia which was often prescribed for WWI soldiers suffering from "battle shock".

phones consistently fail to work, suggesting a failure of human will to effect action. This degraded view of human power—demonstrated by the breakdown of the protagonist’s internal communication device—ultimately results in the man’s suicide towards the end of the play.

In the dramatic closing moments of the play, the actions of the divided protagonist are split between the different parts of the self on stage and visual and sonic effects are heightened. The Emotional self “hurls himself” at the telephone shouting instructions to his body to take a revolver out of his right hand pocket and fire between the fourth and fifth rib. As the dialogue and stage directions note,

M2:Quickly, oh, more quickly ! It will not hurt, believe me, not much. . . .

Fire between the fourth and fifth rib. . . . What ? You are afraid ? There is nothing to be afraid of. It will be all over in a moment. Quick. . . .

(There is a short pause, during which M3 [The Soul] wakes up abruptly and throws an uneasy glance round him. A loud report like a cannon shot is heard. The sound echoes through the vault of the soul. A great hole opens in the diaphragm from which pour out ribbons of blood. Darkness half hides the scene. M2 struggling convulsively falls under the heart drowned in the streamers of red ribbon. The heart has stopped beating. The lung has ceased to respire. A pause. M3 trembles and stretches himself wearily. A Porter carrying a lighted lantern enters.)

Edith Craig as Avant-Garde Director

Edith Craig's selection of Evreinov's *Theatre of the Soul* was fitting for the first production of the Pioneer Player's self-declared art theatre focus. In the representation of a divided modern consciousness—embematized by the protagonist's split into two selves as well as by his final mental breakdown and suicide—Craig's production brought one of the central concerns of the avant-garde to British audiences. Craig also had the opportunity to experiment with a fascinating range of theatrical techniques by which this modern subjectivity is explored. The experimental theatrical conventions of *Theatre of the Soul* provided Craig the opportunity to exercise her many talents: casting, costuming and directing the performers who played the various 'selves', blocking and choreographing the scenes, designing sound and minimalist sets that maximized multi-level staging and creating innovative lighting plots to enhance the visual effect of the whole.

Edith Craig's process in producing *Theatre of the Soul* exemplifies the tension between Craig's feminist-inspired commitment to artistic collaboration and her embrace of the visionary modernist director role, prevalent in European art theatres of the time. As with many of her other productions, Craig assembled a stellar group of avant-garde artists and performers to collaborate with her on the production of *Theatre of the Soul*. The program cover for the December 1915 production of the play was designed by Pamela Coleman Smith, a symbolist artist noted for her experiments with synaesthesia, or the interpretation of music in painting.²²⁴ American artist George Wolfe Plank also began his tenure with the Pioneer Players in the 1916 performance of *Theatre of the Soul*

²²⁴ Smith, who had worked with Craig since the turn of the century, was a member of the Pioneer Players executive council from 1915-1918 and also designed some costumes for the society (WAT 177-178).

(WAT 178).²²⁵ In an ironic twist, Craig cast two famously independent women--Ethel Levey²²⁶ (1881-1995) and Margaret Morris²²⁷ —to play the roles of the objectified female characters.

Yet despite collaboration with these significant and strong-minded theatre artists and performers, Edith Craig exerted firm directorial control over the ‘total work of art’ of *Theatre of the Soul*. Craig’s directorial control over the Pioneer Players’ production of *Theatre of the Soul* is evidenced by archival rehearsal materials found in the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum. The actors who played various characters in this production only had scripts with the lines and stage directions for their own individual character (and the line cue immediately preceding their lines).²²⁸ Edith Craig’s director promptbook copy, however, had not only all of the dialogue but also the lighting, staging, blocking and even musical cues for all of the characters. Clearly, Craig had primary control over the stage action and interactions between characters, text and design elements (lighting, sound, and sets).

In directing *Theatre of the Soul*, Edith Craig also exercised her considerable skill and innovation in the areas of lighting, set design and staging. This monodrama, like many other modernist avant-garde works, is less literary than text-based naturalist dramas. Instead, the play derives its meaning as much from the innovative lighting, sound and set design as from the dialogue and actor performances; it is a ‘total’ work of

²²⁵ George Wolfe Plank (1883-1965), best known for his art deco cover illustrations for Vogue, designed costumes, sets and programs for numerous Edith Craig productions.

²²⁶ Ethel Levey (1881-1955) was an American born actress successful in music halls and theatres in England in the Continent. She was also the first wife of American composer George M. Cohen.

²²⁷ Margaret Morris (1891-1980) had her own theatre in London, which was used on one occasion for the Pioneer Players. Morris published several books on the system of dancing and notation of dance movement that she had developed (*EC* 206).

²²⁸ This resembles the pre-Ibsen theatrical style of Henry Irving at the Lyceum, as well as other Victorian theatre productions, where roles were given on “sides” to individual actors.

art. Craig utilized her skills in lighting design to create an abstracted and anti-naturalist stage setting. According to a description provided by St. John:

In the production of the play Miss Edith Craig used a queer & fascinating machinery, of the simplest kind, by which little was seen of the three entities & the soul beyond their faces appearing at different levels of darkness. The heart was represented by a glowing red space which appeared to pulsate owing to an effect of light. The concepts of the women were seen in the foreground and were brilliantly lighted – The whole effect was thrilling and beautiful, and helped enormously to create a dramatic atmosphere (*CU* 7-8).

While the effect of Craig's lighting was indeed "thrilling", "beautiful" and atmospheric, as St. John points out, Craig's lighting design also had a significant interpretive function. The fact that the 'concepts' of the women were foregrounded and brilliantly lighted would help to clarify distinctions between four versions of two characters in this complex and unusual scenario.²²⁹ The darkness which enshrouded the three entities (the Rational, Emotional and Soul of the self) subtly underscored the shadowy, mysterious and half-hidden nature of the protagonist's subjectivity, in keeping with the depiction of the human psyche presented the play.

"Banned Play"

As with many avant-garde theatrical productions, Edith Craig's London performances of *Theatre of the Soul* were perceived, received--and eventually promoted--

²²⁹ The Rational self has an exalted concept of the wife and debased view of the mistress/dancer; the Emotional self has a negative view of the wife and an idealized view of the mistress/dancer. Consequently four separate actresses play the concepts of the wife and mistress.

as “radical”. Christopher St. John’s preface to *Theatre of the Soul* an act of “practical censorship,” in which Alhambra Theatre manager Andre Charcot (1882-1956) pulled the intended November 18, 1915 Pioneer Players production at the last minute.²³⁰ Yet the Pioneer Players strategically emphasized its status as a banned play when advertising their next performance of *Theatre of the Soul*. Craig’s company employed an oppositional marketing approach which—like those of the contemporary futurists and Dadaists—celebrated and promoted their standing as a radical group. For example, several posters included in the Pioneer Players archive advertise the play as “The Play that was stopped at the Alhambra” and “STOPPED PLAY”; another flyer states “The program will include THE PIONEER PLAYERS in that much discussed play by N. Evreinoff THE THEATRE OF THE SOUL”. Similarly, when Henderson’s published the edition of the play translated by Christopher St. John and Marie Potapenko, it was sold in an envelope printed with the statement: “The play that was banned at the Alhambra”. Edith Craig’s theatre company exploited the play’s “banned” status to promote the production (and the Pioneer Players) *and* to push boundaries in contemporary debates about theatre censorship.

Edith Craig’s March 8 production of *The Theatre of the Soul* received heated, but respectful, reviews from critics. As St. John’s introduction to the play explains:

It was received with indisputable enthusiasm by an audience fairly representative of the best elements in that mysterious entity “the Public,” and provoked the critics to express both admiration and censure with more energy than they usually

²³⁰ ETMM: Christopher St. John’s introduction to *Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov; documents, copies of letters and press cuttings related to this controversy. In chapter 4, I discuss St. John’s response to this incident at length and explore St. John’s role in contemporary debates about stage censorship.

display. To Mr. William Archer it seemed “extremely original,” to Mr. E.F. Bruce “a weird clever piece,” to another critic “poor & puerile and pretentious” (4).

The intensity and hostility of reactions no doubt stemmed to the unusual themes and staging techniques of the play. Elements of *Theatre of the Soul* have been likened to aspects of expressionist²³¹ and futurist drama. According to Katherine Cockin, the defamiliarizing use of time in the play (the entire action is compressed into eighteen seconds) resembles futurist *synthesi* (or synthetic theatre)²³² and other futurist features include the violence of the characters appearing as puppets or machines, the use of discordant sound effects, the anomalous treatment of time and space (WAT 180). In any case, by directing this historic production of Evreinov’s *Theatre of the Soul*, Craig began to ally herself with questions and formal experiments associated with a range of European avant-garde movements.

Introducing Kori to British Audiences

Edith Craig’s historic production of the Japanese marionette play *Kanawa: The Incantation* by Torahiko Kori on December 16, 1917 proved to be another significant contribution to British modernist theatre. In it, Craig directed the work of the first modern dramatist of Japan to be produced outside the country with Western actors.²³³

After his breakout debut at age twenty, Kori Torahiko (1890-1924) was recognized as a

²³¹ Cockin labels *Theatre of the Soul* an expressionist play (EC 119). However in Russia, Evreinov was predominantly associated with the symbolist movement.

²³² The manifesto *Futurist Synthetic Theatre* (1915) describes *synthesi* as performances which “deliberately consisted of brief, ‘one idea’ performances” (Goldberg 26).

²³³ Unpublished letter from Torahiko Kori to Edith Craig, 19 December, 1917; 3.405, ECCF, cited in Chiba 431-432.

“precocious young talent” among fellow Japanese intellectuals and writers . Fascinated by European drama, Kori left for Germany in August 1913 and remained until the outbreak of WWI when he fled to England (Chiba 431). Kori died at the height of his career, when he was only thirty four years old, in a sanitarium in Switzerland in October 1924 (Chiba 431).²³⁴ Kori’s conceptualized *Kanawa: the Incantation* as the second play in a planned trilogy on the theme of woman’s love-revenge (the first being *Dojoji*); however, Kori’s *Kanawa: The Incantation* was an adaption of the Noh drama *Kanawa* (Chiba 438). Noh is a major form of classical Japanese musical drama that has been performed since the 14th century. In Noh drama, many characters are masked, with men playing both male and female roles. The repertoire is normally limited to a specific set of historical plays. Fenellosa, the first western translator of Noh plays, described the form in terms that correspond to Edith Craig’s modernist ‘total work of art’ aesthetic: “All elements – costume, motions, verse and music – unite to produce a single clarified impression...elevated to the plane of universality by the intensity and purity of treatment” (279-80).²³⁵ At Edith Craig’s request, Kori translated *Kanawa: the Incantation* into English for performance by the Pioneer Players.

Edith Craig’s 1917 production of Kori’s play came on the heels of the legendary Noh experiments in London in May or June of 1915. In fact, Torahiko Kori performed as the first chanter in the famous Noh demonstrations, although today more is known about the two other young Japanese men he performed with, Kumé Tamijiro and Ito Michio

²³⁴ For more on Kori’s career and future collaborations with Edith Craig, see Yoko Chiba, “Kori Torahiko and Edith Craig: A Japanese Playwright in London and Toronto,” *Comparative Drama*, Vol 30, Winter 1996-97, Number 4.

²³⁵ Ezra Pound, “Fenellosa on the Noh,” *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, New York: New Directions, 1953, 279-80, qtd. in Innes 135.

(Chiba 434). Ezra Pound reportedly discovered Japanese dancer Ito Michio in the Café Royal and encouraged him to perform in the Noh style. (Ito, a Western-style modern dancer with no formal training in Noh, had become popular in London following a recent two-week stint headlining at the Coliseum (Chiba 434-435).) Kumé Tamijiro, the painter who performed as the second chanter in the Noh demonstration, retained closer ties with Pound after this event. However, of the three, Torahiko Kori was the most conversant with the Noh form. From childhood, Kori had been meticulously trained in Noh chanting and, to a lesser degree, dancing (Chiba 434). Kori's chanting impressed Yeats, if not Pound, as profoundly as Ito's dancing; moreover, this demonstration inspired Yeats' first Noh-influenced play *At the Hawks Well* (1916) and had considerable impact on the course of Western drama and modernist literature (Chiba 434-435).²³⁶

Edith Craig's production of *Kanawa: The Incantation* was therefore a timely and significant performance of Japanese theatre on the British stage. Craig took up several artistic challenges in directing Kori's complicated and unusual play. One challenge was to introduce English audiences to the unfamiliar culture and performance styles of Japan. To that end, Craig commissioned Kori to write a prologue to his English version of *Kanawa*. Craig also cast Kori in the role of the "oriental poet" who delivers the prologue speech. According to the *Times* reviewer, Kori—who wore a black mantle and *cothurnus*²³⁷--spoke "in admirable English" (Chiba 440-441). Also, in directing *Kanawa: The Incantation*, Craig took on a drama which contained an unusual blend of styles reflecting Kori's many influences. In addition to Noh theatre, Kori was deeply interested

²³⁶ In the early twentieth century, modernist writers—in particular Yeats and Pound—transposed the "consciously archaic style" of Japanese Noh to create a "radical break with tradition" that they hoped would revitalize European theatre (Innes 1999:135).

²³⁷ Cothurnus -- a high, thick-soled boots or buskins worn by actors in ancient Greek and Roman tragedies

in modernist European drama in a range of styles, including romanticism, symbolism, aestheticism and decadence. Kori was influenced by European dramatists Oscar Wilde, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Arthur Schnitzler (Chiba 435-436). *Kanawa: The Incantation* combined the simplified performance style of Noh drama with the symbolist language and *fin de siècle* aestheticism associated with Wildean decadence. *Kanawa: The Incantation* was originally conceived of as a marionette play. The adamantly anti-naturalist playwright Kori had long been intrigued by Edward Gordon Craig's revolutionary theories of theatre—including his theorization of the Uber-Marionette. In fact, Kori had translated Gordon Craig's work into Japanese before departing for Europe.²³⁸ For his adaptation of *Kanawa*, Kori originally intended to use small string-manipulated dolls as his marionettes (rather than the large Bunraku puppets often used in Noh theatre); yet these also differed from Gordon Craig's Uber-Marionettes (Chiba 441).

In place of puppets, Edith Craig chose to use human actors in the roles, directing them to perform in an anti-naturalist acting style in keeping with the Noh-influenced aesthetic of the piece. Some reviewers and critics, unfamiliar with Japanese performance styles, objected to Craig's choice. One reviewer remarked that while the prologue had announced that it was a play for marionettes, "we rather regretted it was not played by them. With flesh-and-blood players, it was rather heavy and unimpressive."²³⁹ Another reviewer dismissed the play as "a somewhat crudely dramatic Japanese variant of the incantation legend used by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in *Sister Helen*" and disparaged the acting, apparently misunderstanding the anti-naturalist performance style: "Mrs.

²³⁸ Kori's translation of Edward Gordon Craig's theatre theories was published in April 1912 (Chiba 435).

²³⁹ *The Sketch* 26 December 1917: xiv.

Christopher Lowther seemed to over-act in the part of this shrieking virago and so-called witch”.²⁴⁰ In contrast, Kori’s letter to Craig commended Mrs. Christopher Lowther’s performance as the main character ‘Wife of the Citizen’. Kori noted with pleasure Ellen Terry’s compliment regarding Mrs. Lowther’s interpretation of the role:

that [Lowther’s] way of acting happened to seem of merit to the great actress [Ellen Terry] showed the possibility on [sic] European stage of a sincere effort at the unaffected interpretation of Japanese rhythm (as her personification struck both me and my compatriots among the audience though it may not have appealed to dilettante orient-mongers).²⁴¹

Clearly, the playwright and his fellow Japanese audience members felt that Lowther’s performance approached “the unaffected interpretation of Japanese rhythm,” despite the inability of a number of English critics to grasp the inter-cultural nuances of the performance. Moreover, Kori praised the Pioneer Players production in a manner that suggested Craig’s primary influence on the outcome of the performance:

I feel I must congratulate you on your most successful production last Sunday. As far as my little effort is concerned I cannot help expressing my satisfaction at the way it was done. It chanced to be the very first Japanese dramatic work produced outside Japan, not to speak of European stage. And considering all the difficulties both technical and due to circumstances that naturally accompany such

²⁴⁰ *The Stage* 20 December 1917:18.

²⁴¹ Kori continued “I cordially wish your society a growing success and appreciation and thank you for the pleasure I have had in working with you” Unpublished letter from Torahiko Kori to Edith Craig, 19 December 1917; 3.405, ECCF, qtd. in *WAT* 133-134.

an enterprise your production has really opened the way to an immense field of possibility.²⁴²

Torahiko Kori's respect for Edith Craig's skill as a director resulted in two notable future collaborations. First, shortly after this production of *Kanawa*, Kori was appointed as a committee member of the Pioneer Players (Chiba 433). Second, Craig also introduced Kori's second English-language production—*The Toils of Yoshimoto: A Tragedy of Ancient Japan*—to the British Public (Chiba 432). Craig directed this production at the Little Theatre (not the Pioneer Players), where it ran for three weeks in October 1922.

Conclusion

In the best tradition of modernist drama directors, Edith Craig used her rich and varied background in theatre, design and music to impose her vision for a unified work of art onto over 150 theatrical productions with the Pioneer Players. Theatrical colleagues particularly admired the way Craig deployed her talents throughout her directorial career. As St. John declared,

[Edith Craig's] equipment as a producer...was exceptional in its range. She was a skillful and imaginative stage-manager, could design her own scenery and costumes, was an expert in lighting, and if music were required in a play, could select and arrange it herself with the authority of a trained musician. Nor was this all. The stage-carpenters, property-men and electricians who worked for her were often amazed at her practical knowledge of their jobs (*CU* 24-25).

²⁴² Unpublished letter from Torahiko Kori to Edith Craig, 19 December, 1917; 3.405, ECCF

Melville noted Craig's more subtle and unexpected accomplishments, such as "her ability to arrange stage fights to perfection; the way her crowd scenes had such a sense of design; the ease with which, as a good dancer herself, she had no difficulty in directing any kind of dance" (221). Craig's versatility enabled her to engage continually with experiments in an enormous range of genres and performance projects.

Many critics consider Craig's productions of Paul Claudel's poetic dramas to be the pinnacle of her work with the Pioneer Players. The Pioneer Players produced Claudel's *The Exchange* in 1915, only one year after its publication in French. Craig was the first to direct Claudel's drama on the English stage; as the 1914-1915 Pioneer Players Annual report proudly announced: "This was the first time that Claudel, one of the most notable figures in modern French literature, had ever been acted in England, and although the play did not please everyone, it was everywhere acknowledged that its production was true pioneer work".²⁴³ In addition to taking up further symbolist themes, Craig's art theatre introduced Claudel's experiments with musical drama to the English stage: Claudel used music as a "structural analogy" in order to "amplify character and dramatic situation" (Innes 1993:101).²⁴⁴ Katherine Cockin locates Craig with other art theatre practitioners who have been drawn to Claudel's mystic Catholic dramas "for their exploration of the subjective, and for the alternative values they offer in contrast to the 'materialism and rationalism' which typified the experience of modernity for many modernists" (WAT 177). For example, later avant-garde practitioners Barrault and Brook

²⁴³ PPAR 1914-15:10, qtd. in WAT 181.

²⁴⁴ In the 1940s and 1950s, Jean-Louis Barrault developed his concept of 'total theatre' in France through his productions of Claudel's drama (Innes 1993: 100).

were drawn to religious dramas (such as Claudel's) in their search for a 'secular religion').²⁴⁵

In directing Claudel's Catholic mystic dramas, Craig risked alienating many of her audience members. Although they remained enthusiastic about "the most adventurous enterprise which we have yet undertaken," the Pioneer Player play committee acknowledged the challenges of producing religious poetic dramas: "there is something about a poet which produces resentment in the ordinary human being applies with tenfold force to a religious poet like Claudel. Moreover the unusual dramaturgy of this author demands that his audience should listen with a patient concentration which is rare in the theatre".²⁴⁶ However Independent Theatre director J.T. Grein, a contemporary of Edith Craig's and fellow promoter of avant-garde drama, expressed appreciation for Craig's interest in the ritualized performance techniques required by Claudel's drama. Grein wrote:

Of all the things worth doing which we owe to Miss Edith Craig, this production of Claudel's 'Hostage' is perhaps the most valuable. In the spirit of the part she has created the atmosphere of intense religiousness, of exalted feeling, of super-human sacrifice; she has imbued her actors with the ethereal meaning of the play; she has framed the story in such simple grandeur, anon in such grand display, as makes for impressiveness.²⁴⁷

Although she remained underappreciated by the commercial, West End theatre establishment, most of Craig's productions were reviewed favorably in national and

²⁴⁵ Or as Grotowski put it, "To find a place where a communion becomes possible" (Innes 1993:150, cited in *WAT* 217).

²⁴⁶ *PPAR 1916-17*, 9, qtd. in *WAT* 181.

²⁴⁷ J.T. Grein "The Pioneers", *Arts Gazette* (9) 29 March 1919:129, cited in *WAT* 183-184.

international newspapers. An *Arts Gazette* reviewer wrote of the 1919-20 season: “I have no hesitation in saying that Miss Craig has proved that she is second to none of the producers in this country, that she promises to view with the great producers abroad...she inspired the actors”.²⁴⁸

As the quotation above implies, Craig was conversant with developments in European art theatres and Asian performance movements, among others. In fact, Craig should be credited with directing a number of these experimental works in England for the first time. In so doing, Edith Craig introduced British theatre audiences to a range of avant-garde dramas and movements. J. Fisher White praised the important contributions Craig’s experimental theatre company made in raising the status of theatre in Britain. He wrote: “I think you are doing work which is absolutely essential for the health, even for the life, of the theatre; & work which cannot be done otherwise, seeing that we have no subsidized or endorsed theatre here”.²⁴⁹ Like many modernist theatre practitioners, Craig exerted her formidable dramatic gifts to the ends of revitalizing the theatre.

Edith Craig successfully strove to avoid commercial theatre’s tendency to pander to the status quo. Her fearlessness in tackling dramas with controversial themes—and her continually-evolving experiments with theatrical styles—allowed her to continually challenge herself and her audiences. After a performance of M.E.M. Young’s *The Higher Court* (1920), Virginia Woolf sardonically wrote “We are not going to enjoy ourselves comfortably all over...we are going to be wrought into a sharp nervous point....In short, we are going to be scraped and harrowed and precipitated into some

²⁴⁸ Qtd. in Melville 231.

²⁴⁹ Unpublished letter from J. Fisher White to Edith Craig and Christopher St. John, 31 March 1919; 3.763, ECCF, qtd. in WAT 170.

surprising outburst of bitterness against—probably the Divorce Laws” (Woolf 1988). Yet Edith Craig differed from those avant-garde theatre practitioners who took an oppositional approach to audiences or held a dismissive attitude towards other theatre artists. For example, Edith Craig’s desire to engage her audience critically differs from Marinetti’s argument that “Futurists must teach authors and performers to despise the audience” (Goldberg 16). Edward Gordon Craig’s theatre theory (published in 1905) emphasized the director’s control of design elements to the extent that actors were perceived as mere *ubermarionettes*, visually overpowered by Gordon Craig’s enormous screens and swathes of light and darkness (WAT 174). In contrast, in Edith Craig’s productions, text and actors don’t seem to disappear into the stage and lighting design, but are rather equally integral to performance.

Edith Craig she shared many goals and concerns with other modernist European art theatre directors. Saint-Georges de Bouhelier admiringly described the Pioneer Players’ continuous “struggle against conventions,” in reference to Craig’s continued work outside the bounds of dramatic naturalism (60-1). Yet unlike her contemporaries Stanislavski, Reinhardt and Gordon Craig, Edith Craig was not interested in producing a “revolutionary aesthetic formula” or a single approach to theatre-making (WAT 179). Instead, Craig remained fluid in her directing aesthetic, continually pushing boundaries with a wide range of works, forms, themes, methods, design techniques and even venues. Throughout her career, Edith Craig remained invested in avant-garde experimentation in its broadest sense.

4. Christopher St. John and British Modernist Theatre: Playwright, Suffrage Activist and Pioneering Dramaturg

Introduction

This dissertation concludes with a chapter on playwright, historian, suffrage activist and dramaturg Christopher Marie St. John (1871-1960), particularly her work with the feminist theatre company the Pioneer Players (1911-1925). St John is perhaps best known today for her translation of the earliest known woman-authored drama *Paphnutius*, originally written in the tenth century by the German nun Hrotsvit.²⁵⁰ The 1914 Pioneer Players world premier of *Paphnutius* caused a sensation with reviewers and marked an important moment in international theatre history.²⁵¹ St. John, who co-authored with Cicely Hamilton two of the most popular suffrage dramas of the early twentieth century, has also been frequently mentioned in recent scholarship on the connections between first-wave feminism and theatre. However, despite St. John's presence in theatre histories for her translation of *Paphnutius* and her well-known suffrage plays, few seem aware of her other contributions to theatrical modernism in England. This widespread ignorance is largely due, I believe, to St. John's 'double invisibility'. First, St. John accomplished much of her theatrical activity with the Pioneer Players theatre company (1911-1920, 1925), although she worked in drama before and after this period. As discussed in chapter three, many mainstream theatre historians

²⁵⁰ Hrotsvit (c. 935 – c. 1002) was also known as Hrotsvitha, Hroswitha, Hrosvit and Roswitha. A dramatist and poet, Hrotsvit wrote in Latin and is considered by some as the first person since antiquity to compose drama in the West. Hrotsvit's plays manipulated the conventions and dramatic form of Terrence. See Katharine M. Wilson (Ed.) *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

²⁵¹ Edith Craig's carefully preserved scrapbook albums included numerous articles heralding this historic production.

identified the Pioneer Players as primarily a ‘suffrage’ theatre society and therefore, have not fully considered their contributions to British modernism. Second, St. John’s work within the company—as playwright, board member, historian and translator-adaptor—are often obscured by the more public role that her celebrated partner, director Edith Craig, played in Pioneer Players productions.

Yet as an overview of St. John’s theatrical career demonstrates, her active contributions to the British theatre community for the first half of the twentieth century were multiple and wide-ranging. Although she is known for penning some of the most popular suffrage dramas of her era, Christopher St. John wrote plays on a range of themes, before and after her work with propaganda plays. A prolific playwright, St. John wrote in a variety of genres—from agit-prop to pageantry, and from realist dramas and comedies to experiments with mixed form. Moreover, Christopher St. John also engaged in a wide range of theatrical activities—most notably play selection, translation, historical research and arts criticism. In fact, St. John’s theatrical activities on behalf of the Pioneer Players theatre society correlate to the emerging role of the “dramaturg” in modernist theatre. Although she is frequently referenced in recent scholarship on suffrage drama, very little in-depth or critical material has been published about St. John’s life, literary pursuits and range of theatrical work.²⁵² Therefore in Section I, I discuss pertinent biographical background concerning St. John’s family background, education, professional work, key relationships, early literary and theatrical pursuits, suffrage

²⁵² For example, there is currently no biography for Christopher St. John and only one extended article on her play *The First Actress*. For these reasons, I relied heavily on the following archives: the Oxford University archives, the British Library – Manuscript Room and Lord Chamberlain’s Play Collection, the Theatre Museum Archive–London, the Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection (Jerwood Library of the Performing Arts, Old Royal Navy College, Greenwich, UK), the Women’s Library–London, the Edith Craig Archive at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum (Smallhythe, Kent), and the UCLA Manuscript Collection.

activism, and the 1920s cultural circle of women artists and writers of which she was a part. I pay particular attention to certain themes which recur throughout St. John's oeuvre: Catholicism, lesbian identity, polemical suffrage writings, and her fascination with biographies, first-person genres and women's history.

Section II centers on Christopher St. John's contributions to British modernist theatre through playwriting as well as her dramaturgical work. I provide an overview of St. John's prolific playwriting career, which includes her early social problem plays, the wildly popular one-act propaganda farces she co-authored with Cicely Hamilton (*How the Vote Was Won*-1909 and *The Pot and the Kettle*-1909) as well as St. John's more developed comedies on suffrage and feminist themes. I also discuss St. John's early plays for the Pioneer Players which centered on questions of justice and social change (*The First Actress*-1911, *Macarena*-1912, and *The Coronation*-1912), as well as her experiments with the pageant genre. Whenever possible, I utilize programs, performance reviews, newspaper articles or other archival documents to flesh out the production history of St. John's plays.

St. John's range of theatrical activities for the Pioneer Players also included translating and adapting plays, providing historical research, critiquing the theatre establishment and introducing new dramatists and experimental theatre movements. Drawing upon archival materials for Edith Craig's productions of Hroswitha's *Paphnutius* (1914) and Evreinov's *The Theatre of the Soul* (1915), I argue that St. John's theatrical work as a literary manager and historian for the Pioneer Players was an early manifestation in England of the emerging role of the "dramaturg" in modernist theatre.²⁵³

²⁵³ The *Oxford Encyclopedia to Theatre and the Performing Arts* describes this fluid and amorphous role:

I situate St. John's contributions as an in-house critic, historian, playwright and or literary manager within the discourses of the late nineteenth century British theatrical avant-garde and the rise of European modernism.²⁵⁴ Section II closes with a discussion of St. John's efforts to revitalize the theatre through her participation in the British Drama League, her arts criticism (drama, literature and music), and her anti-censorship activism.

Christopher St. John's mixed form play *The First Actress* (1911) develops a number of the topics, themes and theatrical conventions that she revisited throughout her career. Throughout Section III, I closely analyze St. John's drama with careful attention to the production history of its first performance. In *The First Actress*, St. John interrogates three interrelated problems: resistance to female stage performance during the early Restoration, women's limited professional and social roles in contemporary society and, implicitly, anti-suffrage arguments. Posing theatre as a metaphor for the public sphere, St. John makes an explicit rhetorical connection between women's representation on the English stage and their representation in government through the vote. As part of the pro-suffrage argument of *The First Actress*, St. John disrupts the naturalist form of the play through the incorporation of pageant aesthetics. I contextualize St. John's move within three categories of theatrical expression from which she borrows: the spectacular aesthetics of the suffrage movement (epitomized by Cicely

A dramaturg is a person with a knowledge of the history, theory, and practice of theatre, who helps a director, designer, playwright, or actor realize their intentions in a production. The dramaturg—sometimes called a literary manager, is an in-house artistic consultant cognizant of an institution's mission, a playwright's passion, or a director's vision, and who helps bring them all to life in a theatrically compelling manner.

The rest of the description stresses the changeable nature of the dramaturg's work: "This goal can be accomplished in myriad ways and the dramaturg's role often shifts according to context and is always fluid. As there is no one way to create theatre, there is no single model of the dramaturg." Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia to Theatre and the Performing Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 387.

²⁵⁴ This historical context for the development of dramaturgy will focus on director Harley Granville Barker, drama critic William Archer and German theatre theorist and director Bertolt Brecht.

Hamilton and Edith Craig's widely performed *Pageant of Great Women*), the broader Victorian and Edwardian fascination with historical pageants, and the formal predecessor of the pageant genre: the medieval mystery play. Through the final pageant sequence of *The First Actress*, St. John stages a history of women's theatrical performance in England from the Restoration to her present in order to make a political argument concerning women's suffrage in 1911. At the same time, St. John adeptly engaged with a cultural moment in which celebrity culture overlapped with the aims of suffrage activism, as is evident in her use of famous women playing famous actresses from history. *The First Actress* exemplifies St. John's commitment to create a constructed and polemical women's history to specific political ends.

I. Biographical Background:

Family, Religion, Education, Professional Work

Christabel Gertrude Marshall was the youngest of nine children, born on 24 October 1871 at 38 High Street, Exeter, to Emma Marshal, *nee* Martin (1828-1899), a novelist, and Hugh Graham Marshall, (c. 1825-1899), a manager of the West of England Bank²⁵⁵ (*ODNB* 613). By 1890 the Marshall family was apparently living in Bristol, as records show that St. John was educated at Clifton High School and "abroad" (where abroad is left unspecified).²⁵⁶ Christopher St. John (as Christabel Marshall) studied

²⁵⁵Cockin, Katherine. "Christopher St. John." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography in association with the British Academy: from the earliest times to the year 2000*. Edited by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 613-614. Henceforth *ODNB*

²⁵⁶I want to thank archivist Pauline Adams of Oxford University for her assistance in tracking down Christopher St. John's (Christabel Marshall's) university records.

Modern History (Class III) at Somerville College, Oxford from 1890-1893.²⁵⁷

Afterwards, St. John moved to London where she worked as a journalist (Collis 56) and briefly as secretary to Mrs. Humphrey Ward (Crawford 613). Later St. John worked as a temporary secretary for Lady Randolph Churchill and her son, future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill²⁵⁸ (Melville 175). Later, she worked in the India Office of the government (Collis 57). For unknown reasons, St John later claimed to be of illegitimate birth and attempted with some success to conceal her origins (ODNB 613). For example, St. John's anonymously published *Hungerheart the Story of a Soul* (1915) has been understood as a *roman á clef*, a genre in which the characters are thinly disguised versions of identifiable individuals): the "St. John" character in *Hungerheart* is was an illegitimate child (Melville 176).²⁵⁹ St. John's reticence to expose her past is interesting, given that she wrote biographies of famous women and recovered women's histories through a range of theatre projects.

Upon her conversion to Catholicism in adulthood,²⁶⁰ Christabel Marshall changed her name to Christopher St. John (inspired by biblical figure John the Baptist) (Melville 174). St. John's conversion may have contributed to a rift with her mother, a committed Protestant whose writings reflected an aversion to Roman Catholicism (ODNB 613). Of the few historians who have written about St. John, a number have connected her Catholicism to her lesbian identity. For example, Katherine Cockin argues that the

²⁵⁷ Dates in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry were wrongly given as "from 1894". Oxford University Archives records also state that St. John was a "Green Scholar," although I have not been able to track the significance of that designation.

²⁵⁸ Christopher St John's former employer, Winston Churchill, was present at suffragettes Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst's famous interruption of the Liberal Party meeting Manchester (at the Free Trade Hall, October 1905); for a short time, Churchill was even sympathetic to the movement. (Strachey 294).

²⁵⁹ Marguerite Steen considered St John's claim to illegitimacy in *Hungerheart* to be evidence of her untrustworthiness. See: Steen, Marguerite, *A Pride of Terrys* (London: Longmans, 1962).]

²⁶⁰ Crawford says this conversion and name change occurred in 1912 (613).

protagonist of St. John's anonymous autobiography *Hungerheart* is a self-diagnosed 'invert' and that lesbianism in the *roman à clef* is "only rendered tolerable through Roman Catholicism, ritualizing and sanctioning internalized self-hatred" (23-24).²⁶¹ However, St. John's foregrounding of Catholic themes, forms and styles repeatedly throughout her later theatrical career holds greater import for understanding her oeuvre. In addition to her English translation of *Paphnutius* (the first woman-authored play written by a tenth century German nun named Hroswit/Roswith), St. John wrote *Macrena*, a play about Polish nun Irena Macrena's resistance to Russian Orthodoxy. She also advocated for the Pioneer Player's productions of Catholic mystic French symbolist playwright Paul Claudel.²⁶² Most significantly, St. John appropriated the medieval Catholic pageant genre²⁶³ for political purposes in her feminist theatre project *The First Actress* (1911).

The "Smallhythe Trio" and Ellen Terry

In 1899, St. John reached the most significant turning point in her personal and professional life. Through a backstage visit to the famous Victorian actress Ellen Terry,²⁶⁴ St. John met Terry's daughter Edith Craig. St. John recounted this meeting in

²⁶¹ See Katharine Cockin, *Edith Craig (1869-1947)* Cassell, London: 1998. Henceforth *EC*. Joanne Glasgow also discusses St. John's interpretation of her sexual identity through the lens of Catholicism in "What's a Nice Lesbian Like You Doing in the Church of Torquemada? Radclyffe Hall and Other Catholic Converts," Glasgow and Jay (Eds), *Lesbian Texts and Contexts*, 241-254.

²⁶² These productions of Claudel's plays *Exchange* (1915), *The Tidings Brought to Mary* (1917) and *The Hostage* (1919) were considered by some to be the pinnacle of the Pioneer Players' success. Chapter three briefly discusses the critical acclaim for Edith Craig's direction of these Claudel dramas.

²⁶³ St. John also wrote in this genre in *A Pageant of the Stage* (1913).

²⁶⁴ According to Rose Collis, Christopher St. John first became a fan of Terry's a number of years earlier, after a performance of *Ravenswood* at the Princes Theatre, Bristol. St. John sent the actress flowers, presents and letters, some of which received brief replies. The two did not meet until 1896, when Terry invited St. John to her dressing-room at the Lyceum before a performance of *King Arthur*. St. John and Terry did not meet again until the 1899 backstage visit in London during which St. John met Edith Craig (56).

highly romantic terms in *Hungerheart* and in her later essay “Close Up”²⁶⁵: Edith Craig, who had been knitting, “did not put [her needle] down before shaking hands, which the result that I was pricked by her needle. Cupid’s dart, for I loved Edy from that moment” (*CU* 19). According to Craig’s more prosaic account, the first meeting with St. John was unremarkable. “Edy admitted to Chris that she had felt antagonistic at first as her mother’s girl adorers were apt to become a nuisance if encouraged. ‘But I liked you at once, all the same,’ she said” (Melville 175). St. John and Craig’s romantic²⁶⁶ and creative partnership spanned the next forty-eight years of their lives and several homes, including first living together in London flats (out of which Craig ran her theatrical costume design business) and later in Priest House (Tenterden, Kent) (Melville 175-176).

According to their friend, author Irene Cooper Willis²⁶⁷, St. John and Craig were nicknamed ‘The Squares’ in reference to their first home together at 7 Smith Square, London (*Edy* 107). St. John and Craig’s shared home and social life became a vibrant cultural hub for actors, writers and other theatre professionals at the turn of the century. Among those who spent time at the St. John/Craig household in Westminster were Harcourt Williams and W.B. Yeats. In his essay ‘Bygones’, Harcourt Williams recounted a memory from a Twelfth Night party held during his time living at St. John and Craig’s home:

²⁶⁵St. John, ‘Close-Up’, in Eleanor Adlard (ed.), *Edy: Recollections of Edith Craig*, London: Frederick Muller, 1949. Henceforth, *CU*.

²⁶⁶ According to Melville, St. John was “exceptionally happy, having had no previous serious relationship. She was a very plain woman, heavily built with a slight limp, and a speech impediment” (176). However the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry states that Christopher St. John had one previous romantic relationship with musician Violet Gwynne (later Gordon Woodhouse) in 1895, before she met Edith Craig (613)

²⁶⁷ Irene Cooper Willis (author) graduated from Girton College, Cambridge in 1904 and wrote biographies of Florence Nightingale and the Brontes.

They mulled ale in my bedroom after a recipe by Nigel Playfair, fumigating the chamber with a pungent, lingering aroma. Eventually we made a circle round the fire bent on telling ghost stories one to another – W.B. Yeats²⁶⁸ was one of us, his raven black hair and pale, bird-like features caught in the firelight. It was he who set the ball rolling, but his stories were so enthralling that none of us wanted to interrupt him, nor did we (49).

At one point, St. John and Craig were neighbors to Bernard and Charlotte Shaw, which led to Craig being cast as Mrs. Bridgenorth in Shaw's *Getting Married*.²⁶⁹

In a highly unusual domestic arrangement, the artist Clare (Tony) Atwood (1866-1962) joined the Craig/St. John household at Smallhythe, Kent in 1916; Atwood remained with Craig and St. John until their respective deaths (Craig's in 1947 and St. John's in 1960). Tony Atwood also worked with the Pioneer Players in the capacity of scenic design and set construction. The relationships between the three were well-known among their friends and professional acquaintances; George Bernard Shaw famously proposed that St. John write a history of the ménage-a-trios (*CU* 32), a suggestion to which biographers have had mixed responses.²⁷⁰ According to St. John, the three worked independently in literature, theatre, and art and used their friendship to foster creative inspiration for each other's art. St. John characterized her relationships with Craig and Atwood as harmonious and mutually supportive, writing:

²⁶⁸ See John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Eds.), *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats: Volume 3 1901-1904*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 329.

²⁶⁹ Shaw reportedly recognized the ideal voice for the character of the bishop's wife, Mrs. Bridgenorth, when he heard Craig shouting for St John to throw down the front-door key (St John cited in *Correspondence* 441).

²⁷⁰ For Manvell, Shaw's notion was 'ironic'. Marguerite Steen dismissed Shaw's suggestion as "naïveté or mischief": 'Pretending to some degree of intimacy, he must well have known that such a history was unwriteable' (326).

Such discords as there were in our communal life were always quickly resolved.

As we all had another life, apart, in our work, we did not really see much of one another. The fine point of our pleasure in being together was not blunted by excess of it. It always had the flavour of a treat, whatever its source, a meal in common, going to the theatre, cinema, concerts or picture-galleries....*Different as [we] were [in] our antecedents, our characters, our temperaments, our talents, we belonged to the same world, the artist's world.* That established a camaraderie which was perfectly easy, unguarded and spontaneous (*CU 32—italics mine*).

This “artist’s world” also included Edith Craig’s mother, famed actress Ellen Terry, who lived next door to Edith, Chris and Tony.²⁷¹ At Terry’s invitation, St. John ghostwrote Terry’s autobiography *The Story of My Life* (1908) and also edited *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence* (Constable, 1931). Later, assisted by Edith Craig, St. John re-edited *The Story of My Life* and published it as *Ellen Terry’s Memoirs*²⁷² —in part, to address inaccuracies and a negative portrayal of Edith Craig in Edward Gordon Craig’s biography of their mother (*EC 8*).²⁷³ Although it is written as though it is Terry’s first-person narrative, St John’s introduction describes her writing partnership with Craig in the *Memoirs* as “the work of us both in council (although the actual writing is by one hand)” (xi). Accordingly, St. John claimed she chose the first person singular pronoun in order “to allow the writer in the partnership, for whom it stands, more freedom to deal with some episodes in Ellen Terry’s life than she could have if she spoke for Ellen

²⁷¹Ellen Terry lived at Smallhythe Place (Tenterden, Kent) and the trio lived in the adjoining property Priest House.

²⁷² Edith Craig and Christopher St John (eds.) *Ellen Terry’s Memoirs*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1933. Hereafter *Memoirs*.

²⁷³ See: *Ellen Terry and her secret self: together with a plea for G. B. S.* By Edward Gordon Craig. Publisher: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1932.

Terry's daughter as well as for herself. What is true delicacy in a daughter may be false delicacy in a biographer" (ix).

Literary and Theatrical Pursuits

In the early years of her relationship with Craig, St. John ventured into various literary pursuits. St. John's first published book, the novel *The Crimson Weed* (1900), centered on the illegitimate son of an opera singer and explored themes of passion and revenge. St John also published several short stories in Pamela Colman Smith's little magazine *The Green Sheaf*, which published works in a range of styles including dream poems, mystical and quirky stories and illustrations.²⁷⁴ Following the death of famed Lyceum Theatre actor-manager Henry Irving in 1905, Christopher St John published an elegiac monograph to Irving in *The Green Sheaf* and dedicated it to Edith Craig. As Katharine Cockin has argued, St. John's tribute links Irving to modernist artists: "Henry Irving, the poetic actor, was as impersonal as the poet" (11).²⁷⁵ This monograph concluded with a call for an appropriate memorial to Henry Irving: instead of the proposed endowment of beds for sick actors in London hospitals, St. John suggested a "theatre to carry on his work" (27). Most likely, St. John believed that Edith Craig should inherit the mantle of Irving's memorial theatre.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ *The Green Sheaf* also published pieces by modern Irish dramatists W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory (EC 75).

²⁷⁵ Christopher St John, *Henry Irving*, London: Green Sheaf, 1905, 11, cited in EC 75.

²⁷⁶ The front cover of the *Henry Irving* tribute issue of *The Green Sheaf* includes a sketch of a smoking lantern on the point of being extinguished, "the two plumes of smoke perhaps symbolizing spiritual inspiration leaving the body of Irving and the Lyceum"; Katherine Cockin notes visual links between the illustration style of this *Henry Irving* image and a later Pamela Coleman Smith caricature of Edith Craig (EC 76).

Also around this time, St. John began to perform in and translate plays. She had been attracted to the stage since childhood when she gave her first performance at five years old. As she wrote, “arrayed in a diminutive man’s dress-suit made of black sateen, I made a hit at a drawing room entertainment by singing a comic song popular at that date – 1880 – “The Frenchman”.²⁷⁷ Through her association with Craig and Terry, the St. John acted at the Imperial Theatre in 1903, first appearing in the Terry/Craig production of Ibsen’s *The Vikings*,²⁷⁸ followed by a small role in *Much Ado About Nothing*.²⁷⁹ While on tour with Ellen Terry in the provinces in the fall of 1903 and 1904, St. John performed her first speaking part (under the stage name of Joanna Willet): the court nurse in Clo Graves’s play *The Mistress of the Robes*.²⁸⁰ She was a member of the Stage Society²⁸¹ (as Christabel Marshall), and acted under this name in Gilbert Murray’s translation of *Andromache* at the Garrick Theatre in 1904. As part of Ellen Terry’s tour to the US in 1906-1907, St. John performed the role of Mathilde Boss in *The Good Hope* and understudied Edith Craig as Saart; she eventually played Saart in Chicago when Craig was ill.²⁸²

Throughout her literary career, the historically-minded St. John often returned to first person narratives and biographies. She wrote about her relationship with Craig in

²⁷⁷ In an unpublished letter to Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven (dated 3 Dec 1931), Christopher St. John detailed this and every other remembered performance of her career. (Theatre Museum – London; Chris St. John folder).

²⁷⁸ I discuss this production in Chapter 3 on Edith Craig.

²⁷⁹ In an unpublished letter to Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven (dated 3 Dec 1931), Christopher St. John detailed this and every other remembered performance of her career. (Theatre Museum – London; Chris St. John folder).

²⁸⁰ Cited in Christopher St. John’s unpublished letter to Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven (dated 3 Dec 1931), (Theatre Museum – London; Chris St. John folder).

²⁸¹ Her membership with the Stage Society also helped her publish her translation (from the Dutch) of *The Good Hope* by Herman Heijerman, which was attributed to her assumed name, Christopher St. John.

²⁸² Cited in Chris St. John’s unpublished letter to Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven (dated 3 Dec 1931), (Theatre Museum – London; Chris St. John folder).

two works: her journal, *The Golden Book* (1911) and her anonymously published second novel, *Hungerheart: the Story of a Soul* (1915). In her unpublished journal *The Golden Book*, St. John addresses Craig as beloved, expresses her own desire (in contrast to Craig's extremely reserved demeanor) and hints at what she saw as troubling aspects of their relationship.²⁸³ It is not clear who St. John saw as her readership for *The Golden Book*: the journal's narrative voice shifts from addressing Craig directly to speaking about her to an unknown party. St. John also took a multifaceted and careful approach to discussing her relationship in her novel *Hungerheart*, which is part *bildungsroman* and part *roman à clef*. In *Hungerheart*, St. John mixed factual and fictional material, references both famous and anonymous figures and represented herself and Craig through interweaving narratives and voices (EC 71-72). In addition to her biographies and edited collections of letters of Ellen Terry, St. John later penned biographies of pioneering physician Christine Murrell MD (1935)²⁸⁴ and composer and suffrage activist Ethel Smyth (1958).²⁸⁵ *Ethel Smyth: A Biography*, completed in spite of St. John's ill health at the time, was honored by the Book Society as book of the month (ODNB 614). Christopher St. John also wrote literary reviews in the *New Statesman*, and music

²⁸³ (MS UCLA). For Laurie Wolf, St. John's account suggests the obscurity of Craig's sexual orientation (87). Alternately, Katharine Cockin proposes that the journal acted as a testimony of their relationship and commitment to each other which could not otherwise be expressed in public (EC 71).

²⁸⁴ Christine Murrell, MD (1874-1933) – gained her M.D. in 1905 from London University and was the first woman physician elected to the membership of the General Medical Council of Great Britain (in 1924). During WWI, Murrell served in the Women's Emergency Corps and in 1925 she became President of the Medical Women's Federation.

²⁸⁵ Dame Ethel Mary Smyth (1958-1944) was an English composer and a suffrage leader. Her "The March of the Women" (1911), with lyrics by Cicely Hamilton, became the anthem of the women's suffrage movement.

criticism for both *The Lady* (under the initials C.M.) and *Time and Tide* (from 1920 to 1931).²⁸⁶

Suffrage Activism

In addition to their creative pursuits, St. John and Craig were also active participants in the women's suffrage movement. Both Christopher St. John and Edith Craig worked with the Women's Freedom League (WFL) and its President, Charlotte Despard (1844-1939) (*EC* 83). St. John and Craig also offered their flat on Bedford Street, London as a 'safe house' for suffragettes who were recently released from prison or hiding from the police (Collis 58). Margaret Webster recalled that "some of the most determined of the 'militants' would take refuge with them, either before they set out on some mission or after they were released from prison" (248). Prominent suffrage activist Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Honorary Treasurer of the WSPU, visited Craig and St. John in 1909, four months after her release from prison (*EC* 81). Christopher St. John engaged in militant protest tactics to a greater extent than Edith Craig. St. John heckled politicians, chalked 'Votes for Women' on the pavement and seized a police horse's bridle (for which she was arrested) (Collis 58). In 1909, she was arrested for setting fire to a pillar box (*ODNB* 613).

St. John was also involved in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), and was a committee member of the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society (CWSS) and

²⁸⁶ The Ellen Terry Memorial Museum currently houses the collection of recordings of music which Christopher St. John reviewed. St. John also wrote theatre criticism, which I discuss in Section II (which focuses on her contributions to modern drama in Britain).

the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL) (*EC* 83, 89, 115).²⁸⁷ She sharpened her skills as a polemicist by writing articles, pamphlets and plays on behalf of the suffrage movement. On 29 June 1909, St. John participated in the WSPU deputation to the House of Commons, contributing an article "Why I Went on the Deputation" to *Votes for Women* 9 July 1909 (Crawford 613).²⁸⁸ In her prefatory essay to Charlotte Despard's influential pamphlet *Woman in the New Era*, St. John wrote: "Always in sympathy with what we call 'the Woman's Question' (object, briefly, Woman to be a noun herself, not an article relating to a noun eternally), she begins now to see its absolute importance" (St. John 1910: 19). St. John's renaming of 'the Woman Question' challenges the understanding of women as a type of 'problem' that a male-controlled society must resolve (or ignore). Instead, St. John frames women as active subjects with the greatest stakes in making the political changes that will provide answers to the questions that most concern them (*WAT* 69). St. John later deployed her considerable rhetorical skills in a number of feminist theatrical productions, most notably *The First Actress*. .

After the Actress Franchise League (or AFL) was organized in autumn of 1908, Christopher St John collaborated with Cicely Hamilton to write dramas on behalf of the women's suffrage movement. Their satirical short pieces *How the Vote Was Won* and *The Pot and the Kettle*, performed by the AFL became two of the most popular propaganda plays of the era. Edith Craig directed the debut of *How the Vote Was Won* at the Royalty Theatre, London, on 13 April 1909, and subsequently in venues from the Corn Exchange, Stratford-upon-Avon (25 October 1909) to the Caxton Hall in London,

²⁸⁷ St. John, Craig and Cicely Hamilton were photographed holding a banner for the Women Writers' Suffrage League in a street procession of 1910.

²⁸⁸ Crawford, Elizabeth. *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866-1928*. UCL Press: London, 1999.

where the WFL's Green White and Gold Fair was held in April 1909. St. John also acted in *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909), a production created by Hamilton and Craig, which was performed nationwide.²⁸⁹ Christopher St. John was a founding member of the Pioneer Players theatre society spearheaded by her partner Edith Craig, which began as an outgrowth of the activities of the Actress Franchise League (Webster 249). When the Pioneer Players society was founded in 1911, Craig, Terry and St. John took differing roles. Edith Craig served as the director, Ellen Terry served as the president, and St John contributed as a dramatist, translator and actor. St. John was also the honorary secretary from 1915 to 1920, and worked on the advisory and casting committees.²⁹⁰ Christopher St. John's varied roles in the Pioneer Players company—and her subsequent contributions to theatrical modernism in Britain—are the subject of sections II and III of this chapter.

Cultural Circles

In the 1920s and 30s, St. John, Edith Craig and Tony Atwood's home Priest's House became the focus of a busy social and cultural life in Kent for women, actresses and writers in particular. After Ellen Terry's death in 1928, Edith Craig began to convert the barn behind Ellen Terry's adjacent home Smallhythe Place into a memorial theatre, which played annual summer Shakespeare productions in Terry's honor. In 1932 Craig established the subscription-based Barn Theatre Society which put on four or five shows a year from 1932-1939. Somehow Craig persuaded the elite of London's theatre world to

²⁸⁹ In section III of this chapter, I discuss *A Pageant of Great Women* and analyze its relationship to St. John's *The First Actress*.

²⁹⁰ For a comprehensive material history of the Pioneer Players theatre society, see Katharine Cockin's *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: the Pioneer Players, 1911-1925*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. (Henceforth, WAT). The Pioneer Players records are part of the Edith Craig Archive held at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum (Smallhythe Place, Tenterden, Kent). I am grateful to Katharine Cockin for her generous assistance in locating items in the Edith Craig Archive.

rehearse her shows in the afternoons (for free) while they performed in other paid West End productions in the evenings. Only given financial compensation for travel expenses, these professional actors would trek down to Smallhythe in Kent for a single Sunday performance directed by Edith Craig (Collis 63). St John first acted at the Barn Theatre in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1929 and in subsequent years performed in a number of plays there.²⁹¹

Craig, St John, and Atwood, known as 'Edy and the boys',²⁹² were close friends with the prominent lesbian couple Radclyffe Hall and her partner, Lady Una Troubridge, who had become famous after the adverse publicity from a 1928 obscenity trial concerning Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (Collis 64). In 1930 Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge moved to Kent, living in rented houses while their house, the Black Boy in the High Street, Rye, was under restoration. For the next three years in Kent, Hall and Troubridge, both devout Catholics, spent much of their time with Craig, St John and Atwood.²⁹³ Una Troubridge wrote of their friendship: 'There is great consolation and gratification to me in the company of these friends who like us & want to be with us because they know us for what we are and respect what John [Radclyffe Hall] has done

²⁹¹ St. John's unpublished letter to Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven (dated 3 Dec 1931), states that she performed once or twice in that year alone. "In August this year (1931) I played a Mayor in a sketch written by myself, and was told by Harcourt Williams (a member of the audience) that judged by any standard, my performance was first rate!" (Theatre Museum – London; Chris St. John folder).

²⁹² St John wrote "in our circle...everyone who joined it was sooner or later awarded a nickname" (CU 28). Katharine Cockin argues, "Group identity in the *ménage à trios* – and beyond – was forged around a variety of names suggestive of different kinds of relationship....Vera Holme was Jacko, Gabrielle Enthoven was Gabriellino. Their adversarial role was reinforced by the name the 'Bolshies', while Chris and Tony were known in relation to Edy as the 'Boys', the 'Serfs' or the 'Djinns'.....Chris and Tony as the Boys to Edy's 'Master Baby' or the 'Matka' were playing with gender as well as generational roles" (EC 22).

²⁹³ See Michael Baker, *Our Three Selves: The Life of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985).

for her kind.²⁹⁴ Troubridge and Hall attended productions at the Barn Theatre and spent two consecutive Christmas holidays with St. John, Craig and Atwood.

In 1932, Christopher St. John engaged in a brief affair with poet Vita Sackville-West²⁹⁵ which had disruptive effects within the Smallhythe Place household and among the friendships between the women artists in their circle.²⁹⁶ St. John and Sackville-West were introduced by Violet Pym at the Ellen Terry Memorial Shakespeare performance of *Twelfth Night* in July. In August, Sackville-West invited the ‘Smallhythe Trio’ (Craig, St. John and Atwood) to her estate (Sissinghurst, Kent) and in Sept 1932 Vita Sackville-West was invited to read her Hawthornden Prize-winning poem *The Land* at the Barn Theatre; Virginia Woolf and Stephen Spender were in attendance for this Barn Theatre reading of the poem. Sackville-West took St. John on a visit to her former home, Long Barn, gave her a blue necklace from Persia and visited her at the Covent Garden flat. According to St. John, Sackville-West informed her that, although the list of those she really loved was a short one, ‘now I was on it’.²⁹⁷ Likely referring to Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando* about a character who transcends time and genders,²⁹⁸ St. John nicknamed Sackville-West “My Lord Orlando” and wrote: ‘I could love you in breeches,

²⁹⁴ Qtd. in Baker 271.

²⁹⁵ Victoria Mary Sackville-West, The Hon Lady Nicolson (9 March 1892 – 2 June 1962), best known as Vita Sackville-West, was famous for her poetry, prolific literary production and her open marriage (Sackville-West had numerous affairs with women—most notably, novelist Virginia Woolf.) She was the only poet to win the Hawthornden Prize twice: first in 1927 for her long narrative poem, *The Land* and again in 1933 for her *Collected Poems*.

²⁹⁶ See Rose Collis (1994) and Katharine Cockin (1998) for details of this affair. Their research is culled from the published biographies and unpublished letters journals of Vita Sackville-West, Christopher St. John, Edith Craig, Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall. From Collis’ and Cockin’s accounts, I have pieced together a chronology of the St. John/Sackville-West affair that highlights the interconnections between the modernist writers and actors affiliated with the “Smallhythe Place trio” of which St. John was a part.

²⁹⁷ Qtd. in Collis 65.

²⁹⁸ Woolf reportedly based the novel on Sackville-West’s life. (Woolf and Sackville-West also had a famous affair.)

or in skirts, or in any other garments; or in none.²⁹⁹ She wrote letters and a love journal³⁰⁰ to Sackville-West, referring to her as ‘the complete human being who transcends both [sexes].’³⁰¹ Christopher St. John self-consciously recorded the fact that she slept with Vita Sackville-West on 20 December 1932 (*EC* 167). To St. John’s regret, this was to be their last sexual liaison.³⁰² For Vita Sackville-West the liaison was casual, but St. John was quite smitten.³⁰³

While the affair was short-lived, St. John’s infatuation with Sackville-West disrupted Smallhythe Place. Despite Craig’s previous claims to be free of jealousy, she was enraged by St. John’s infatuation with another woman. There were a number of vicious fights between St. John and Craig before it became clear that St. John’s feelings were not being reciprocated by Sackville-West (*Collis* 66). According to Radclyffe Hall’s biographer, Christopher St John’s fleeting relationship with Vita Sackville-West disturbed the Smallhythe Place household to such an extent that Hall and Troubridge abandoned their earlier plans to build a house next to Priest’s House (*Baker* 286). The affair also may have opened both Christopher St. John and Edith Craig to Virginia Woolf’s ridicule. Unhappily caught in the middle of the St. John/Sackville-West

²⁹⁹ Qtd. in *Collis* 65

³⁰⁰ “Violet Pym, the mutual friend who had originally introduced Chris to Vita Sackville-West, went through Chris’s papers and discovered the journal she had kept of their affair. Incredibly, she handed it over to Vita. In her study in the tower at Sissinghurst, she read the ‘horrifying document’” (qtd. in *Collis* 58).

³⁰¹ St John quoted in Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, 253.

³⁰² “What the swooning Chris did not realize was that Vita was on the rebound from another broken female love affair and was merely taking consolation in Chris and would soon embark on one of her lengthy journeys abroad. While Vita was away, Chris wrote many letters to ‘My Lord Orlando’, but Vita did not exactly hurry back to her side after returning from her travels six months later. When they did meet up, they went for a drive and Vita told her that their first night together had also been their last. Chris was hurt but never stopped loving her” (*Collis* 66).

³⁰³ *Collis* claims that the spurned St. John “got revenge-of a sort” when Sackville-West’s book *Saint Joan of Arc* came out in 1936; St. John’s review in the *New Statesman* “lambasted” the book (66). In contrast, Cockin characterizes St. John’s same July 1936 *New Statesman* review as “diplomatic” (180).

affair,³⁰⁴ Woolf described St. John as Sackville-West's "mule-faced harridan",³⁰⁵ and her later letters refer to St. John with disdain.³⁰⁶ Woolf also later immortalized Edith Craig (in unflattering terms) as Miss LaTrobe,³⁰⁷ the pageant-producer of Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts*.³⁰⁸ However Christopher St John and Virginia Woolf, both active writers and literary critics in London, continued to cross paths in a professional context. In her biography of composer Ethel Smyth, St John indirectly corrected Virginia Woolf's pronouncements on early music in *A Room of One's Own*; Woolf later disapproved of an unidentified article by St John in 1937.³⁰⁹

II: Theatrical Contributions

Playwriting

St. John both translated and wrote plays before her explicit work with suffrage theatre for the Actress Franchise League, although information about these early works is limited, as many remain unpublished.³¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, St. John's translation

³⁰⁴ Reportedly, Ethel Smyth unsuccessfully attempted to advocate for St John's through Woolf; however Vita Sackville-West remained uninterested. (*EC* 179-180).

³⁰⁵ Woolf quoted in Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 271.

³⁰⁶ See Virginia Woolf, *The Sick Side of the Moon. The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume V: 1932-1935*, ed. Nigel Nicholson (London: Hogarth Press, 1979). "Over a year after the affair, in January 1934, Woolf wrote to Smyth that St John 'haunts Vita' (272). In April 1934, St John's 'Horrid revelations' were still the subject of Woolf's correspondence with Smyth (289). As late as March 1935, St John was still a 'complication' (379)" (Cited in *EC* 179-180).

³⁰⁷ "Miss LaTrobe is portrayed as an outsider in the village; mistrusted and constantly falling out with her 'cast', she strides about in a smock frock, often with a whip in one hand. The locals call her 'Bossy' behind her back" (Collis 66).

³⁰⁸ Katharine Cockin traces Virginia Woolf's complicated reactions to both Edith Craig and her mother Ellen Terry; see *WAT* and *EC*. I also briefly discuss Virginia Woolf and Edith Craig in chapter 3.

³⁰⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead. The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume VI: 1936-1941*, ed. Nigel Nicholson, London: Hogarth Press, 1980, 136, cited in *EC* 180.

³¹⁰ For example, St. John wrote and filed two plays with the Lord Chamberlain's censorship office, although it is not clear if these were ever performed publicly. (See *Erikson's Wife* -- LCP ADD MSS 1904/20 and *Her Will* -- LCP ADD MSS 1914/14). Some of St. John's plays were apparently unpublished

(from the Dutch) of Herman Heijerman's play *The Good Hope*³¹¹ was successfully performed in Britain during Ellen Terry's season at the Imperial Theatre (1903) as well as America, during Terry's U.S. tour in 1906-1907.³¹² Similar to Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* in setting, tone and theme, this four act realist drama explores the impact of an exploitative shipping business upon the lives of workers in a small fishing village. Heijerman drew on his experience of living in a fishing village for two years and witnessing oppressive working conditions (WAT 98). The 'Good Hope' of the title refers to a heavily insured and unseaworthy vessel that is put to sea, despite the risk to the sailors on board. When the ship sinks, many lives are lost. *The Good Hope* dramatizes the villagers' responses to the dangerous work on which they depend and the effects it has on their relationships. Heijerman's play was successful in bringing about social change in the Netherlands: after it was written, the government introduced protective legislation to regulate the Dutch fishing industry (WAT 98-99).

Although the plot of *The Good Hope* was not specifically suffragist in nature, the *Vote* newspaper called this production a "a suffragist play by accident" (*Vote*, 8 November 1912) because it exposed the inner workings of an exploitative social system and sympathetically portrayed the experiences of those oppressed. *The Good Hope* emphasized the need to change the entire social system (WAT 99). Another reviewer agreed that *The Good Hope* shared overlapping—if not identical—concerns with the suffrage movement in its critique of:

and not submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office, such as the plays *What a Plague is Love* and *The White Room* (ODNB 614).

³¹¹ *The Good Hope* by H. Heijerman (trans. Chris St John) was filed for performance with the Lord Chamberlain in 1903; this copy is held in the British Library (LCP 1903/10).

³¹² Cited in Christopher St. John's unpublished letter to Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven (dated 3 Dec 1931), (Theatre Museum – London; Chris St. John folder). I discuss the 1903 Ellen Terry season at the Imperial Theatre in chapter 3.

the condition of things that the Suffragist is out to revolutionise. It is, in fact, a Suffragist play by accident, simply because it is a sincere picture of the sufferings of humanity under a regime that is being attacked root and branch by the Suffrage movement (*Votes for Women*, 18 December 1912 – cited in WAT 99).

As with a number of other Pioneer Players productions of dramas dealing with social problems and structural inequalities, *The Good Hope* seems to have resonated with an audience largely sympathetic to the suffrage cause.

The first performance of one of Christopher St. John's own plays, *The Decision: A Dramatic Incident*, occurred at a program of events at Stafford House in July 1906.³¹³ Actress Italia Conti³¹⁴ was the star of this event, which included a range of performers and artists connected with Edith Craig and St. John.³¹⁵ While Craig was not listed as producer of *The Decision*, she collaborated and directed many of St. John's plays. For example, Craig directed St. John's play *On the East Side*³¹⁶ in July 1908 at the Royal Court Theatre; this performance was a charity fundraiser on behalf of the East London Hospital for Children, Shadwell.³¹⁷ Perhaps inspired by her U.S. tour with Craig and Ellen Terry in 1907, St. John's *On the East Side* is set in New York City among a community of Greek immigrants. In this play, St. John explores conflicts between "old

³¹³ Event program filed in D16 ECD. Cited in EC 84.

³¹⁴ Italia Emily Stella Conti (1873-1946) founded the Italia Conti Academy, Britain's oldest independent theatre arts training school, in 1911.

³¹⁵ St. John's play was accompanied by Aimee Lowther's pantomime *Le Madrigal de Pierrot* and Mrs. Craigie's *Two in a Tent*. Edith Craig provided the costumes for Alix Egerton's *The Masque of the Princess*, for which E. Overbeck provided the music. Pamela Colman Smith and Marion Gordon Kerby used the event to advertise their upcoming 'afternoon of folk lore' at the Aeolian Hall, Bond Street (EC 84).

³¹⁶ *On the East Side* by Chris St. John (LCP 1908/15)

³¹⁷ This play was later rewritten in Italian and performed by the Pioneer Players (EC 84).

world” and “new world” values such as honor, family reputation, jealousy and love and distinguishes concepts of barbarism and violence against civilization and cowardice.

For ten years beginning in 1909, St. John penned a number of comedies that centered on the issue of women’s suffrage or other explicitly feminist themes. As mentioned earlier, St. John and Cicely Hamilton co-wrote two of the most well-known suffrage plays produced by the Actress Franchise League and directed by Edith Craig: the comedies *How the Vote Was Won* (1909)³¹⁸ and *The Pot and the Kettle* (1909). *How the Vote Was Won* was adapted from a pamphlet written by Hamilton, illustrated by C. Hedley-Charlton and published in 1908 by the Women Writers’ Suffrage League (WWSL). First produced at the Royalty Theatre, London on 13 April 1909, the play *How the Vote Was Won* eventually toured the country and later had a run of its own with a permanent cast (Spender and Hayman 19). The wildly popular one-act humorously upended the common anti-suffrage economic argument that woman did not need the vote because men ‘looked after’ them. As the play opens, women have declared a massive strike on work and, seeking financial support, begin to descend in hordes upon their nearest male relatives. The anti-suffrage hero Horace Cole, confronted with a houseful of unemployed female relatives, soon realizes the error of his ways and rushes from the house to join the throngs of similarly converted men marching on Parliament. The men demand that the government give votes to women – immediately. Regarding the propagandistic nature of the piece, the *Stage* noted that “the sentiments expressed in *How the Vote Was Won* seemed to arouse conflicting feelings, and perhaps it is a little risky to

³¹⁸ Published in Dale Spender and Carol Hayman’s anthology *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*. Methuen: London, 1985.

present this skit with a purpose before a mixed audience”.³¹⁹ However, one reviewer from the *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote:

The fact that it is so acutely controversial is not at all against it – is, in fact, a virtue rather than a defect, for the Theatre of Ideas is upon us. All that really matters is that it is clever and it is witty, and that it kept yesterday’s audience brimming with excitement and in roars of laughter. It is in fact a long time since we have seen nearly so amusing a one-act play, and if some London manager does not snap it up for his theatre we shall be rather surprised.

Surprisingly, other mainstream critics from *The Times*, *The Star*, *The Stage*, and the *Daily Graphic* not only accepted the propagandistic element of *How the Vote Was Won*, but also praised the play for its liveliness.³²⁰ St. John and Hamilton’s *The Pot and the Kettle* experienced similar reception. *The Pot and the Kettle* appeared on the same bill as Hamilton and Craig’s *A Pageant of Great Women* and several other one act plays. In this short satirical piece, “the Pot is a youthful Anti-Suffragist indicted for assaulting and battering a titled Suffragist”.³²¹ In addition to directing, Edith Craig also performed in both plays, drawing on her character-acting skills. In *How the Vote Was Won*, she played Aunt Lizzie and in *The Pot and the Kettle*, Craig performed the role of anti-suffragist, Mrs. Brewster (EC 84). Although the *Times* reviewer acknowledged the play’s express propagandistic aim (to mock opponents of suffrage), he considered *The Pot and the Kettle* (along with *Master* by Miss Gertrude Mouilleot) as “good-humored and amusing satire”. The *Times* critic also praised the “cleverness” of the acting (which he likened to

³¹⁹ *Stage* review, 13 May 1909, 20, qtd. Stowell 61.

³²⁰ Numerous quotes representing these publications are documented in Spender and Hayman’s anthology (19-20).

³²¹ From a *Times* review cited in *The Common Cause*. 18 Nov 1909, 8.

performances “found at the Court during the Vedrene-Barker *regime*”) and also concluded that these two plays “should find their way to the regular bill at one of the theatres”.³²²

In addition to the popular one-acts co-authored with Cicely Hamilton, St. John wrote several longer feminist and pro-suffrage comedies, in a style not unlike the comedy of errors, with witty situations, short dialogue and conventional form. Edith Craig directed St. John’s comedy *The Wilson Trial*, which was first performed at the Court Theatre³²³ on 14 December 1909. The heroine, a 26 year old Gaity Girl named Violet Trench, is not a suffragist, but has gained “street smarts” through her experiences as a professional actress. In her efforts to save her brother Edmund from damaging legal testimony, Violet triumphs over the lawyer Sir Leslie Roberts in drawing-room verbal tangles. Sir Roberts ultimately declares to the articulate and clever Violet: “It is I who should thank you. You have taught me more in twenty minutes than I should have found out for myself in twenty years”.³²⁴

At the opening of St. John’s 1914 satire *Her Will*, Helen Wilton, a wealthy suffragette and major financial supporter of the Cause, has recently died as a result of being jailed for a suffrage demonstration and suffering health complications from force feedings in the Holloway prison. The play centers on the reactions of her nephew and niece Raymond and Cicely Wilton, their mother Mrs. Wilton, and Cicely’s fiancé Harry Vernon as they wait to hear the reading Helen Wilton’s will. Helen Wilton’s maid

³²² *Times* review cited in *The Common Cause*, 18 Nov 1909, 8.

³²³ Harley Granville Barker, George Bernard Shaw and Elizabeth Robins all had productions at the Court Theatre, which sought to elevate the quality of English drama. In chapter 2, I discuss Robins’ production of *Votes for Women*, directed by Harley Granville Barker at the Court.

³²⁴ *The Wilson Trial*; LCP ADD MSS 1909

Crocker is also present and reminds the other characters that she and Helen met in Holloway Prison. While the Wiltons and Harry Vernon initially express their disapproval of the suffrage cause, they soon learn from the reading of the will that they are implicated in the outcome of the movement: Cicely and Raymond may still receive an inheritance, but only whatever fortune remains when women get the vote. Comically, the previously hostile characters begin to declare new-found sympathy for the suffrage movement. At this point Miss Loring-Parke, the suffragette charged with supervising Helen Wilton's fortune, arrives. Loring-Parke effectively convinces the previously anti-suffrage characters that the achievement of equality for women is in their best interest—even beyond the inheritance at hand. St. John also wrote a feminist comedy with Anthony Ellis after World War I called *In Clover: Or Just a Wife or Two* (1919); the theme of the play is reportedly “the revolutionary assumption that marriage should simply be considered a tool through which thinking, caring people can subvert laws and customs” (Carlson and Powell 250).³²⁵

In the early years of the Pioneer Players theatre company, St. John expanded her repertoire with a series of plays around questions of justice, particularly as they pertained to the tropes of women's empowerment, resistance to forms of oppression, and/or the possibilities of social change. Her dramas *The First Actress* (1911), *Macrena* (1912) and *The Coronation* (co-authored with Charles Thursby, 1912) exemplified St. John's engagement with these issues. St. John frequently applied her training as a historian to explore these themes. For example, her innovative mixed-form drama *The First Actress*:

³²⁵ I am not familiar with this play, but recently came across this description in Carlson and Powell's essay “Reimagining the Theatre: Women Playwrights” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

A Fantasy (1911) challenged anti-suffrage prejudices obliquely, through presenting an English women's performance history that challenged Restoration-era arguments against actresses performing on stage. St. John's version of women's theatre history (from the Restoration to the present) in this play *The First Actress* provides background on the careers of famous English actresses, including details such as their most famous roles. This "testimony of history" of women performing on stage becomes a central part of the indirect pro-suffrage argument St. John mounts in *The First Actress*.

In her 1912 drama *Macrena*, St. John presents the dilemma of Polish nun Irena Macrena, who rallied her community of nuns to resist Emperor Nicholas of Russia in his attempts impose the Russian Orthodox church upon the Catholic citizens of Poland in 1840. Through her program notes for the Pioneer Players May 5, 1912 production of *Macrena*, St. John provides the historical backdrop for the drama and claims Macrena as a heroic figure of the Roman Catholic church. Her author's note states:

The story of the coercive measures employed by the Emperor Nicholas of Russia (1830-1840) while completing the incorporation of Poland into the Russian Empire is not well known in England. So it is necessary to say that the nun Irena Macrena was a real person and that the incidents in this play, of which she is the central figure, are historically true. Macrena's constancy to the Catholic Church, for which many of her nuns suffered martyrdom, stemmed the tide of apostasy in Poland, but it was not until she escaped from the Russians and told her story in Paris and Rome that Catholic Europe was roused to protest against the barbarous methods used to force the Poles to join the Russian Church. The liberty of the

Catholic Church in Poland was secured by the sagacity and courage of this nun, who was a second St. Thomas of Canterbury in her resistance to tyranny.³²⁶

As playwright and educator, St. John contextualizes the both the heroine of her story and the action of the drama in terms resonant with British audiences (placing Irena Macrena in the legacy of English martyr Thomas Beckett of Canterbury).³²⁷ St. John's emphasis on the historicity of the events portrayed in *Macrena* fits in with her feminist commitment to recovering women's histories as a means of inspiration for contemporary suffrage activists.

St. John appropriates Irena Macrena as a revolutionary role model for women's leadership whose influence transcends national borders. Although Irena Macrena's struggle was a religious one³²⁸, the language of the play echoes the spiritual metaphors common in suffrage publications and speeches. For example, the concepts of "conversion", "sisterhood" and "community of women" were frequently invoked by British women's suffrage leaders. The character Irena Macrena also uses militant language similar to that of suffragette agitators to describe the resistance tactics she and her sisters would need to employ. At a key turning point in the drama, Macrena declares "I see now what is our duty. We are not to stay here like lambs waiting for the slaughterer – No, we must have the courage of lions, and fight...we must escape from here somehow and strike a blow for our faith" (12). Katharine Cockin also reads the

³²⁶ Pioneer Players Program for *Macrena* by Christopher St. John, Kings Hall, Covent Garden May 5, 1912 (Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection).

³²⁷ Thomas Becket (1118-29 December 1170), was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 until his death in 1170. Venerated as a saint by both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, Becket was assassinated in Canterbury Cathedral by followers of Henry II of England.

³²⁸ Christopher St. John's interest in Irena Macrena was certainly, in part, due to the Polish nun's heroism on behalf of the Catholic faith to which St. John had converted. (Christopher St. John later published the *Little Book of Polish Saints*.) The Catholic Women's Suffrage Society approached St. John to organize a performance of *Macrena* for them (EC 115).

figure of the nun as a metaphor for the suffragette, noting that in *Macrena* “nuns are militant, politicized and woman-identified ... it is important that it is a community of women, rather than an individual, which effectively challenges the state” (WAT 130). St. John also wrote the action of the play to resonate with the suffrage movement in 1912. In *Macrena*, the Russian government deploys military authorities to suppress any Polish resistance to the imposition of Orthodoxy, including that of Macrena and her fellow sisters. Such measures echo the police brutality that occasionally broke out at suffragette rallies and demonstrations. As inspiration for the secular British suffrage movement in early twentieth-century England, St. John offers the stalwart heroines of a religious and political conflict in nineteenth-century Poland. Even under the threat of rape and death, Macrena and her loyal band of fellow nuns tenaciously refuse to abandon their faith and ultimately survive this tumultuous historical period.

St. John’s play *The Coronation* (1912), co-written with Charles Thursby,³²⁹ took up questions of justice and social change in a manner consistent with the frequent connections between feminism and socialism during this period. *The Coronation* is a political fantasy that dramatizes a monarch’s change of heart in an imaginary kingdom. On the way to his coronation with his advisers, King Henricus of Omnisterre encounters a lone protestor, a woman who demands that he recognize the devastation caused by poverty in his country. Henricus is shaken by the testimony of the destitute woman, whose poverty led to the death of her child. The play traces his political conversion and

³²⁹ St. John’s pro-suffrage co-author Charles Thursby frequently played Prejudice in the widely-performed propaganda piece *A Pageant of Great Women*, written by Cicely Hamilton and directed by Edith Craig. (On other occasions, the role Prejudice was performed by Leonard Craske and on one occasion by Nigel Playfair). (EC 112). Interestingly, a number of sources mis-identify “Charles Thursby” as a woman (presumably, because they came to realize the Christopher St. John was the pseudonym for a female playwright).

ends with the king and the woman united to combat starvation and social inequality. The overtly political tone of the plays sparked controversy: the Lord Chamberlain's copy in the British Library shows alarm over its king and his politics as well as over St. John and Thursby's critiques of capitalism (Carlson and Powell 249).

Christopher St. John also experimented with writing in the pageant genre, both through her mixed-form play *The First Actress* (1911) and in her later *Pageant of the Stage* (1913). In *Pageant of the Stage*, St. John creates an overview of the history of Western drama from ancient Greek theatre to the early twentieth century with the stated aim "to illustrate the history of the Art of Acting."³³⁰ Written completely in the pageant style, St. John's piece clusters various movements and eras of Western drama into ten representative groups (the Classic Stage; Miracles, Mysteries, Moralities; the Italian Players, the Elizabethan Players; His Majesty's Servants; Servants of the Public; Idols of the Public; the Strolling Players; Pantomime; and Drama of the Day). Edith Craig directed the first performance of this production on 11 June 1912 as a fundraiser for the charity arm of the Theatrical Ladies Guild (EC 221).³³¹ St. John was emphatic that Craig retain directing rights as co-creator of the piece:

I could not consent to the pageant being repeated unless Edith Craig were responsible for the production and I understand she cannot afford to do all that work again unless she is paid. Her work was more than half the battle – indeed

³³⁰ Program for "*Pageant of the Stage*. Written by Christopher St. John. Arranged and produced by Edith Craig. Royal Albert Hall. The Theatrical Ladies' Guild Tea Party: A society for helping the poorer Members of the Theatrical Profession, also a Maternity Guild. Friday, March 15th, 19th, 3 to 6pm." Edith Craig Archive, Ellen Terry Memorial Museum, Smallhythe Kent.

³³¹ Craig's earlier production of *Pageant of the Stage* involved Cicely Hamilton as prompter, Regina Laurence as stage-manager and Mrs. Haverfield as call-boy. [N11 ECD cited in EC 90).

she is practically part author, and I cannot hand over her ideas to be dealt with by another.³³²

The star-studded cast list for *Pageant of the Stage* includes many famous actors and actresses who worked with St. John and Craig in other contexts.³³³

In the portion of St. John's pageant devoted to Medieval drama ("Miracles, Mysteries, Moralities"), the character of "Tragedy" pays homage to the tenth century German nun Hrotsvit³³⁴ as a theatrical pioneer. In iambic pentameter, Tragedy declaims to the audience: "See, after multitudes of years/ The Christian drama now appears--/The nun Roswitha leads the way,/A Benedictine, in whose day/Playwrights of either sex were rare:/ Tribute to her is only fair" (6). St. John then depicts Roswitha directing two novices who are preparing to perform in one of her dramas. Roswitha expresses confidence that the voice of God has encouraged her efforts: "Go on, Roswitha, go on! What thou hast begun in the cloister will be continued in the world outside" (7). The character "Tragedy" confirms that these dramas eventually reached the outside world and that men of the church followed Roswitha in composing plays: "It was not long ere priests began / To make Church dogmas sweet to man. / Through miracle and mystery plays" (7-8). Thus while *Pageant of the Stage* does not have a strong 'justice argument'

³³² Carbon copy letter from Christopher St John to May Whitty, 12 February 1913; ECD. St. John's letter to May Whitty addresses the Theatrical Ladies Guild's request to produce *The Pageant of the Stage* for a second time, without hiring Craig as director. St. John's letter explains the issue of authorship / performance rights as well as the financial ramifications (for Craig) of the first performance of *The Pageant of the Stage*. St. John continues:

[Craig] gave not only her time and her talents as a present to the charity when the pageant was last done, but a very considerable sum of money. She was much out of pocket by it. She doesn't grudge this at all but she does feel she ought not to let her enthusiasm carry her away a second time.

I am very sorry—but unless this first condition – Edith Craig as producer – is complied with, the pageant must not be performed, I need not go into the others which are all of minor importance.

³³³ These included Ellen Terry, Lena Ashwell, Mrs. Langtry, Eva Moore, Mrs. Cora Brown-Potter, Marion Terry, Lady Tree and Miss Irene Vanbrugh, among others.

³³⁴ In *Pageant of the Stage*, St. John refers to Hrotsvit by one of her other names: "Roswitha".

or a central feminist theme, St. John boldly claims woman playwright Hrotsvit as the first dramatist of the Middle Ages.

Dramaturgical Activities

At one point in his speech introducing Roswitha, the character named Tragedy muses “I wonder if her Latin plays / Would grip an audience in these days?” (6). The rhetorical question St. John posed in *Pageant of the Stage* was answered a year and a half later through the Pioneer Player’s historic production of Hrotsvit’s first drama, *Paphnutius*.³³⁵ Although St. John respected Hrotsvit’s work as religious drama, St. John’s translation of *Paphnutius* stands primarily in the context of St. John’s feminist commitment to create and celebrate women’s histories.³³⁶ In her program note on Hroswitha St. John claims that “many plays written in the year 1913 are already more old-fashioned than *Paphnutius*.”³³⁷ Praise for director Edith Craig’s set design suggest that the staging, at least, was modern; Craig’s stage design was compared with those of Leon Bakst³³⁸ (EC 115). Edith Craig also drew upon her musical training, experimenting with antiphons in *Paphnutius* (EC 115).³³⁹ The episodic structure of *Paphnutius* was also

³³⁵ The Pioneer Players first performed Hroswitha’s *Paphnutius* (trans. Chris St. John) on 12-12 January 1914 at the Savoy Theatre. Edith Craig directed the production.

³³⁶ For example, Katharine Cockin points out that “This [PP] production, and St. John’s translation of the play, have received little attention from Hrotsvit scholars...” (Cockin 100 quoting Petroff 1986: 5).

³³⁷ “*Paphnutius: The Conversion of Thais* by Hroswitha, a nun of the Order of St. Benedict, translated by Christopher St. John. Pioneer Players 13th Subscription Performance: Sunday, January 11th, 1914; Monday, January 12th, 1914.” (Program in Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection).

³³⁸ Russian painter/scene and costume designer Leon Samoilovitch Bakst (1866-1924) became famous as a scene-painter with the Ballet Russes in 1908. Beginning in 1909, Bakst worked mostly as a stage-designer, designing sets for Greek tragedies and for *Cleopatra* (1909), *Scheherazade* (1910), *Carnaval* (1910), *Narcisse* (1911), *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911), and *Daphnis et Chloe* (1912).

³³⁹ The play program also includes “A Note on the Music”, which states: “6. *In Paradisum*: ‘May the Angels lead thee into Paradise; may the martyrs receive thee into their company and lead thee even into the holy city, Jerusalem.’ 7th mode. The type of melody is of the 5th century. In it the joyful confidence with

innovative, even though the highly conservative narrative of *Paphnutius* differs significantly from the contemporary dramas produced by the Pioneer Players during this period. In the play, a prostitute character named Thais is converted by a confessor figure, the priest Paphnutius. The plot punishes the prostitute character Thais, whose redemption is only accomplished through misery: her imprisonment ultimately leads to her death. Katharine Cockin notes that the problematic *Paphnutius* exemplifies the complex readings possible for many Pioneer Players' productions: "It could be read as an endorsement of the restriction of women's sexuality. In the context of the imprisoned suffragists, it could be interpreted as granting their suffering a sacrificial status" (EC 115-116)

The *Paphnutius* program note on Hroswitha provides additional insight into the playwright's appeal for her translator. In recalling others' references to the "gifted nun" as the "Christian Sappho", "the brightest glory of the Middle Ages" and "the tenth Muse," St. John underscores Hroswitha's obvious importance to women's theatre history.³⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, the Pioneer Player's inaugural production of *Paphnutius* was widely celebrated as part of the early feminist project to create and disseminate women's histories.³⁴¹ Additionally, St. John suggests that Hroswitha's sense of being called by God enabled the playwright to resist compromise in her style or theme:

which a Christian should be inspired by the thought of death is beautifully expressed." (Program in Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection).

³⁴⁰ From Christopher St. John's "A Note on Hroswitha" in "*Paphnutius: The Conversion of Thais* by Hroswitha, a nun of the Order of St. Benedict, translated by Christopher St. John. Pioneer Players 13th Subscription Performance: Sunday, January 11th, 1914; Monday, January 12th, 1914." (Program in Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection).

³⁴¹ However, although Christopher St John's translation Hrotsvit's *Paphnutius* was published in *The Plays of Roswitha* (1923), by 1951 it was already becoming lost to theater history. For example, Phyllis Hartnoll, *Oxford Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) cites a translation by H.M. Tillyard, 1923, and the 1914 production by Edith Craig of St John's translation but not St John's published translation (EC

This dramatist, who was a nun consecrated to the service of God, did not write for money or for fame. She did not consider the box-office or the actor-manager; and her message was not clouded by speculations as to what the public wants. She, herself tells us, in the preface to her plays, that her only desire in writing them was to make “the small talent given me by Heaven create, under the hammer of devotion, a faint sound to the praise of God.’ And because such a motive cannot age, being born of eternal things, the work which it produced has not aged.³⁴²

St. John compares and contrasts Hroswitha to contemporary dramatists possibly motivated by money or fame, who must pander to public whims and contend with the demands of commercial theatres. This description of the commercial theatre establishment suggests some of the difficulties faced by St. John and other feminist dramatists of her day. St. John idealizes Hroswitha’s spiritual approach to drama—and her circumstances—as a way of life separate from the corruption and compromise of theatre in a capitalist context.

Christopher St. John’s varied activities for this production of *Paphnutius*—translating the play into English, introducing the dramatist Hroswitha to modern British audiences, explaining historical research on medieval drama and offering a critique of the contemporary theatre establishment—exemplify St. John’s wide-ranging contributions to British theatre. Specifically, St. John’s theatrical work as a literary manager and historian for the Pioneer Players was an early manifestation in England of the role of the

115, 205). Due to political turmoil in Ireland, the manuscript of St. John’s translation of Hrotsvit’s plays was destroyed by fire at her Dublin publishers. (Christopher St John, trans. *The Plays of Roswitha* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1923), xiv. Cited in *EC* 120-121.

³⁴² From Christopher St. John’s “A Note on Hroswitha” in “*Paphnutius: The Conversion of Thais* by Hroswitha, a nun of the Order of St. Benedict, translated by Christopher St. John. Pioneer Players 13th Subscription Performance: Sunday, January 11th, 1914; Monday, January 12th, 1914.” (Program in Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection).

dramaturg. When situated within the broad historical development of dramaturgy in Europe and England, St. John's work as in-house critic, historian, playwright and/or literary manager for the Pioneer Players emerges as an important facet of the development of theatrical modernism

Although the position of dramaturg or literary manager was not formally instituted in any British theatre until the early 1960s, theatres in Germany, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and the Netherlands have employed dramaturgs since the late eighteenth century (Luckhurst 1).³⁴³ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) held the first appointed position of dramaturg at the Hamburg Theatre (1767-1769). Lessing's experimental work pioneered reforms of theatre practice and theory, led to the centrality of dramaturgs in German-speaking theatres, and eventually inspired the spread of official dramaturg positions in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and the Netherlands. Lessing's theatre criticism, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*), is widely considered one of the most important theoretical documents of eighteenth-century drama (Luckhurst 24). In Britain, however, with interest in this type of theatre role only beginning to cohere with the rise of modernism, the dramaturg position was not formalized until the early 1960s.³⁴⁴

Two of Christopher St. John's contemporaries--theatre director Harley Granville Barker (1877-1946) of the Stage Society and later the Court Theatre and drama critic William Archer (1856-1924)—laid the groundwork for what would eventually become an

³⁴³ I am grateful to Mary Luckhurst for conversations around the topic of dramaturgy during a tutorial at the University of York (2003). See also her groundbreaking book covering the history of the European and British dramaturgy. Luckhurst, Mary. *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

³⁴⁴ The appointment of Kenneth Tynan as Literary Manager for the National Theatre in 1963 was the first official designation of a professional dramaturg in Britain (Luckhurst 1).

official dramaturg position in Britain.³⁴⁵ Like other key players in the late nineteenth-century theatrical avant-garde, Barker and Archer were passionately committed to the elevation of dramatic literature and of the playwright's status (78). In their efforts to revitalize the theatre establishment, Barker and Archer campaigned for a National Theatre which would provide an alternative model to the existing commercial actor-manager system, which they viewed as economically corrupt and artistically compromising (78). In their 'Blue Book', or *Scheme and Estimates for a National Theatre* (privately printed and distributed in 1904 and published in 1907),³⁴⁶ Archer and Barker suggested creating a new position to improve the caliber of dramatic literature presented on the English stage. Archer and Barker imbued this theoretical "literary manager" with a wide range of responsibilities, including:

to weed out new plays before they are submitted to the Reading Committee; to suggest plays for revival and arrange them for the stage; to follow the dramatic movement in foreign countries, and to suggest foreign plays suitable for production; to consult with the scene painter, producers, &c., on questions of archeology, costume and local colour. The Literary Manager would be a member of the Reading Committee, but in all other matters would be subordinate and responsible to the Director (*NT* 12-13).

According to their opening description, the proposed "literary manager" would correspond to the German *Dramaturg*, a post with which both Archer and Barker would

³⁴⁵Citations in this section taken from chapter 4: "William Archer and Harley Granville Barker: Constructions of the Literary Manger" (pp. 78-108) and chapter 5: "Bertolt Brecht: the Theory and Practice of the Dramaturg" (pp. 109-151) in Luckhurst's *Dramaturgy*.

³⁴⁶For the official publication the title was altered. See William Archer and H. Granville Barker, *A National Theatre: Scheme and Estimates*, London: Duckworth and Co., 1907. Henceforth *NT*.

have been familiar. [Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, first translated in an abridged version in 1879,³⁴⁷ was reprinted in English in 1905; also, Archer had traveled extensively and researched German and Scandinavian theatre (Luckhurst 82).] During his later travels in Europe, Barker learned more about the management of repertoire and the division of labor at the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus and the Deutsches Theater (under Max Reinhardt) and he wrote admiringly of the German dramaturgy system (Luckhurst 90). Subsequently, Barker more thoroughly fleshed out his ideas regarding the Literary Manager's play reading and selection processes in his article "Two German Theatres" (1911) and book *The Exemplary Theatre* (Luckhurst 89).³⁴⁸

The National Theatre for which Archer and Barker imagined the Literary Manager role did not come to pass in their lifetimes. Yet, with the exception of consulting with the scenic and costume designers, St. John fulfilled many of the responsibilities of the "literary manager" role projected by Archer and Barker. St. John both recommended plays and served on the play selection committee for the Pioneer Players—equivalent to the "Reading Committee" Archer and Barker proposed for the National Theatre (EC 110). As her work on *Paphnutius* illustrates—and my later discussion will show—St. John also translated and adapted plays for the stage.

Meanwhile, although the "dramaturg" position did not exist formally in England during the time of St. John's work with the Pioneer Players (1911-1925), other European modernists were familiar with this role. Most notably, German theatre theorist and

³⁴⁷ See G. E. Lessing, *Selected Prose Works*, ed. E. Bell, trans. E. C. Beasley and Helen Zimmern, London: George Bell and Sons, 1879.

³⁴⁸ See H. Granville Barker, 'Two German Theatres', *Fortnightly Review* 89 (January–June 1911): 60–70. For further information on Barker's impression of German theatre, see Kennedy, *Granville Barker*, p. 196. See also: Granville-Barker, Harley. *The Exemplary Theatre*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1922. Luckhurst calls Barker's combined theorizations of structures and systems for literary management "the most advanced printed documents written by an English hand on the English theatre" (101).

director Bertolt Brecht stressed the importance of the dramaturg's role as in-house scholar, critic, educator and theatre activist, within the collaborative practice of political theatre (Luckhurst 120). Early in his theatrical career, Brecht trained as a dramaturg³⁴⁹ and he later included dramaturgs as part of his early informal collaborative theatre experiments.³⁵⁰ During the 1920s Brecht instituted the more formal but still fluid "Brecht collectives," which consisted of actors, directors, dramaturgs, writers, musicians, designers and other intellectuals who worked on Brecht's productions.³⁵¹ Brecht later theorized the centrality of the dramaturg to the project of political theatre in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*,³⁵² a brilliantly witty exploration of the philosophy and aesthetics of epic theatre, conceptualized as a drama.³⁵³ Brecht particularly relied on the work of three women collaborators throughout his career—Elisabeth Hauptmann (1897-1973), Ruth Berlau (1906-74) and Margarete Steffin (1908-41); among other duties, these

³⁴⁹ From 1924-1925, Brecht worked as assistant dramaturg at Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theatre in Berlin, one of the leading theatres in Europe. See Sacks, Willett and Willett and Manheim. In 1927 Brecht joined the 'dramaturgical collective' of Erwin Piscator's first company, which was designed to tackle the problems of finding new plays for its "epic, political, confrontational, documentary theatre" (Erwin Piscator, "Basic Principles of a Sociological Drama" in Kolocotroni, Goldman and Taxis, 243).

³⁵⁰ Mary Luckhurst argues that a collaborative approach to theatre-making was the defining characteristic of Bertolt Brecht's entire oeuvre: "The most striking pattern in Brecht's development as playwright, critic, theorist, director and dramaturg is his persistent need for and generation of teams of creative individuals to fuel his own artistic energy. Throughout his life he positioned himself at the centre of literary and theatrical circles, both private and professional, from which he sought ideas, discussion, collaboration and a willing audience" (120).

³⁵¹ Brecht collectives continued working in this way from the winter of 1924 until Hitler came to power in January 1933 (Luckhurst 120-121).

³⁵² Brecht wrote *Der Messingkauf* (*The Messingkauf Dialogues*) sporadically between 1939 and 1955. *The Messingkauf Dialogues* stages a discussion between five characters seated on stage in an empty theatre: the Philosopher (an ideologue director committed to Marxism), Actor, Actress, Lighting Technician and Dramaturg. The dramatic form of the piece reflects the centrality of collaboration with other theatre professionals in every stage of Brecht's theatre practice—from conception, choice of material, and playwrighting, to direction, rehearsal exercises, criticism and use of music and set. A student, critic and practitioner of theatre, the Dramaturg has knowledge of theatre history, texts and practice and his considerable critical faculties "at the Philosopher's disposal" with the ultimate goal of rejuvenation in the theatre. The Dramaturg, who initiates the dialogue, plays the crucial role of mediator, bridging the gaps of expertise, philosophy and motivation that exist between the different theatre personnel.

³⁵³ Referencing the German version of the text (as opposed to Willett's 1965 English translation), Luckhurst stresses that Brecht's plans in the text itself (along with commentaries in his journals) make clear his intention to produce both a theoretical document and a performance text (111).

dramaturgs identified promising scripts from a range of cultures, translated them into German and helped adapt them to meet the goals of Brecht's political/aesthetic project of epic theatre (Luckhurst 121-122).³⁵⁴ In the same vein, St. John applied her considerable dramaturgical skills—fluency in several languages, knowledge of drama and historical training—to aid Edith Craig in the development of repertoire, particularly during Pioneer Players' 'Art Theatre' period (1915-1920, 1925).

As perhaps her most important contribution to British avant-garde theatre, St. John expanded the roster of international drama performed in England by translating or adapting numerous works from a range of languages. In 1915, artistic director Edith Craig announced her intention for the Pioneer Players to become the leading art theatre in England (*EC* 122). To that end, the Pioneer Players produced a wide range of international dramas from France, Germany, Belgium, Russia, Holland, Spain, the United States and Japan (*EC* 119). Even amidst the more conservative and nationalistic climate in Britain throughout World War I (when many other theatres were abandoning controversial plays), the Pioneer Players maintained their theatrical experiments and engagement with foreign plays (*EC* 118). The Pioneer Players performed many of these works for the first time in England. Through this broad range of plays, the Pioneer Players represented an array of experiments initiated abroad, including works now associated with symbolism, expressionism and futurism among other now canonical avant-garde movements. St. John applied her linguistic skills in Dutch, French, Latin³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ In particular, Elisabeth Hauptmann's wide reading and translations exposed Brecht to new ideas and forms; these included her translations of Arthur Whaley's *Nô* plays, Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, and Kipling's poetry, all of which Brecht incorporated into plays to some degree (Luckhurst 121-122).

³⁵⁵ Earlier in this chapter I discussed the medieval drama *Paphnutius* translated by Christopher St. John; the German nun Hrotsvit composed the play in Latin.

and Russian to prepare a number of these plays for performance in England. In addition, as she had done with the Pioneer Players production of *Paphnutius*, St. John also drew upon her historical training and knowledge of contemporary theatre movements to provide program notes and introductory materials for many of these plays. Through her dramaturgical work, Christopher St. John helped introduce a number of avant-garde European dramas to British audiences and served as a passionate apologist for experimental theatre.

When Edith Craig's London-based Pioneer Players kicked off their 'Art Theatre' period in December 1915, they began their engagement with international avant-garde movements by producing the work of Nikolai Evreinov, a Russian symbolist dramatist.³⁵⁶ Nikolai Nikolayevich Evreinov (1879-1953) was a producer, dramatist and theatre theorist. His work reflected the philosophical influence of Bergson, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and incorporated commedia dell'arte and symbolist aesthetics.³⁵⁷ Christopher St. John first translated Evreinov's *The Theatre of the Soul* from Russian into English, on this one occasion in collaboration³⁵⁸ with Marie Potapenko, also famous as the model for Anton Chekhov's Irina Arkadin in *The Seagull*.³⁵⁹ St. John and Potapenko's version of *The Theatre of the Soul*, translated on behalf of the Pioneer

³⁵⁶ In chapter 3, I discuss different aspects this historic production of *The Theatre of the Soul* and in particular, Edith Craig's directorial work. In my chapter 3 analysis, I highlight Craig's contributions to the staging, parallels between Evreinov and Craig's careers, and an interpretation of the play's theme and theatrical conventions in light of the common avant-garde project to deconstruct the bourgeois subject.

³⁵⁷ Today, Evreinov is best known for his spectacular production of *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920), a recreation of the October Revolution on its three-year anniversary. The mass spectacle form took the pre-revolutionary Symbolist utopias of "ritual theatre" and recast their 'people' as the proletariat (Golub 1998:354-355).

³⁵⁸ St. John otherwise worked as the sole translator.

³⁵⁹ Ronald Hingley, *A Life of Chekhov*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 192-5, cited in EC 206.

Players, was the first Evreinov play to be performed on a British stage.³⁶⁰ Their English translation was published by Henderson's, the bookseller and publisher that, in the parlance of suffrage militancy, advertised itself as 'the bomb shop' (EC 119).³⁶¹

As a monodrama, *The Theatre of the Soul* theatricalizes the psychic and physiological processes of a male protagonist as he struggles with the decision of whether or not to leave his wife (the mother of his children) for his mistress, a dancer with whom he is in love.³⁶² The man's divided psyche is represented by two separate actors who portray the protagonist's Rational self (informed by social propriety and moral absolutes) and his Emotional self (characterized by romantic ideals and his sexual drives). The English title given to Evreinov's play by translators Christopher St. John and Marie Potapenko—*The Theatre of the Soul*—might initially suggest that the theatricalized interplay between the rational self and the emotional self is what constitutes the soul of man. However, the drama's cast list includes a separate character related to the psyche of the protagonist: a third male character called 'the Soul', is shown visibly sleeping on stage throughout most of the drama. After the protagonist commits suicide, the Soul rouses in the final moments of the production and boards a train for "Everyman Town". Thus, in an ironic twist, the titular figure of the Soul remains completely passive through most of the play. The play's original title in Russian—*The Soul*—suggests either greater

³⁶⁰ The following year, the Pioneer Players produced Evreinov's *A Merry Death* (April 1916).

³⁶¹ Evreinov, Nikolai. *The Theatre of the Soul: A Monodrama in One Act*, trans. Marie Potapenko and Christopher St. John (London: Hendersons, 1915).

³⁶² In his 1909 work *Introduction to Monodrama*, Evreinov theorized that the future of theatre lied with monodrama, "a dramatic performance that strives to convey to the spectator a protagonist's frame of mind. At any given moment, the spectator should hear, see and feel what the hears, sees and feels. The task of the monodramatist is thus to turn the spectator into an 'imagined' character" (Cody and Sprinchorn 919).

significance for this sleeping figure—or, more likely, an ironic homage to this distinctly *unspiritual* vision of human nature.³⁶³

In her lengthy introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul*, dramaturg Christopher St. John informs the Pioneer Players' audience of Evreinov's "considerable reputation in Russia as a daring and unconventional dramatist who has also distinguished himself by experiments in the production of plays" (1).³⁶⁴ Perhaps conscious of the perceived "otherness" of *The Theatre of the Soul*, St. John likened Evreinov's style to an older Russian playwright more familiar to English audiences, namely Chekhov, in his farces *The Wedding* and *The Jubilee*.³⁶⁵ However, St. John warns that Evreinov's satire is more acidic than that of the familiar Chekhov: "But [those] famous little plays taste rather like sweet lemonade, indubitably made of real lemons after one has drunk a little of Evreinov's [sic] strong essential life"(1-2). St. John provides an overview of Evreinov's theatrical career, highlighting his work as producer, dramatist and composer with the Parody Theatre (or False Mirror Theatre) in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). Aware that English audiences might find themselves alienated by the avant-garde theatrical conventions of Russian symbolism, St. John contextualizes Evreinov's approach by familiarizing the audience with the basics of Evreinov's theatrical theory as formulated in his book *Theatre—As Such*: "Evreinov holds that the theatre exists and cannot be altered, although it can be used as a means of expression/exploration. He thinks that the word

³⁶³ For a more detailed analysis of the plot, themes and theatrical constructs employed in *The Theatre of the Soul*, see my discussion of the play in Chapter 3.

³⁶⁴ My citations are taken from St. John's original documents on *The Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov, held at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum. The published version of St. John's Introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul*, now viewable online, has different pagination.

³⁶⁵ Recent British Chekhov productions included *The Seagull* (Glasgow Repertory 1909 and Little Theatre London 1912), *The Cherry Orchard* 1911 and *Uncle Vanya* 1914 (produced by the Stage Society.) Sometime after this 1915 production of *The Theatre of the Soul*, the Pioneer Players performed Chekhov's *The Wedding* (May 1917, Jan 1920) and *On the High Road* (Jan 1920).

“theatrical” ought not to be a term of reproach” (2). St. John’s explanation reveals her theoretical acuity and her wide knowledge of European avant-garde movements, while simultaneously demonstrating her sensitivity to the needs of a public still used to naturalist drama.

Christopher St. John astutely characterizes Evreinov’s role within the Russian and broader European theatre establishment as iconoclastic. St. John describes Evreinov’s satirical work at the Parody Theatre, explaining that the Russian director “produced Shaw’s *Candida*, with a black boy reading the stage directions which Evreinof considers the most brilliant part of the play”(2). Evreinov’s radical disruption of British naturalist drama in this performance of *Candida* was only one example of his irreverence towards the European and English theatre establishments. Evreinov also directed a landmark production of Gogol’s *Inspector General*, in which each act parodied a different modern theatre aesthetic: provincial realist theatres, the Moscow Art Theatre (directed by Constantin Stanislavski), the techniques of Edward Gordon Craig and Max Reinhardt, and slapstick comedy films. St. John suggests that the irreverent stance taken in Evreinov’s direction of *Inspector General* reflects Evreinov’s rejection of any unified theoretical school or theatrical method:

In this satirical venture Evreinof was hitting out at the cranks who want to reform the theatre, or make a new thing which shall be more artistic than the theatre ... He is in the position of being a rebel against the rebels, and is no more in sympathy with the Art Theatre, Moscow & all similar enterprises than with the ordinary commercial theatre (2).

In addition to explaining the Russian director's playfully iconoclastic approach, St. John may have appropriated Evreinov's stance of "a rebel against the rebels" as a metaphor for the Pioneer Players, as Katharine Cockin suggests (WAT 180). Like Evreinov at the Parody Theatre in St. Petersburg, Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players refused to be categorized and declined to produce a definitive manifesto of revolutionary aesthetics.

In her final remarks, St. John praises Evreinov's insightful satire on the human condition: "Horace's "ridendo dicere severum" would appear to be Evreinof's motto."³⁶⁶ Even in *The Theatre of the Soul* I feel that he is being profound – with his tongue in his cheek" (3). Interestingly, St. John mistakenly attributes this saying to Horace, when actually this aphorism is Frederick Nietzsche's pun on Horace's rhetorical question "ridentem dicere verum, quid vetat" (*Satires* I.24), or "What forbids us to tell the truth, laughing?"³⁶⁷ St. John concludes her dramaturgical notes with a defense of the "crude psychology" represented theatrically through the staged antics of *The Theatre of the Soul*:

Evreinof may be right in his assumption that the reflections of the soul are crude.

Everyone who thinks at all knows that the interior of a human soul has very little furniture, and that what takes place there is astonishingly simple. What a man expresses through the medium of his brain and personality is complicated, both in its beauty and its ugliness, but the thing from which this elaboration of thought and action is evolved is as it exists in the soul elemental whether the soul be a philosopher's or a peasant's (3).

³⁶⁶ "Ridendo dicere severum" may be translated "Through what is laughable say what is somber".

³⁶⁷ Nietzsche included the aphorism "ridendo dicere severum" on the title page of *The Case of Wagner*. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Nietzsche Reader*, Vol. 10. Eds. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Duncan Large. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006. (xxx).

St. John's Introduction to the playwright Nikolai Evreinov and *The Theatre of the Soul* is one of the more detailed documents exemplifying St. John's many dramaturgical talents. In this essay, St. John insightfully analyzes an experimental Russian symbolist work, demonstrates familiarity with a range of other modernist avant-garde movements (evidenced by her references to Moscow Art Theatre, Edward Gordon Craig, Reinhardt, slapstick film), and her ability to contextualize a contemporary theatrical work within a broader historical tradition of Western satire.

St. John's familiarity with dramas and theatre movements from cultures other than Russia is evident in her translations of a range of works. In 1912, the Pioneer Players produced Christopher St. John's earlier translation of *The Good Hope* by leading Dutch playwright Herman Heijerman.³⁶⁸ During the Pioneer Players 'Art Theatre' period, Christopher St. John translated two more Heijerman dramas from Dutch into English: *The Hired Girl* (1917) and *The Rising Sun* (1919). St. John also provided an introduction to the version of *The Rising Sun* that she filed with the Lord Chamberlain's office in 1926.³⁶⁹ Translator and dramaturg St. John contextualized Heijerman's drama within his politics and historic moment and explained the Pioneer Players' interest in his work: "As in all Heijerman's plays, our sympathies are roused for those who suffer and fail, for the victims of poverty and of all the evil and distress it involves" (St. John 1929: vii).

³⁶⁸ In 1903, St. John translated her first Heijerman play *The Good Hope* which was performed successfully in England (at the Terry-Craig 1903 season at the Imperial) and in the U.S. during Ellen Terry's 1907 tour. St. John published her translation of this play in 1921. (Heijerman, Herman. *The Good Hope: A Play in Four Acts*, trans. Christopher St John (London: Hendersons, 1921).

³⁶⁹ *The Rising Sun* by H. Heijerman (trans Chris St John) with an Introduction by Chris St John (LCP 1926/21). The Pioneer Players collection of the Edith Craig Archive (Ellen Terry Memorial Museum) contains a range of performance materials for *The Rising Sun*, including the scene plot/props and scenery layout, lists of cues for a range of sound and visual effects (shop bell, telephone, clock, harmonium, wind machine), the published character list from the first production at the Lyric Theatre, and Edith Craig's prompt book for the production of this play she directed in Leeds.

Although hailed as the greatest Dutch dramatist, Heijerman's 'Socialistic views were distasteful to a thoroughly comfortable and powerful bourgeoisie' during his lifetime (St. John 1929:v).³⁷⁰ In contrast to Heijerman's contemporaries in Holland, St. John's translation of three of his plays—coupled with the themes evident in many of her own plays (such as *The Coronation*, 1912)—suggest her socialist sympathies drew her to his dramas.

Christopher St. John also maintained an interest in French drama, particularly French symbolism. Her work as a translator and adapter of experimental European drama was influenced partly by her attraction to Catholic mysticism particularly in her encouragement of the Pioneer Players' performances of French symbolist Paul Claudel's religious poetic dramas (*EC* 124).³⁷¹ The Pioneer Players' produced Claudel's play *The Exchange* (1915) only one year after it was published in French and Edith Craig was the first to direct Claudel's drama on the English stage; many critics consider Craig's productions of Paul Claudel's poetic dramas to be the pinnacle of her directorial work with the Pioneer Players.³⁷² The Pioneer Players' London premier of Claudel's *The Tidings Brought to Mary* (1917) and later performance of Claudel's *The Hostage* (1919) further introduced avant-garde elements of symbolist themes to the English stage, as well as displayed Claudel's experiments with 'musical drama' and the aesthetics of ritual theatre.³⁷³ St. John also translated a work by a little-known Belgian symbolist poet named Isi Collin (1878-1931): a dramatic dialogue entitled *Sisyphe et le Suif Errant*

³⁷⁰ Cited in *WAT* 99.

³⁷¹ For Edith Craig, who did not share St. John's attraction to Catholicism, Claudel's drama was compatible with her lifelong interest in pageants, her increasing interest in the relationship between drama and the church, and her curiosity about the effect of making theatre in a spiritual context (*EC* 124).

³⁷² See my discussion of Edith Craig's directing work of Claudel's drama in the conclusion of Chapter 3.

³⁷³ For more on the Pioneer Players and Craig's relation to Barrault, Brook and other avant-garde artists with interests in ritual and religious drama, see the conclusion of chapter 3.

(1914), or *Sisyphus and the Wandering Jew*. The Pioneer Players premiered St. John's English translation of *Sisyphus and the Wandering Jew* on 7 March 1915 in London.³⁷⁴

St. John translated Saint-Georges de Bouhelier's drama *The Children's Carnival* from the French for its British premier in June 1920. By this time, de Bouhelier had already heard of the Pioneer Players and Edith Craig, even though he was not an English speaker (de Bouhelier 59). He viewed the Pioneer Players in the context of a European battle against naturalist theatre (EC 122) and affirmed Edith Craig's aims in the Art Theatre period: "pour lutter contre les routines dont souffrait notre art" ('to struggle against the conventions from which our art was suffering') (de Bouhelier 61). The Pioneer Players performed St. John's translation of *The Children's Carnival* at the Kingsway Theatre, London on 20 June 1920.³⁷⁵ This was the Pioneer Player's penultimate performance; that is, their last official subscription production until they regrouped after five years of inactivity to perform American Susan Glaspell's feminist expressionist drama *The Verge* in March 1925 (WAT 188). According to the Pioneer Players annual report, *The Children's Carnival* "met with a very hostile reception from the London critics" (PPAR 1919-20: 6). Some reviewers were horrified by the play's subject: a dying woman whose last moments of life are witnessed by her distressed children. A reviewer from the *New Age* was impressed by the "astonishing performance"

³⁷⁴ No manuscript for *Sisyphus and the Wandering Jew* is extant, but a playbill for *Idle Women* (Little Theatre, John Street, Strand) lists this as one of the plays translated by Christopher St. John. The Pioneer Players 7 March 1915 production in London is confirmed by an article on modern Belgian drama in a February 1919 volume of *The Drama* journal: "A symbolist poet of Liege, Isi-Collin (born, 1878) is known in London by his dramatic dialogue *Sisyphus et le Suif Errant*, published in 1914, and produced by the Pioneer Players, March 7, 1915, in London". (*The Drama: A Quarterly Review Devoted to the Play and Theatre*, Vol. 9, Issues 33-34. February, 1919. Editor Theodore Ballou Hinckley. Mount Morris, IL: The Drama League of America, p. 92).

³⁷⁵ This June 1920 performance of Saint-Georges de Bouhelier's *The Children's Carnival* raised funds for Serbian Children. The Pioneer Players took on the fundraiser at short notice with little help from the Serbian organization, but the production attracted a distinguished audience (WAT 142).

by one child, which “showed an emotional power, and a facility of expression, that I have never before seen in a child actress” (153).³⁷⁶ Yet the reviewer also remarked “It was the powerful acting of the child...that made the play seem so unnecessarily brutal; for once, I find myself in agreement with Mr. William Archer, and revolted by the torture of the child” (153).³⁷⁷ In contrast, one reviewer from *The Referee* stressed the importance of the Pioneer Players performing de Bouhelier’s work in England: “It is a play which has already met with some success in Paris, and one which everybody who cares about the theatre must be glad to have seen. Gruesome though some of it is, there are moments of poignant beauty.”³⁷⁸ *The Referee* reviewer also admired *The Children’s Carnival’s* exploration of the theme of death, favorably comparing this play to other recent British and European works on the same topic:

...the play haunts one, not with horror but with beauty – indeed, it seems to me, in its truth and unstrained simplicity, to put both Maeterlinck’s and Shaw’s variously pretentious treatments of the same theme to shame (Agravaine).³⁷⁹

This range of reviews demonstrates that while many plays by foreign dramatist were still considered controversial or suspect, British audiences and reviewers had come to expect—and increasingly appreciate—the Pioneer Player’s introduction of these experiments.

Christopher St. John’s dramaturgical work in expanding the Pioneer Player’s repertoire may have extended beyond identifying and translating foreign plays for

³⁷⁶ Clipping found in Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection.

³⁷⁷ Clipping found in Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection.

³⁷⁸ “Pioneers and Profiteers: *The Children’s Carnival*. An Ordeal of Irony” by Agravaine. Review of *The Children’s Carnival* – transl. Chris St. John. *The Referee* 27 June 1920. (Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection).

³⁷⁹ Despite his overall admiring tone, it should be noted that this same reviewer pans Sybil Thorndike’s performance as the mother.

performance. She may have had a hand in adapting the play *Daughters of Ishmael* (1914) from the 1911 novel of the same name by American journalist and author Reginald Wright Kauffman.³⁸⁰ The Pioneer Players' timely performance of *Daughters of Ishmael* (set in New York City) exposed the forced prostitution of women—sometimes termed the “white slave trade”—and led to controversy. Since Boots lending libraries banned Kauffman's novel,³⁸¹ this unlicensed play was performed covertly at the King's Hall to avoid what Edith Craig termed the “fuss” of censorship (WAT 102). In any case, through her translations and adaptations of experimental and controversial dramas, St. John shaped the contours of a significant and international avant-garde performance canon in Britain.

Arts Criticism, Theatre Reform and the Anti-Censorship Movement

In other venues, Christopher St. John also worked to revitalize the arts and educate British audiences. Christopher St. John's extensive knowledge of music, theatre and literature equipped her as an arts critic, writing for a range of publications. She wrote music criticism for *The Lady* under the initials C.M., and was a regular drama and music critic for Lady Rhonda's feminist journal *Time and Tide* from 1920 to 1931 (Crawford 614).³⁸² St. John also wrote literary reviews in the *New Statesman*. Occasionally St. John reviewed plays or wrote articles about the theatre, a number of which served to

³⁸⁰ Katharine Cockin names A. D'Este Scott as the adapter (WAT 102), but a printed a playbill for *Idle Women* (Little Theatre, John Street, Strand) lists this as one of St. John's (translated, adapted or original) plays from between 1911 and 1916 (Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection). *Daughters of Ishmael* is one of the 6 plays performed by the Pioneer Players for which no script has been located, so it is currently impossible to confirm the identity of the adapter.

³⁸¹ *Vote* 29 June 1912: 177

³⁸² St John's collection of recordings of music which she reviewed is held at the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum.

promote the directorial work of Edith Craig. In her review of *Singing Jailbirds* (a musical by Upton St. Clair which was the first production of the Masses' Stage and Film Guild), St. John criticized the play, wryly noting that it "does not seem to have any genuine representatives of the masses among its members".³⁸³ Yet her review praised Craig's direction and design: St. John claimed she was "enraptured by scene after scene of beauty, contrived out of those odds and ends of material with which the producer of a Sunday show...has to make shift."³⁸⁴ Echoing her remarks in a review of Craig's production of *The Great World Theatre* in 1924, St. John questioned the motivations behind Craig's exclusions from many commercial theatre opportunities: "It is strange indeed that we see so little of Edith Craig's work in the 'commercial' theatre. Is this explanation to be found in what Ethel Smyth calls 'this obscurely-working, self-unconfessed anti-woman spirit?'"³⁸⁵ (EC 160).

St. John, along with Craig, was also an active participant in the British Drama League (BDL), founded in August 1919 "to encourage the Art of the theatre both for its own sake and as a means of intelligent recreation among all classes of the community."³⁸⁶ St. John served as the representative for the Foreign Drama Committee and was one of the speakers for the British Drama League dinner on 30 November 1919.³⁸⁷ In Edith Craig's keynote speech on "reform in production" at the BDL inaugural summer conference at Stratford upon Avon, she argued for progress and transformation, rather

³⁸³ On behalf of the Masses' Stage and Film Guild, Harold Scott asked Edith Craig to direct Upton Sinclair's musical about the 1923 dock strikes in America organized by the International Workers of the World (Striker Red Adams was imprisoned and died in his prison cell); *Singing Jailbirds* was performed at the Apollo Theatre, London, on 9 February 1930 (EC 159). .

³⁸⁴ G1694 ECD

³⁸⁵ G1694 ECD, cited in EC 160.

³⁸⁶ C37 ECD

³⁸⁷ 22 August 1919; G212 ECD, cited in EC 130.

than reform.³⁸⁸ According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Edith Craig openly disagreed with her brother, who advocated for the designer's dominating vision for theatre production; while Edward Gordon Craig held that "the whole thing should be the creation of one mind," Edith Craig "believed the theatre should be run entirely by the men and women of the theatre".³⁸⁹ In the open discussion following Edith Craig's keynote speech, St. John was outspoken: "'there had been too much of the introduction of the studio on the stage. Chelsea artists had invaded the theatre, and thought production was quite an easy job. They did not bring about the reform that was needed.'"³⁹⁰ Christopher St. John, like Edith Craig, was loathe to prioritize one element of theatrical production (i.e.: design) over the balanced process of all theatre artists working together.

Collaboration between theatre artists—and patrons—was also necessary for success in the fight against stage censorship. As Katharine Cockin has demonstrated, the Pioneer Players were at the forefront of the anti-censorship movement afoot in the early twentieth century.³⁹¹ A key activist in the 'Free Theatre' movement, Christopher St. John passionately advocated against stage censorship in the theatre in several ways. First, she

³⁸⁸ "Possibly referring to the furor over Grein's production of *Salome* the previous year, Craig quoted Oscar Wilde, to the effect that 'reforms in art were as tiresome and unprofitable as reforms in theology'" (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 August 1919; G216 ECD, cited in *EC* 130).

³⁸⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 August 1919; G216 ECD, cited in *EC* 130.

³⁹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 August 1919; G216 ECD, cited in *EC* 130.

³⁹¹ Cockin devotes a chapter to the Pioneer Player's involvement in the anti-censorship movement. See "The Costs of a Free Theatre" (pp. 16-40) in *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage*. Here is my summary of the historical conditions surrounding the censorship debates: From 1737 to 1968, in keeping with the Theatre Licensing Act (1737), all theatre companies were required to deposit any play text under consideration for public performance at the Lord Chamberlain's office for licensing. Any play that the Lord Chamberlain denied a license could not be performed at a paying public theatre. In some cases, the Pioneer Players avoided censorship of their more controversial productions by exploiting a loophole of their organizational structure as a 'subscription society'. By only performing the plays for their subscription society members (who had pre-paid for participation in the season events), these performances were technically considered private engagements. Therefore, those play texts did not have to pass the Lord Chamberlain's regulations for public performance. Besides the Pioneer Players, a number of other vanguard theatres functioned as subscription societies—the Independent Theatre and the Stage Society, for example. These theatre companies, interested in performing cutting-edge and often controversial dramas, were also on the forefront of the anti-censorship movement (WAT 16-18).

challenged the Lord Chamberlain's policies through the controversial plays she submitted for licensing, as well as through those unlicensed plays performed for large "private" subscription audiences. Second, St. John encouraged Pioneer Player audience members to organize protests of theatre censorship. Third, through her writings, St. John publicly opposed what she called the "practical censorship" exerted by managers in commercial theatres.

As a frequent playwright and translator/adaptor of dramas, St. John was often responsible for depositing play texts that the Pioneer Players proposed for performance with the Lord Chamberlain's office. Occasionally dramas she wrote or translated were denied a license, or only granted one upon making changes to satisfy the Lord Chamberlain's requirements. St. John and Thursby's unlicensed play *The Coronation* (1912) was an example of a play denied licensing. *The Coronation* portrayed the political awakening of a fictional monarch. Influenced by the testimony of a poor but articulate woman, the king converts to socialism. The Lord Chamberlain's copy expresses concern over the representation of the king and his politics,³⁹² as well as the playwrights' critique of capitalism (Carlson and Powell 249). The Lord Chamberlain refused to license the Pioneer Players' intended January 1912 non-subscription (or "public") performance of *The Coronation*. Since this production was intended to be a fund-raiser for the International Suffrage Shop, the Lord Chamberlain's censorship had a

³⁹² Representations of monarchs (especially British monarchs) were particularly subject to scrutiny and censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's office.

negative financial impact on the intended beneficiaries.³⁹³ In this instance, the International Suffrage Shop was deprived of a large, paying audience (WAT 19).

Since St. John and Thursby's play was denied a license for 'public' performance, the Pioneer Players performed *The Coronation* in January 1912 before a 'private' subscription audience. An article in *The Times* exposed the hypocrisy inherent in this situation: "As however, [the play] has been judged to be unfit for public performance, the money which had been paid for the tickets had to be returned, and the audience were present at a dramatic At Home as invited guests, and were therefore regarded, by a polite fiction, as a collection of private individuals."³⁹⁴ At the end of this performance, the Pioneer Players' audience was called upon to form "The Coronation Society" to campaign against theatre censorship (EC 112). Another newspaper review foregrounds the censorship aspect of the production and documents the Pioneer Players' mobilization of the audience to formally protest the Lord Chamberlain's refusal to license the production:

The Coronation was censored, it is understood, because of the Socialistic tendencies of its chief character, the young King Henricus of Omnisterre, the part played at the private performance at the Savoy by Mr. Godfrey Tearle. After the curtain had fallen, the audience passed the following resolution, with one dissentient: "That this house, after seeing the play called *The Coronation*, is of the opinion that the conduct of the Lord Chamberlain in refusing to license the

³⁹³ The International Suffrage Shop did not perform this play (Fisher 1995). Rather the shop was the recipient of the funds raised by the performance.

³⁹⁴ *The Times* 29 January 1912:10, qtd. in WAT 20.

play is wholly unjustifiable; and desires to put on record its protest against the refusal.³⁹⁵

The “call to arms” for St. John and Thursby’s “Coronation Society” followed after a similar protest in support of another unlicensed Pioneer Players production, *Pains and Penalties: the Defense of Queen Caroline* (1911) by Laurence Housman³⁹⁶ at the Savoy Theatre. *Pains and Penalties* sympathetically told the story of Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821), who was tried for adultery in the House of Lords in 1920 at the instigation of her husband, George IV (Smith 1993; Fraser 1996). Housman’s play thus was something of a feminist revisionist history project. Laurence Houseman’s author’s note in the theatre program states:

The Lord Chamberlain’s reason for refusing to license this play was because it ‘dealt with a sad historical episode of comparatively recent date in the life of an unhappy lady.’ The “unhappy lady” has been dead for ninety years, and during all that period her memory has rested under a cloud which the whole trend of my play was calculated to remove. The Lord Chamberlain says that this is not to be done. As a concession to so chivalrous a spirit, protective to womanhood, I now include an additional scene (the Coronation of George IV) which helps still further to give this cloud its right location and to relieve the Lord Chamberlain of all honourable scruples.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵ Clipping of review titled “The Coronation” [10/2/1912], with photo of a scene from the play (Newspaper unknown). Photo title: “The censored play which was produced the other day: ‘The Coronation,’ at the Savoy Theatre. (Mander & Mitchenson Collection).

³⁹⁶ Laurence Housman (1865-1959) was artist and writer actively involved in numerous political campaigns for civil liberties, including women’s suffrage and anti-censorship. (WAT 19).

³⁹⁷ From Theatre Program for the Pioneer Players 3rd Subscription performance: “Pains and Penalties: The Defence of Queen Caroline” by Laurence Housman: Nov 26, 1911 8pm. (Mander & Mitchenson Collection).

Immediately after the 26 November 1911 performance of *Pains and Penalties*, theatre director Harley Granville Barker and actress/playwright Elizabeth Robins—neither of whom were ever members of the Pioneer Players—took to the stage to rouse the audience to campaign against stage censorship by joining the “Caroline Society” (Findlater 118-119).

Christopher St John later publicly confronted the problem of ‘unofficial censorship’ in her protest of the Alhambra Theatre’s last-minute refusal to produce the second Pioneer Player’s performance of Evreinov’s *The Theatre of the Soul*.³⁹⁸ Following the Pioneer Player’s successful March 8 production at the Little Theatre, a second performance of *The Theatre of the Soul*—also directed by Craig but with a new cast—was scheduled to be performed at the Alhambra Theatre on November 18, 1915. This performance was intended as part of a fundraising matinee on “Russia’s Day” organized by Lady Paget. Shortly before the performance date, St. John was asked to submit a copy of the play to the Lord Chamberlain’s office, as it had not yet been licensed. St. John wrote “That someone was at work then trying to prevent the performance became clear to me later.”³⁹⁹ Andre Charlot (1882-1956), the business manager for the Alhambra Theatre, told St. John not to bother submitting the play since the censor would not pass it. To Charlot’s additional statement that the play “was not fit for the Alhambra audience”, St. John retorted:

³⁹⁸ Christopher St. John’s preface to *The Theatre of the Soul* addresses this incident in detail. The description of the events above is derived primarily from this document and related letters or newspaper clippings found in the Ellen Terry Memorial Museum archive. (ETMM: Christopher St. John’s introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov; documents, copies of letters and press cuttings related to this controversy).

³⁹⁹ Christopher St. John’s Introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov. (ETMM).

This I could not deny, as there is neither inanity nor nudity in *The Theatre of the Soul*, but I could, and did, argue that an audience gathered together at the Alhambra on "Russia's Day" would not be an Alhambra audience that presumably there would be people present in the theatre with some interest in Russia who might prefer a play by a Russian dramatist to jokes about Charlie Chaplin, and a ballet décolleté and retrousse.⁴⁰⁰

However, the Lord Chamberlain did license the play for public performance, following a few alterations. The Lord Chamberlain's notes on the play state: "I have marked on p. 9 a phrase which seems to refer to abortion, 'kill them for the sake of their precious figures': perhaps this should best be cut out, though in a serious play as this, I should hesitate to do so."⁴⁰¹ Despite the fact that *The Theatre of the Soul* was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain for public performance, Charlot abruptly cancelled the production after watching the dress rehearsal on the morning of the intended performance. No official reason was given; no apology was offered.⁴⁰² Christopher St. John perceived Charlot's abrupt decision as a form of "practical censorship" and demanded a public apology and explanation for his actions. St. John viewed Charlot's withdrawal of the play as a particularly "English" form of artistic provincialism, writing:

It is an incident like this which makes England the derision of artists all the world over. On the very day that the newspapers were printing columns of gush about Russia's art and boasting of English sympathy with it, a Russian dramatist's (6) work is declared unfit for the stage of a London music hall, and the public are left

⁴⁰⁰ Christopher St. John's introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov. (ETMM)

⁴⁰¹ ADD LCP 1915/31; BL.

⁴⁰² Christopher St. John's introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov; documents, copies of letters and press cuttings related to this controversy (ETMM).

to draw the inference that it is indelicate and obscene, as no courageous avowal is made of the true reason for conduct both stupid and ill-bred (6-7).⁴⁰³

St. John boldly challenged authorities and spoke out against the practices of commercial theatre which she felt compromised the integrity and freedom of artistic expression in England. Her leadership efforts in these areas spurred the Pioneer Players in the anti-censorship campaign, which was interlinked with the efforts of other vanguard theatre groups. St. John's advocacy for experimental, controversial and foreign dramas constituted a major contribution to the range of theatrical performances available to British audiences in the early decades of the twentieth century. Christopher St. John's value of new theatre reflected both her openness to international experiments and her commitment to developing British drama. In the follow section, I analyze the intersection between St. John's thematic commitments (suffrage activism, women's history, British theatre) and her theatrical experimentation in one of her own works: *The First Actress*.

III. *The First Actress* in Context: Melding Genres, Making Women's History

St. John's one-act play *The First Actress: A Fantasy*, directed by Edith Craig, was part of a triple bill performance opening the Pioneer Players' first official season at the Kingsway Theatre in London on May 8, 1911. An apt production for inclusion in the Pioneer Players' first performance, *The First Actress* dramatizes the dilemma of Margaret

⁴⁰³ Christopher St. John's introduction to *The Theatre of the Soul* by Nikolai Evreinov; documents, copies of letters and press cuttings related to this controversy (ETMM).

Hughes, who St. John claims was the first actress on a London stage, in 1661.⁴⁰⁴ During the Restoration period, when women like Margaret Hughes began performing in England, much of the British public actively opposed women acting in theatrical productions (young men or boys played female dramatic roles before the Restoration).

The play opens immediately after Hughes's curtain call following her performance of the role of Desdemona in *Othello*.⁴⁰⁵ Many audience members jeer at the actress "with cat-calls, hissing and hooting," (1)⁴⁰⁶ decrying her presence on the stage as an outrage and demanding the return of popular boy-actress Edward Kynaston. Following this first inglorious entrance, Hughes is quickly humiliated once again: the audience learns that as the mistress of Sir Charles Sedley, Hughes is a pawn in Sedley's public and petty feud with Kynaston. When Sedley and his fellow aristocrat Lord Hatton arrive backstage, they largely ignore Hughes's performance itself and instead focus on the feud. In particular, Sir Charles repeatedly and almost obsessively gloats over his hope that Hughes' mere presence on the stage has humiliated and threatened the career of his rival Kynaston. After Sir Charles and Lord Hatton leave the scene, the actor Griffin suggests to Hughes that the audience's rejection of her performance was not personal: rather, the audience is adamantly opposed to *any* woman performing on the theatrical stage due to the "deficiency in [the] talents" of their sex (10). The play shifts into a debate in which Hughes helplessly tries to defend herself against Griffin's argument that

⁴⁰⁴ "Christopher St. John's *The First Actress* was rejected on the grounds of historical inaccuracy, or indeed as one reviewer put it, a 'violent perversion of the facts and dates.' Speculation ensued about candidates for the first actress on a Restoration stage, such as mistress Sanderson...in place of St. John's claim for Margaret Hughes" (WAT 46). Elizabeth Howe makes a case for Anne Marshall and dates the first performance by an actress on a London stage as 8 December 1660 (Howe 1992: 24, cited in WAT 67, 209).

⁴⁰⁵ Margaret Hughes was the first actress to play Desdemona (Gilder 142).

⁴⁰⁶ Christopher St. John. *The First Actress*, Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection vol. 14, no 128 (1911) British Library, 1911, 1. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically. The play was also privately printed by the Utopia Press.

women are inherently unsuited for theatrical performance. Defeated, Hughes falls asleep backstage while lamenting the possibility that her failure may prevent all other women from success in the theatre (11). However, at this point the play's dramatic form alters from naturalism to a dream sequence featuring a pageant-like procession of well-known historical English actresses who are successors to Hughes's legacy. The dream-vision actresses encourage Hughes with "prophesies" that her performance will actually pave the way for their acting careers in the future. As the play closes, the actresses crown the sleeping Hughes, hailing her as their "forgotten pioneer" (17).

In many ways, *The First Actress* emblemized the feminist themes and questions that St. John took up throughout her career. The play examines three interrelated problems: female artistic expression on stage, women's roles in society (both professional and social) and, implicitly, arguments surrounding the suffrage question. In the play, St. John stages a history of women's theatrical performance in England from the Restoration to her present in order to make a political argument concerning women's suffrage in 1911. Posing theatre as a metaphor for the public sphere, St. John's drama makes an explicit rhetorical connection between women's representation on the English stage and their representation in government through the vote. The play's subtitle "A Fantasy," is indicative of several key aspects of the work. While St. John claims a 'historical' basis for *The First Actress*, the play's subtitle—"A Fantasy"—indicates the importance of the fictionalized elements of the plot. In particular, the final sequence of the play deploys fantastical pageant-like aesthetics to celebrate a 'mythic past' of English actresses. As St. John's subtitle hints, the 'fantasy' pageant sequence is significant to *The First Actress*'s overall theme.

Since in *The First Actress* St. John deftly links metatheatricality with contemporary social questions concerning the roles of women in society, the formal variations within drama also merit close attention. Most notable is the shift in the final third of the play from a naturalistic drama into a fantastical dream sequence. Recent literary critics and contemporaneous newspaper reviews alike tend to focus solely on the pageant-like aesthetics at the end of the play. Some reviews assume that St. John's play lacks the formal qualities of a drama and therefore dismiss the work altogether, as Katharine Cockin has noted (WAT 46). Others misread *The First Actress* as a failure of realism. For example, in her chapter on the Pioneer Players, Julie Holledge described *The First Actress* as "more of spectacle than drama" (124). Several theatre reviewers in St. John's day regarded it as "a vehicle for actress' self-promotion," a "semi-pageant" or "piece d'occasion."⁴⁰⁷ Yet St. John's drama *The First Actress* also followed the dictates of conventional theatrical form. It was a play performed in a traditional venue (the Kingsway Theatre, owned by entrepreneurial actress-manageress Lena Ashwell), and the more abstracted form of the actress-vision sequence only occupies the final third of the play script. The first two thirds (in which the actor Griffin debates with Margaret Hughes the relative merits of women actresses) are written in a naturalistic style. The critics' responses suggest that the powerful impression made by the later pageant aesthetics eclipsed, for them, the realist form of the first two-thirds of *The First Actress*. So why this shift in style? And what did St. John accomplish through it?

⁴⁰⁷ Reviews from *Daily News*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*, *Stage* and *World* cited in Christine Dymkowsky's essay "'Entertaining Ideas: Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players,'" in Viv Gardener and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850 – 1914*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992 (233).

Ultimately, St. John's radical disruption of realist form through pageant aesthetics is as essential to the pro-actress and pro-suffrage argument of *The First Actress* as the explicitly feminist rhetoric spoken by the vision actresses in the final pageant-like dream-sequence. However, I want to distinguish the pageant drama genre I discuss here from another type of feminist spectacle in early twentieth-century England. These other events, also often referred to as pageants, were actually demonstrations, in which a range of suffrage organizations coordinated to march together through the streets of London bearing colorful banners representative of professional or local suffrage groups.⁴⁰⁸ For the purposes of this argument, I contextualize St. John's work in *The First Actresses* within the three broad categories of dramatic expression that she borrowed: Cicely Hamilton and Edith Craig's suffrage drama *A Pageant of Great Women*, the broader Victorian and Edwardian fascination with historical pageants, and the formal predecessor of the pageant genre: medieval mystery plays.

***A Pageant of Great Women*, Medieval Modernism and the 'Parkerian Pageant'**

The most notable immediate predecessor to St. John's pageant works was Cicely Hamilton's immensely popular and influential suffrage propaganda piece, *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909). Directed by Pioneer Players founder Edith Craig, the sensational production was performed throughout Britain between 1909 and 1911, before several thousand spectators at a time. In most cases, professional actresses performed the main speaking roles of three allegorical figures: Justice, Prejudice and Woman. Craig usually

⁴⁰⁸ See my earlier discussion of these theatrical suffrage demonstrations in Chapter 3.

recruited activists from local suffrage organizations to fill in the roles of the “great women” from history.⁴⁰⁹

Hamilton and Craig’s *A Pageant of Great Women* capitalized on the general popularity of pageants in the Edwardian era, in part as a holdover from the earlier Victorian obsession with history and the Middle Ages in particular.⁴¹⁰ Modernist writers and authors during this period of increasing nationalism and fragmentation also found inspiration not only in Classical Greek and Roman cultures, but also in the perceived unity and coherence of the Middle Ages. For example, in a program note for the Pioneer Players’ historic production of *Paphnutius*, G.K. Chesterton commented on the appeal of medieval culture for modernist writers and artists: “The test is that in a real renaissance, everyone in the new world is more or less influenced or attracted by the language and images of the old world.”⁴¹¹ On a related note, large-scale communal pageants narrating the history of particular counties, castles and events were something of a rage, peaking between the summers of 1907 and 1909.⁴¹²

In his history of English pageantry, Robert Withington credits Louis Napoleon Parker (1852-1944) with the invention of a new theatrical form—the “modern pageant”

⁴⁰⁹ For more details on this production, see my discussion in Chapter 3.

⁴¹⁰ See Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (1970), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971; Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1981,

⁴¹¹ Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, Pioneer Players box, Program for *Paphnutius: The Conversion of Thais*” by Hroswitha, a nun of the Order of St. Benedict, translated by Christopher St. John; Pioneer Players 13th Subscription Performance: Sunday, Jan 11th, 1914; Monday January 12th, 1914.

⁴¹² G.K. Chesterton himself participated in the English Church Pageant. G.K. Chesterton, ‘Modern and Ancient Pageants’ in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton XXXVIII: The Illustrated London News 1908-1910*, ed. Lawrence J. Clipper, San Francisco: Ignatius Pres, 1987, 350.

(or Parkerian pageant)—a type of “historical folk-play” (195 n1).⁴¹³ Louis Napoleon Parker directed the first of this style of pageant in Sherborne, Dorset in 1905; this production alone involved about nine hundred people and roughly 50,000 spectators descended on the little Dorset village for the event (Yoshino 49-50).⁴¹⁴ Ayako Yoshino argues that although he did so “in the costume of tradition,” Parker developed a “contemporary and highly political” theatrical form (52-53). Yoshino points out that the Parkerian pageant was initially seen as a nationalistic form of drama: “the emphasis shifted between the democratic potential of the pageant and its role in reinforcing communities, its use as a tool for teaching local and national history, and perhaps most commonly, as locus of patriotic sentiment” (51). In particular, the influence of medieval culture was felt both in local communities and in the arts in this otherwise modernist movement. Recounting this “remarkable spate of pageants” directed by the most prolific pageant producer and inventor of the genre, Roger Fulford writes: “at a wave of the Parker wand, county ladies strolled among ruins as medieval princesses, mayors thundered across wet meadows disguised as crusaders, the rotund figures of Edwardian gentry did not look amiss as dignitaries of monastic life while burgesses tried to feel comfortable masquerading as Hengist and Horsa”.⁴¹⁵ Like many modernists, Parker

⁴¹³Withington carefully distinguishes the Parkerian “modern pageant” from the “pageant given in modern times”, a more traditional ‘aesthetic’ platform that ‘existed primarily to entertain’ (195 n1). See Robert Withington. *English Pageantry: An Historical Outline*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918-1920, 195-8.

⁴¹⁴ For these and other details on the history of the “modern” pageant form in the early twentieth century, see Ayako Yoshino’s “Between the Acts” and Louis Napoleon Parker—the Creator of the Modern English Pageant”. *Critical Survey* 15 no 2 2003, 49-60. Parker remained in demand for the next 20 years: 73 towns invited him to direct pageants; he chose Warwick (1906), Bury St Edmunds (1907), Sherborn, Oxford (1907), Winchester (1908), Dover (1908), Colchester (1909), Bath (1909) and York (1909). The York pageant had 16,000 participants and half a million spectators (Yoshino 50).

⁴¹⁵ Roger Fulford, *Votes for Women*, Faber & Faber, London, 1957, 157, cited in Tickner SOW 287-288.

drew upon the era's fascination with history and the Middle Ages in his formulation of the "modern" pageant form.

Medieval Mystery Plays: the Political Potential of a Religious Form

Hamilton and Craig's *A Pageant of Great Women* exploited the propagandistic potential of the medieval pageant both through its flexible performance structure and its allegorical aesthetics.⁴¹⁶ Medieval pageants—performed throughout cities on wagons that served as moveable stages—were deeply communal events; anonymous clergy wrote them, trade guilds produced them, and the "civic oligarchy" regulated their content and production.⁴¹⁷ An integral part of medieval Catholic festivals, pageant plays take place over vast quantities of time and space. For example, the York Corpus Christi Play cycle took the course of an entire day with performance stations sprinkled throughout the city of York.⁴¹⁸ The centuries-old civic tradition of the pageant play provided a structure flexible enough to promote a sense of collectivist action among suffragettes working together in local settings as well as those separated by geographical distance (but connected through having worked on the same *Pageant*). The sheer size of the

⁴¹⁶ I am not the first to note the propagandistic potential of the medieval pageant genre, nor is the pageant's political power limited to the suffrage movement. Marlow A. Miller argues "The pageant form is particularly suitable for political persuasion. Plotless and highly dependent on ritualistic symbols and music, pageants rely upon a unifying moralistic and nationalistic theme to integrate the entire drama" (139). Miller stresses the potential negative possibilities of the genre, pointing out that the repetition and themes of communal unity common to the pageant may lead to a dangerous precedent of audience passivity (139). For more on the pageant as political form, see Howard (1994), Goodman (1991) and Miller (1998).

⁴¹⁷ Beckwith, Sarah. *Signifying God: Social Relations and Symbolic Act in the Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001 (xv-xvi).

⁴¹⁸ Beckwith xv.

production allowed the suffragette participants and organizers to utilize the play in their strategy of mass mobilization.⁴¹⁹

The abstracted nature of the setting, characters and dialogue, link *A Pageant of Great Women* to its generic predecessor, the medieval mystery play. In *The Pageant of Great Women*, the setting is a court, the home of Justice, to whom the one male character, Prejudice addressed or made his anti-suffrage arguments. Woman then countered Prejudice's arguments with the case for women's right to enfranchisement. The figures of Justice, Prejudice and Woman have an allegorical quality reminiscent of medieval morality play figures such as Everyman and Mankind, and of course Biblical figures like God, Satan and Christ. As allegorical figures, the *Pageants'* characters are not particularized but rather representative of broad categories or types; it is this very abstracted quality about the characters that gives their debate a cosmic dimension. Moreover, the allegorical nature of the dialogue between these opposing forces gives Woman's arguments for gender equality the weight of an eternal and transcendent truth, confirmed by the authority of the equally abstract figure of Justice. In striking contrast to the allegorical figures, the historical female characters remained silent throughout. (The only exception was the speaking role of eighteenth-century actress Nance Oldfield, which was played by Edith Craig's mother, celebrated actress Ellen Terry.) On a practical level, the silence of the historical women characters simplifies casting: local suffrage coordinators need only find women who physically approximated the role, talent

⁴¹⁹ *A Pageant of Great Woman* often appeared along other pro-suffrage plays as part of larger political meetings. Many saw the enormous gatherings surrounding these productions as threatening and some productions even incurred physical danger. For example, activist speaker Muriel Matters' reported that following one lecture stop, the house where she and other suffragists had stayed had been surrounded at midnight by an "angry Liberal mob" in *Vote*, 19 February 1910, 196, cited in *EC* 97.

notwithstanding. Yet the silence of the historical women characters also suggests the disenfranchisement of the women performing the *Pageant* throughout England. Despite their great achievements in every sphere known to humans, women are rendered politically voiceless without representation through the vote.

Anti-Actress/Anti-Suffrage Debates and the Nature of Woman

Christopher St. John's feminist views challenged her to find precursors to the anti-suffrage arguments of 1911. She finds one source of inspiration in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century rhetoric against women actresses. In the first realistic section *The First Actress*, St. John sets up an anti-actress and anti-woman polemic through the character of Griffin. Although he initially seems sympathetic to Margaret Hughes, Griffin mouths a series of anti-actress arguments that reflect contemporary debates about women's suffrage, and represent some fairly standard rhetorical moves of that position throughout history. Griffin's anti-actress stance is built on three arguments: one, a false opposition between women's opportunity and the "public good"; two, biological or natural "limits" on women's ability to function in the public sphere, and three, a sexist approach to the art-vs.-nature debates around acting as mimesis.

The First Actress debate on the subject of women and stage performance begins innocently enough. After Margaret Hughes is jeered off the stage by a contingent of boy-actress Edward Kynaston's cronies, Griffin attempts to cheer her with the explanation that it is not her individual performance that has failed, but rather "It is your sex which has failed. It has been weighed in the balance and found wanting" (7). Griffin describes how the aristocrat Sir Charles Sedley has used his mistress Hughes in a feeble attempt to

humiliate his rival Kynaston. Ironically, Griffin suggests that Hughes gained what minimal acting ability she has “by mimicking our leading boy-actresses” (8) not through native talent or creative ability. Sedley exploited Hughes attractive appearance in a feeble attempt to destroy Kynaston’s career by situating Hughes in a theatre company and spreading rumors that female actresses were soon to be the rage. However, Griffin argues, the aristocrat’s strategy backfired with the public for good reasons:

But Sedley’s gold and Sedley’s lies have alike *failed to corrupt the public*. The public, trained by the accomplished actors of a past generation, and since Kynaston, perhaps the greatest of them all, know what the art of acting is. They will not accept a woman in the place of those great men merely because she is lovely – merely because she is the favourite of a man of fashion. No – never! (8—*italics mine*).

With a seemingly democratic impulse, Griffin credits “the public” with the authority to evaluate “the art of acting.” This contrasts with Griffin’s earlier dismissive attitude towards the self-proclaimed arbiters of theatre who favored Hughes: Sir Charles Sedley, Lord Hatton and the other fashionable aristocrats of “Fop’s Corner.”

However, while this impulse appears egalitarian, Griffin proceeds to project his own assessment of the inferiority of women actresses as the opinion of the majority of the public. Griffin’s praise for the opinions of the mid-seventeenth century theatre-going public consequently depends upon their commitment to reject women on stage. Griffin’s appeal to the public will at the cost of women’s ability to act on the theatrical stage would have familiar resonances with audiences in 1911 London. Suffrage activists, in particular, would be all too familiar with the Liberal party’s equivocation on the issue of

universal suffrage for women in the name of benefiting the working man and pursuing the greater public good. Through the character of Griffin, St. John makes explicit the underpinnings of this kind of argument: a false opposition between women's opportunity and the "public good".

Next, St. John has Griffin insert a series of assumptions about biological determinism into his discussion with Hughes about the "natural" limitations that prohibit women from acting on the stage with any success. These assumptions and the rhetoric Griffin deploys also have resonances with anti-suffrage positions in 1911. For example, Griffin tells Hughes: "the audience to-night were not incensed against you personally. They were but protesting against woman's invasion of a sphere where she is totally unfitted to shine" (8). One of the most prevalent anti-suffrage arguments was the notion that women were not suited to the sphere of political or public life. Griffin further emphasizes that women should stay within the private sphere, where they can pursue

a large choice of...affairs better befitting a woman's mental capacity –

Embroidery, the study of languages, the ornamental side of cooking, and many other domestic arts. And lastly there is what I may call the "grande affaire"—the true vocation of every woman—the excellent business of being a wife to a good man, and rearing him a hopeful and healthful progeny (10).

Griffin's speech resembles certain strains of contemporary anti-suffrage discourse--particularly coming from and aimed at middle and upper-class women--that limits women's activities to the domestic arts, wifedom and motherhood. Ironically, Griffin mentions the "study of languages" as a domestic pursuit; meanwhile, playwright St. John

used these same language skills in her professional theatre work, translating and adapting a variety of European plays.

According to Griffin's essentialist arguments, "the limits imposed on you by Nature prevent you from studying the art seriously" (10). Nature's limits apparently ensure women's lack of "the mental power or the mental energy" and "the creative imagination" required to represent characters through stage performance (9). The logic continues, then, that women's presence on the stage inevitably leads to moral depravity: Since women inherently lack acting talent, they would then automatically seek to "tempt" men with their "airs and tricks", leading to immorality on and off stage. As Griffin points out to the doubtful Hughes: "The gentry would not be able to judge of your performance apart from your sex. No doubt they would enjoy the diversion, but the stage would suffer degradation." (10). Through Griffin's statements about the "natural" limitations that would "prevent" women from being able to study acting, St. John exposes the misogynistic (and ridiculous) beliefs behind the common argument that women were physically and intellectually unsuited for the responsibility of voting. Just as Griffin feared a woman's "unnatural" presence on the stage would lead to moral depravity, some anti-suffrage activists feared that "women's enfranchisement would lead to social and moral disorder" (*WAT* 75).

Finally, Griffin proposes an irrationally sexist theory on the art-vs.-nature debates around acting as mimesis:

Acting, Mistress Hughes, is the art of assuming a character, not the accident of being it. You happen to be a woman, but can you draw terms for a woman's grief as Kynaston can? Can you so sensibly touch the audience to the spectacle of

outraged modesty and invincible fidelity? Forgive me, no! 'Tis the genius of assumption, of creation, that makes an actor like Kynaston the faithful limner of your sex upon the stage (9).

This passage reveals several key points in the anti-actress/pro-mimesis argument Griffin espouses. First, and most importantly, it asserts that acting is essentially a mimetic practice – it is “the art of assuming a character, not the accident of being it”. The second is akin to the first, as Griffin emphasizes that true acting skill is proven by *accurately* representing a character that is qualitatively different from oneself. That is what makes the boy-actress Kynaston “the *faithful* limner of your [female] sex upon the stage” (*emphasis added*). Griffin claims that the “genius of assumption, of creation” of (female) roles depends on the male actor’s skill in bridging the existential gap between the “real” actor and the “performed” character. Yet for the blindly sexist Griffin, no such possibility exists for actresses playing male roles. Third, Griffin implies that a secondary test of acting skill, or masculine mimesis, exists: the ability to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Griffin argues that Hughes is not capable, as Kynaston is, to “so sensibly touch the audience to the spectacle of outraged modesty”.

In his insistence that the boy-actor Kynaston is more skilled at representing the distinctively ‘feminine’ physical markers of womanhood than a female actress, Griffin makes a kind of closeted argument for drag: “I will even go so far as to say that his trained powers enable him, when he dons a woman’s habit, to look lovelier than you all – to speak with a sweeter voice – to walk with a greater grace – to express the very quintessence of the female soul!” (9). Implicit in Griffin’s claim here is a reductive definition of womanhood based primarily on a few simple physical markers. So the

converse of this point can be inferred as well. The feminine bodily markers appropriated by Kynaston—not only a woman’s “habit”, but also her “sweetness of voice” and “graceful walk”—support the idea that there are essential qualities of interiority, “the quintessence of the female soul”, shared by all of womankind. On the one hand, St. John is articulating a modern critique of drag: it is an utter fantasy that there is a “quintessence” of a male/female soul and that said “essence” can be assumed by appropriating a few physical markers. Yet more bizarre is Griffin’s irrationally sexist assumption that only *male* performers possess the mimetic skill for “successful” (i.e. compelling, accurate, appealing) drag performance. It is this assumption that St. John challenges in the pageant-like vision actress scene at the close of the play.

The Pioneer as Anti-Heroine

Shown to be a product of his historical moment, Griffin ends the conversation with Hughes completely confident in his projection that women will “never” be accepted by the public on stage. He remains convinced of the correctness of his essentialist assumptions about women’s intellectual inferiority and unsuitability for the acting profession. And in his blind sexism, Griffin does not question the irrationality of his ideas about the superiority of male mimesis over female mimesis in the creation of theatrical characters. Yet it is significant that even in his arrogance, Griffin is not portrayed as an ogre; he even personally consoles Hughes. After all, it is not she who has failed, rather her entire sex “has been weighted in the balance and found wanting” (7). Meanwhile Hughes—helpless before Griffin’s critique of women and humiliated by the jeering audience members—finally capitulates to her fellow actor’s assessment. Hughes

sense of defeat is signified, most notably, by her willingness to judge her own performances as a “failure” in the terms of mimetic realism offered by Griffin. She states:

I know you are right in the main. I failed completely. My diction was artificial – my voice was weak – and I tried to make up for it by bawling – Charles’s flattery about my gestures didn’t deceive me – They were ill-designed and inappropriate – I walked like a cripple – and held my head like a hunchback – Oh, I know! ‘Tis very bitter to me to think that through my failure I may have kept my sex off the stage for centuries – if not for ever – Good-night, Griffin” (11)

While Hughes clearly believes that she “failed completely”, her later statements blur the categories of this self assessment. At what, precisely, has Hughes failed? In part, at least, Hughes seems to be addressing her theatrical performance of the role of Desdemona: her reference to artificial diction, weak voice and “ill-designed and inappropriate” gestures are terms of theatrical criticism pertinent to both male and female stage performers.

Hughes’ references to walking “like a cripple” and holding her head “like a hunchback” have a double resonance, however. On one level they signify a failure of mimetic realism: her gestures and posture were better suited to *other character types* rather than that of Desdemona. On another, more critical, level—particularly given Griffin’s earlier delineation of the physical markers of feminine loveliness on stage—Hughes self-indictment suggests that she has failed at representing “woman” according to the standards of masculine mimesis. Strikingly, St. John endows Hughes with the rhetoric of melodrama and Ibsenite realism: Hughes’ language suggests that the very act

of public performance has made her ill. The “first actress” is brought to the point of confession of her “failure” in performance, and repentance for or renunciation of her dreams of an acting career in the theatre, before she falls asleep on the stage.

It is fascinating that St. John takes such pains to present Hughes unflatteringly throughout *The First Actress*. Rather than presenting a self-confident and evidently talented first actress on the English Stage, St. John’s portrays Hughes as the hapless mistress of Sir Charles Sedley and pawn in his feud with Kynaston. Throughout the play, Hughes desperately seeks affirmation for her performance from men – first from Sir Charles and Lord Hatton and later from Griffin. She clearly sees herself as inferior to them, both in talent and in aesthetic judgment: “You are very clever, Griffin, and I am a fool – Charles always told me so himself, until he wanted to educate me for the stage”(8). Moreover, when challenged, Hughes has no well-articulated defense for why women should be allowed to perform on the stage and seemingly capitulates to Griffin’s argument that women are unsuitable for the stage.

However this unglamorous portrayal of Margaret Hughes serves numerous functions within the logic of St. John’s play. First, Hughes’ lack of acting skill—and her defense of it—reveals the material constraints and hostile social conditions faced by women in Restoration theatre. As Hughes points out, up until that historical moment “men have had more practice. Perhaps if women were encouraged to give the art as careful a study, they could do as well” (9). Thus, St. John’s play represents Hughes’ theatrical dilemma in 1661 in terms that would resonate with the challenges of women attempting to enter a broader range of professions and gain the vote in 1911. Second, the representation of Hughes’ character as lackluster and diffident also establishes her as a

political and social innocent, rather than as an ideologically savvy feminist polemicist. As a result, the title character of *The First Actress* becomes the ideal naïve questioner when she stubbornly asks “I see no reason why women should not be able to act – and in any case, is it becoming to see men past forty frisking it as wenches of fifteen?” (8). The fact that this question comes from an otherwise intellectually unsophisticated character suggests that there is an inherent logic to her challenge to Griffin. Third, *The First Actress* is not so much about its title character, who like many “first women” is unimpressive in and of herself – and certainly inferior by the male-defined contemporary social standards. Rather, the true subject of St. John’s plays is a trajectory of women’s theatrical history: specifically, the legacy of female actresses to come. Accordingly, the weight of the defense for women in the acting profession rests not with Hughes but rather with the dream vision actresses that enter in the final third of the play. It is through these characters, the actresses that play them and the form of the drama that *The First Actress* makes clear the necessity of “firsts” in any female tradition; as St. John’s play makes clear, it is only in retrospect that we can fully and appreciate a pioneer of any kind.

Vision Actresses: History Speaks

At this point, St. John interrupts the story of actress Margaret Hughes’ dilemma and the familiar naturalism of the play thus far. The dramatic form radically shifts to a dream sequence featuring a pageant-like procession of actresses of the future. In this pageant-like dream sequence, St. John stages her counter-argument to the anti-actress/anti-suffrage attacks leveled by Griffin in the earlier, realistic portion of the

play.⁴²⁰ Each “vision actress” encourages Hughes—and counters Griffin’s critique of performance—by describing key elements of her own acting career. The English actresses represented in the dream sequence provide a veritable ‘who’s who’ of women’s theatre history, beginning with the Restoration stage and continuing to St. John’s contemporary moment.⁴²¹ Many famous actresses of the day performed the roles of the vision actresses; Ellen Terry, May Whitty, Auriol Lee, Dorothy Minto and Decima Moore were some of the well-known contemporary performers. Most notably, the celebrated actress-manageress Lena Ashwell played the Actress of Today.⁴²² As each historical vision actress appears and speaks, an unassailable “testimony of history” accrues that proves Margaret Hughes’s right as a woman to perform on the public stage—and ultimately, women’s right to gain the vote.

On the level of dialogue, the historical actresses in the dream vision sequence offer specific details from their careers that directly contradict Griffin’s earlier anti-actress pronouncements. The characters of Nance Oldfield, Peg Woffington and Madame Vestries typify the ways in which the historical actresses’ lives and careers challenge Griffin’s assertions regarding the public’s refusal to accept female stage performers, biological “limits” to women’s ability to perform on stage, and his (sexist) devaluing of women’s approach to acting as a mimetic art.

⁴²⁰ As Lesley Ferris has argued, in this final portion of the play, the script’s focus becomes a dialectical response to Griffin’s view of the actress (253). See Lesley Ferris, “The Female Self and Performance: The Case of *The First Actress*” in *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics*. Ed. Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1995, 242-257.

⁴²¹ They are Nell Gwynn (1650-87), Mrs., Barry (1658-1713), Mrs. Bracegirdle (1673/4 – 1748), Mrs. Anne Oldfield (1683 – 1730), Peg Woffington (1714 – 60), Kitty Clive (1711 – 85), Sarah Siddons (1755 – 1831), Fanny Abington (1737 – 1815), Dorothy Jordan (1761 – 1816), Madam Vestris (1797 – 1856) and “An Actress of Today”.

⁴²² The rest of the cast included Nancy Price, Lily Brayton, Suzanne Sheldon, Henrietta Watson, Saba Raleigh, Mona Harrison, Lillian Braithwait, Edmund Gwenn, Ben Webster and Tom Heslewood

Nance Oldfield is the first to invoke what I call the ‘testimony of history’ to argue on her behalf. A recurring trope in the vision actress segment of *The First Actress*, the testimony of history refers to the audience’s understanding that, over time, previous attitudes have changed. (i.e.: the contemporary moment challenges proclamations from the past about how things will “always be” or “never be”, etc.) In this case, Nance Oldfield’s speech powerfully contradicts Griffin’s assertion that the public will “never” accept women performers on stage:

An actress so greatly honoured that at her death she will lie in state in Jerusalem Chamber.... The public, who loved her when she laughed as when she wept, will be faithful. They will crowd to see her – in her last part! Only sixty years after they threw pippins at you, and the world will see an actress buried in Westminster Abbey – buried like a queen! (13).

Not only would Oldfield reach heights of fame with the public beyond that of “Griffin”, she would do so within a mere sixty years after the early Restoration period in which it was assumed (by some) that women should never act.

Meanwhile, the character Peg Woffington aggressively challenges the ruffians in Hughes’ audience and any others who might question a woman’s right to perform on stage. In addition to arguing against Griffin’s demeaning essentialist claims about women’s lack of intelligence and mental energy for the stage, Woolfington’s speech addresses some of Griffin’s more subtle points about the “essential” nature of femininity:

Unmannered dogs! I’ll teach them to doubt a woman’s intellect – a woman’s grit. Nature has given me a harsh displeasing voice – but that shall not daunt me – I’ll learn to use it! A defect shall become a grace – And as for intellect! – (14)

Specifically, Woffington draws attention to her *natural* “harsh, unpleasing voice”, recalling the typically “feminine” manner of speech favored by Griffin and performed by the boy-actresses like Kynaston. However, St. John’s play argues that Woffington’s greatest success came through her ability to use what Griffin would consider to be a liability, an unfeminine “harsh” voice, to the ends of compelling, powerful theatrical performances.

Famed Victorian actress-manageress Madame Vestris—beloved for her portrayal of male roles, particularly in the hugely popular “extravaganzas” written by Planché⁴²³—turns Griffin’s arguments for male drag to her own ends. Dressed as the character Captain MacHeath, Madame Vestris declares:

I’ll not content myself with playing the women, not I! Since men once put on the petticoats and played all our parts – Vestris will put on trousers and play some of theirs for a change! *And play them so well too, that man will hardly know himself, so elegant, so gallant, so fascinating will he appear – such a pretty devil of a fellow!... (16)*

Through Vestris’s coy parting words—“so elegant, so gallant, so fascinating...such a pretty devil of a fellow!” —St. John playfully attributes to men superficial and reductive performative markers similar to those Griffin attributed to all women. At the same time, Vestris’s storied career in transvestite roles completely upends Griffin’s irrationally sexist assumption that only *male* performers possess the mimetic skill for “successful” (i.e. compelling, accurate, appealing) drag performance. In similar ways throughout the

⁴²³ For a discussion of Vestris’s career playing male roles, particularly in Planché’s extravaganzas, see: Fletcher, Kathy. “Planché, Vestris, and the Transvestite Role: Sexuality and Gender in Victorian Popular Theatre.” *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 15.1 (Summer 1987): 8-33.

‘vision actress’ pageant section of *The First Actress*, the specific accounts of the career successes of individual actresses from history counteract Griffin’s broad-stroke dismissals of “all women” in the earlier realist portion of the play.

Along with these clearly polemical monologues, St. John still applies the satirical humor for which she was well-known in her treatment of the historical actresses in the dream vision scene. Even as she heralds their professional achievements on the stage, St. John pokes fun at the comically clashing egos of some of the female performers. For example, Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Bracegirdle—represented as if they are fresh off the stage mid-performance—bicker after Mrs. Barry drives a prop knife into Mrs. Bracegirdle’s heart:

Bracegirdle: Oh! Oh! I’ll be sworn you did that on purpose, Mrs. Barry, to revenge yourself because the property man gave me your veil. The knife has pierced my stays; it has entered at least a quarter of an inch into my flesh! I’ll play the Rival Queen with you no more, trust me for that. I’ll walk out of the theatre rather! (13)

Yet even in this tongue-in-cheek dialogue, the two decide to put off their “private feuds and jealousies” to pursue “the glorious public triumphs we shall win...there shall be peace between our reputations!” (13). This scene contrasts sharply with Sedley and Kynaston’s ongoing feud described in the beginning of *The First Actress*, in which both men abuse the theatre in order to act out their rivalry. (Kynaston had used the theatre stage as a public platform to mimic Sedley’s voice and arranged for a “cabal” in the theatre audience to heckle Hughes; Sedley installed his mistress in Killigrew’s theatre company solely in order to displace Kynaston and sent his “ten sturdy fellows” to clear

out Kynaston's cabal before the end of the first act). Although the scene can hardly be considered a testament to female unity among fellow actresses, St. John's representation of Barry and Bracegirdle's willingness to overcome their quarrel for the greater good of the stage shows them upholding a more noble view of and greater respect for the theatre profession.

Theorizing the "Vision Actress" Scene: the Pageant Genre as Feminist Argument

Even beyond the evidence marshaled in support of women on stage, articulated through the dialogue of the historical vision actresses recounting their career successes, the pageant style of the vision actress scene is *itself* a theatrical counter-argument to the Griffin's earlier position. In contrast to the opening realism of *The First Actress*, the actress-vision sequence is denaturalized through the elements of music, dance and cross-historical theatrical costume. The break away from the earlier naturalistic style of *The First Actress* is denoted instantly by the incorporation of music: the first sound heard at the beginning of the dream vision sequence is the disembodied singing voice of Nell Gwynne, before actress Ellen Terry makes her physical entrance on stage in the role. The intended abstract quality of this first musical interlude—the mystery of disembodied female singing voice—is suggested by the stage direction: "A voice is heard singing outside. Gradually it becomes more distinct" (11). The actress-vision sequence is further denaturalized by the use of abstracted, dream-like stage directions throughout. In the final moment, for example, "The shapes of the others rise from the front of the theatre. They come forward," there is "Music" and the "Disappearance of visions" (17). Musical selections most likely accompanied many of the entrances and exits of the vision

actresses, as suggested by handwritten notes with musical references marking these moments in director Edith Craig's prompt copy of the play. In addition to the striking visual impact of Craig's staging of successive historical actresses in "characteristic costume,"⁴²⁴ the vision of Kitty Clive's entrance introduced the physical element of dance.

In the vision actress sequence of *The First Actress*, St. John draws upon certain facets of medieval pageant aesthetics, melding them with the earlier realistic form of the drama in order to overturn—on the level of theatrical convention—the anti-actress argument articulated by Griffin at the beginning of the play. As I argued earlier, Cicely Hamilton and Edith Craig's large-scale theatrical production *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909) also exploited the flexible performance structure and allegorical aesthetics of the medieval pageant form. As with medieval mystery plays, the abstract setting of the *Pageant* ("the home of Justice") and the typological characters (Justice, Prejudice and Woman) suggest a cosmic dimension to the debate. Moreover the allegorical nature of the dialogue—and the confirmation offered by the authority of the allegorical figure Justice—imbued Woman's arguments for equality with the symbolic weight of an 'eternal' truth. The procession of costumed 'great women' from history provides accumulated and embodied visual evidence of female accomplishment; yet, with one exception, the great women remain entirely silent throughout *A Pageant of Great Women*.

In contrast to *A Pageant of Great Women*, St. John's play firmly melds the 'transcendent' resonances of the medieval religious pageant with the more concrete—and

⁴²⁴ The *Daily Mail* comments 'Miss St. John's piece forms a convenient vehicle for the introduction on the stage of *all sorts of* famous actresses from Mrs. Siddons to Mme. Vestris as impersonated in characteristic costumes by some of the most popular of their successors' (italics mine).] (Dymkowski 229)

verbally expressive—historical figures of the vision actresses. In the final scene of *The First Actress*, St. John initially establishes the break from realistic form through the abstracted stage directions, as visions appear and disappear and “shapes of the others rise from the front of the theatre” (17)⁴²⁵. The vision actresses, representing different periods of British theatre history, make distinct appearances to Hughes (they appear on stage either individually or in pairs). Yet all of these trans-historic figures are mysteriously united in their quest to affirm Hughes’s legacy, suggesting her transcendent ‘right’ to perform on the theatrical stage. By presenting actresses from different historical periods on the same stage, St. John recalls the coexistence of sacred and quotidian time in medieval pageantry.⁴²⁶ In the Corpus Christi plays, for example, events spanning Biblical history—from the creation of the world through the fall, flood, birth, death and resurrection of Christ and onto judgment—are compressed into a day.⁴²⁷ The multiple historical subject positions represented by the vision actresses sharing the same stage space suggest a transcendent “sisterhood” shared not only by the characters, but also the actresses performing the roles and the female audience members.

Yet in contrast to those medieval mystery plays in which allegorical characters bear the weight of communicating profound truths, in *The First Actress* vision scene it is the concrete, historical actress characters, who affirm Hughes and the legacy of actresses to come. Moreover, it is not through abstracted dialogue but rather through clever mimicry of the stage rhetoric from various periods that the “vision actresses” offer the pro-actress and pro-suffrage arguments of the play. And it is the historical actress

⁴²⁵ The dreamlike language of the stage directions here also echoes that of symbolist drama, with which both Christopher St. John and Edith Craig were familiar in 1911.

⁴²⁶ Beckwith xv-xvi

⁴²⁷ Beckwith xv-xvi

characters' descriptions of their own successful stage careers that establishes the authority of their "prophesies" for future actresses as well as all women in the future—particularly in regards to suffrage.

The closing scenes of *The First Actress* share not only some formal characteristics with *A Pageant of Great Women*, but also the newly forged associations between the genre of the pageant and suffrage activism. In fact, some reviewers criticized both the pageant-like formal properties of *The First Actress* and the feminist political aims of the project. Director Edith Craig, however, embraced the melding of propaganda and art associated with the form: "In short, our plays take the place of tracts".⁴²⁸ The links between the pageant form and first wave feminism were also strengthened on the level of audience reception, since many of the performers featured in *The First Actress* could be recognized from their previous participation in Hamilton and Craig's *Pageant*. Moreover, since the Pioneer Players was a subscription society consisting of both amateur and professional theatre practitioners, some of the audience members may have also performed in the *Pageant*—therefore previously sharing the stage with each other, as well as with the performers in *The First Actress*.

St. John further expands the pro-suffrage argument of her dream sequence by exploiting the celebrity status of the famous contemporary actresses performing their historical counterparts in *The First Actress*. As Tracy Davis has noted in *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, the Victorian public possessed a "voracious appetite for biographical information about actresses," resulting in a variety of popular published memoirs and biographies as well as theatre journal

⁴²⁸ Edith Craig interview with the *Daily News and Leader*, qtd. in WAT 46.

features on actresses' life stories (73-74). This fascination with famous actresses and the growing "cult of personality" only intensified in the early years of the twentieth century. Of course, the significance of celebrity culture to the suffrage cause had been well-established in other venues, particularly those with a theatrical or spectacular element. Many actresses, such as those in the Actress Franchise League, lent their fame and talents to performances of suffrage dramas (such as the *Pageant of Great Women*) and participated in major mass rallies and marches. The suffrage movement's leaders emphasized the participation of well-known women when advertising or reporting on major events; the media, primed to sell papers, also highlighted the participation of aristocratic suffragettes.⁴²⁹ The endorsement and presence of aristocrats, actresses and other famous women helped to counter the prevalent negative iconography of the "shrieking sisterhood" of suffragettes in the press. St. John and director Edith Craig maximized this public fascination with celebrity actresses in *The First Actress* by casting some of the most famous female performers of the day, many of whom were their close friends and fellow suffrage activists.

The stylistic effect of famous early twentieth century actresses playing the roles of the vision actresses from history can be likened to that of contemporary celebrity figures acting cameo roles in films, with a distinct difference. The audience pleasure in spotting cameo roles derives from the mere recognition of a famous person in a (usually) nondescript role in a film or television show that is not their normal setting. In *The First Actress*, however, famous actresses played the roles of other great actresses from history

⁴²⁹ For example, an advertisement for the 13 June 1908 National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' (NUWSS) Demonstration in London stressed the participation of (Lady Henry Somerset, 'most eloquent of Englishwomen', the Reverend Anna Shaw, 'the most distinguished woman speaker of the United States') or contributing their musical and artistic talents to the occasion" (cited in Tickner 80-81).

rather than playing a generic character. Moreover, the recognizable identity of both contemporary actresses and the historical vision-actress characters was essential to the counter-argument of the play. By their very bodily presence on the stage, the ‘real actresses’ and their roles countered Griffin’s predictions that women would never be accepted in the public sphere of the theatrical stage.

In other words, St. John’s drama forges a feminist theatre genealogy which links the well-known actresses of St. John’s day with the famous British actresses from previous eras (the “vision actress” characters): together these figures provide a “testimony of history” that defies the anti-actress prejudices voiced by Griffin in the earlier realist portion of the play. The ‘vision actresses’ heightened further the scene’s overall effect by entering the stage clad in the costumes of famous women stage characters or describing famous female roles. In particular, Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Bracegirdle are dressed as—and describe their roles as—the title characters from *The Rival Queens*, Mrs. Siddons enters for Lady Macbeth’s sleeping-walking scene, and Mrs. Abington describes herself as the “original” Lady Teazel from the Restoration comedy *The School for Scandal*. Many of these roles from famous English plays could be viewed as negative female stereotypes. However, the pride expressed by the “vision actresses” suggests that St. John intends for these juicy roles to be understood and appreciated for the careers they enabled. The triple representation of historical actress characters, famous contemporary actresses and notable female characters from the English stage teaches and reinscribes (through performance) a women’s theatre history to the audience of *The First Actress*.

St. John's linking of familiar actresses from history with famous contemporary actresses is best illustrated by two examples: Ellen Terry playing Nell Gwynn and Lena Ashwell playing "The Actress of To-day". The first vision actress to appear is Nell Gwynn, a mere fruitseller in the orchestra pit who was present at Margaret Hughes' first theatrical performance, where she had just been jeered off stage. The role of Nell Gwynn was performed by famed Victorian actress (and mother of Edith Craig) Ellen Terry. In *The First Actress*, the historical actress Gwynn claims to have been inspired to a stage career by watching Hughes; she explains: "Be merry, Mrs. Hughes. You've led the way and I that was at first no better than a Cinderwench, will follow..." (12). In this scene, Gwynn's historical significance is recalled and linked not only to the "first actress" Hughes but also to the formidable theatrical reputation of Ellen Terry (Ferris 255).

In contrast to Griffin's association between actresses and the taint of prostitution (his reference to "French hussies" as the only existing women to perform on the stage), Terry's fame was rooted in one of the most stately theatre institutions: she was best known for her decades-long work as principle actress in Henry Irving's Shakespeare productions at the Lyceum Theatre.⁴³⁰ The irony of a famed actress of Terry's renown playing Nell Gwynn, a simple theatre-pit-orange-seller-turned-actress, would not have been lost on the audiences of *The First Actress*. Moreover, famed actress Terry's delivery of Gwynn's line "I...will be spoke of by folks who've never heard the name of

⁴³⁰ Although Ellen Terry had a respectable and distinguished career as a professional actress at the Lyceum Theatre (far from the disreputable and illegal prostitutes of Griffin's earlier reference), her personal life was unusual for her time. Terry married several times to men of wildly different ages: to G.F. Watt (1817-1904) an artist thirty years her senior, to Charles Clavering Wardell Kelly (1839-1885) an actor/journalist, and to James Carew (1876-1938), American actor thirty years her junior. She also had a seven-year relationship with architect and designer Edward William Godwin (1833-86), the father of her two children. Some biographers have speculated that Terry also had a romantic relationship with her Lyceum Theatre co-star Henry Irving, who was separated, but not divorced from his wife.

Edward Kynaston!” (12)⁴³¹ likely heightened the audience’s pleasure in her celebrity cameo and strength of the pro-actress argument.

The ‘testimony of history’ St. John has built throughout the pageant sequence of *The First Actress* culminates with the closing speech delivered by “An Actress of To-day”. Once again, the celebrity status of the performer is particularly significant here: the role was played by Lena Ashwell,⁴³² a well-known actress, committed suffragette and successful manager of the Kingsway Theatre in London.⁴³³ Unlike the other dream vision actresses, Ashwell is not playing an actress from history, but one of the present moment. Since Ashwell was a famous contemporary and successful actress and theatre manager, audiences in 1911 most likely would have recognized her speech as self-referential and, therefore like Terry’s speech, metatheatrical. The Actress of Today’s highly metatheatrical speech serves as a crucial linchpin in *The First Actress*, and therefore bears quoting at length:

When I am born, dear Peg, people will have quite forgotten that the stage was ever barred to us. They will laugh at the idea that acting was once considered a man’s affair – they will be incredulous that the pioneer actress was bitterly resented – Yet they will be as busy as ever deciding what vocations are suitable to our sex. It will be “Man this” and “Woman that” as though we had never taught them a lesson [.....] yet that is how I see them still dividing the world of humanity – “This half for men”, “That half for women”. If in my day that archaic

⁴³¹ As Ferris points out, this particular line of dialogue applied to Terry as well as her “historical counterpart” Gwynn (255).

⁴³² British actress and manager Lena Ashwell (1872-1957) took up theatre management at the Savoy Theatre in 1906. In 1907 she established her own theatre (the Kingsway). See her autobiography: Lena Ashwell. *Myself a Player*, London: Michael Joseph LTD, 1936.

⁴³³ In fact, the first performance of the triple bill that featured *The First Actress* took place at Lena Ashwell’s Kingsway Theatre.

map is superseded, we shall not forget that it was first made to look foolish when women mounted the stage.

Bravo Hughes! – forgotten pioneer – Your comrades offer you a crown! (17)

For several reasons, Ashwell's speech as the "Actress of Today" is central to St. John's feminist argument in *The First Actress*. First, the Actress points out how ludicrous the historical exclusion of women from the theatrical stage looks from the vantage point of the contemporary moment. By the time of her own birth "they will laugh at the idea that acting was once considered a man's affair – they will be incredulous that the pioneer actress was bitterly resented". Second, the speech draws comparisons between the earlier exclusion of women from the stage and the equally arbitrary divisions of male and female professions and spheres that still exist in 1911. Again, St. John rhetorically links the anti-actress position from the Restoration era with the anti-suffrage arguments of the early twentieth century; the negation of the former suggests the eventual negation of the latter. Perhaps most significantly, through this speech, St. John endows the theatre with a special role as an engine for cultural and political change. The Actress of Today makes the striking suggestion that the first stage actresses began the process of contesting *all* arbitrary gender divisions: "we shall not forget that it was first made to look foolish when women mounted the stage". Thus, through the closing speech of *The First Actress*, Christopher St. John both marks the current historical moment and situates the suffrage movement and contemporary feminist struggles within a broader women's history; specifically, a history of women's theatre.

5. Conclusion

Feminist scholars have made important strides over the last two decades in recovering the work of women theatre artists previously absent from histories of late nineteenth and early twentieth century England. Julie Holledge's groundbreaking history *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre* (1981) introduced the Actress Franchise League along with suffrage dramatists including Robins, Craig and St. John to theatre scholars. Suffrage plays were also recovered in collections such as Viv Gardner's *Sketches from the Women's Franchise League* (1985) and Dale Spender and Carole Hayman's *How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays* (1985). The works of neglected and forgotten women dramatists of the period are now available through Katherine Kelly's edited anthology *Modern Drama by Women 1880s – 1930s* (1996) and Sheila Stowell's critical study *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (1992), among others. As evidenced by many of the titles of these works, Robins, Craig and St. John are primarily classified—and therefore discussed and understood—as suffrage playwrights.⁴³⁴ Nor should the distinctiveness of their commitments to the suffrage cause and to the concerns of first-wave feminism be overlooked; the ideology and mass activism of suffrage feminism provided the impetus for many of Robins, Craig and St. John's early dramatic engagements as well as fueled their critique of existing theatre practices and establishments.

Yet one of the pleasures of researching this project was discovering the range of

⁴³⁴ A notable exception to this trend is Penny Farfan's recent interdisciplinary contribution *Women, Modernism and Performance* (2004). Farfan's analysis usefully places Robins' and Craig's dramas alongside a range of other modernists works, including plays by Henrik Ibsen and Djuna Barnes, novels by Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall and performances by Ellen Terry and Isadora Duncan.

connections between Robins, Craig and St. John and the many performers, artists and writers they influenced, were influenced by and collaborated with over the course of their careers. The large number and rich overlaps of these artistic connections form the basis of my argument that their work must be resituated within a discussion of British modernist theatre. In *The Gender of Modernism* (1990), Bonnie Kime Scott seeks to expand the roster of modernist literary figures by including women writers as well as considering the “aesthetics of gender” in the works of canonical modernist writers (5). Scott also meditates on the influence of women modernists on their male peers, and vice-versa: her introduction includes a graphic entitled “A Tangled Mesh of Modernists” that illustrates the web of relationships between the heretofore canonical and non-canonical writers featured in her anthology.

Through the course of this dissertation, I have also begun to trace another dense network of modernists: the pages of each chapter are peopled with compatriots and admirers of the women theatre artists I discuss. A number of those individuals maintained work and interests overlapping with those of Robins, Craig and St. John in shared concerns with first-wave feminism and the suffrage movement: Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling, Havelock Ellis, Charlotte Despard, Emmaline Pethick-Lawrence, Cicely Hamilton, Ethel Symth, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, to name a few. Some are the most celebrated performers and actor-managers of the late Victorian period—such as Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, Janet Achurch, Charles Charrington, Marion Lea, Florence Farr and Mrs. Patrick Campbell—as well as famed European actresses Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse. Yet many of the men and women who critiqued as well as corresponded and/or collaborated with the feminist theatre artists in this project

are more often associated with Britain's theatrical and literary avant-garde during the rise of modernism in England; these include Oscar Wilde, Henry James, William Archer, George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville-Barker, J.T. Grein, W.B. Yeats, Pamela Coleman Smith, Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Moreover, through the works they translated, performed in and/or directed, Robins, Craig and St. John also link to a range of international avant-garde dramatists: Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, Edward Gordon-Craig, Constantine Stanislavski, Antoine Lugné-Poe, Adolphe Appia, Nikolai Evreinov, Torahiko Kori, St. Georges de Bouheliér, José Echegaray, Susan Glaspell, Upton Sinclair and Paul Claudel.

Beyond their relationships with British, American and European modernists, Robins, Craig and St. John also engaged with avant-garde questions of subjectivity formal experimentation, impelled by modernist as well as feminist concerns. In the introduction chapter, I referenced Josephine Guy's theoretical framework for the artistic avant-garde's 'reforming' (versus revolutionary) relationship to the intellectual and political tradition in late nineteenth-century Britain. Although initially intended to discuss literary avant-gardism in Britain, Guy's formulation provides a useful framework for understanding the kinds of subtle theatrical experimentation accomplished by Robins, Craig and St. John during the rise of modernism. While the work of these playwrights has been discussed as a subculture apart from larger modernist developments, my project seeks to show not only where these playwrights engaged ideas outside of feminist developments, but also how their theatrical experimentation stands as a formative feminist contribution to modernism.

I originally conceived this dissertation as a chronological project. With this

historically ordered dissertation structure I intended to suggest a trajectory of British feminist avant-gardism corresponding to the development of modernist avant-garde theatre in Europe: beginning with Ibsen's literary style of dramatic naturalism, connecting Robins' suffrage politicization and work as an actress with her approach to playwriting and representing female characters (a feminist revision of Ibsen's dramaturgy), moving to St. John's text-based work as feminist playwright and modernist dramaturg with the Pioneer Players, and concluding with the 'mise-en-scène'-influenced material and design-oriented work of suffrage activist and avant-garde director Edith Craig. When it proved unnecessarily difficult to describe the work of little-discussed playwright and dramaturg St. John before establishing Craig's slightly better-known reputation among feminist theatre historians as founder and artistic director of the Pioneer Players, I switched the order of those two chapters. The achronological approach eventually revealed important implications of the modernist feminist work of Robins, St. John, and Craig.

Specifically, a number of new overlaps between the careers of Robins, St. John, and Craig emerged which, though related to my original discussion of Robins, St. John and Craig's shared avant-garde impulses, are also distinct from them. In the following section, I tease out three connective threads between the careers of these three women. First, their feminist critiques of the commercial theatre establishment and leadership in the avant-garde 'free-theatre' movement; second, their engagement with modernism's 'culture of personality' and third, a discernable strain of new politically-inflected modernist theatrical aesthetics. As I argue, each figure of my dissertation took a different approach to these developments, thus resisting the kind of teleological narrative I may

have initially imposed on them.

I. Feminist Critiques of Commercial Theatre and the “Free Theatre” Movement

First, all three feminist theatre artists critiqued the commercial theatre establishment and participated in anti-censorship activism, though they did so to varying degrees. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Elizabeth Robins articulated an explicitly feminist critique of the commercial theatre establishment’s entrenched and limiting methods of play selection formed by the biases of actor-managers.⁴³⁵ Robins went on to propose her vision for a “theatre of the future”, an alternative theatre model based on principles of gender and economic equity (*WH* 11). Christopher St. John’s, for her part, publicly lamented the absence of woman-centered plays and denounced the sexual discrimination that she believed led to Edith Craig’s lack of directorial engagements, despite the critical acclaim that Craig’s work frequently received.⁴³⁶ Edith Craig’s stance toward the commercial theatre establishment is more difficult. On the one hand, Craig did not explicitly denounce sexism in theatre formally or in print, as did Robins and St. John. Craig also denied that she was discriminated against as a woman stage director, stating in an interview “If you know your job there is no actor who will resent you because you are a woman”.⁴³⁷ Here Craig elides the issue of sexual discrimination from the theatre managers and producers who did not hire her; working with talented male and female actors was never a problem for Craig. Craig’s belief that theatre was a meritocratic realm of equal opportunity for talented women (in contrast to broader

⁴³⁵ See *Wither and How* [*WH*] (manuscript in Fales Library, NYU) and *Ibsen and the Actress* (*IA*).

⁴³⁶ British actor John Gielgud, Craig’s second cousin, shared St. John’s assessment. Gielgud believed that Craig was resented as one of the few female directors. (Cited in Auerbach *Ellen Terry* 431).

⁴³⁷ Edith Craig, “Women in the Theatre”, *Hastings Observer*, 20 May 1933; G171 ECD, qtd. in *EC* 12-13.

society) was undoubtedly influenced by her unusual position as daughter of the famed Victorian actress Ellen Terry, as her biographer Katharine Cockin has noted.⁴³⁸ This might suggest that Craig subscribed to the ‘exceptional woman’ idea, which emphasized the achievements of individual women over critiquing systemic injustices that might affect the majority of women in theatre. On the other hand, Craig not only spearheaded the Actress Franchise League and boldly promoted the production of new suffrage propaganda plays, she also led the Pioneer Players, a theatre society, established with a commitment to “produce plays dealing with all kinds of movements of interest at the moment”, including, most prominently, suffrage feminism.⁴³⁹ In Craig’s Pioneer Players, key leadership positions were held predominantly (though not exclusively) by women. Craig’s theatre company itself functioned as the ultimate critique: a feminist alternative to the sexist commercial theatre establishment.

Robins, Craig and St. John were all active in critiquing the theatre censorship in Britain, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as demonstrated in the body of this dissertation. The ‘free theatres’ in England—which spearheaded the anti-censorship campaign—were vanguard companies interested in performing radical and often controversial dramas (these included the Independent Theatre and the Stage Society). Raymond Williams has credited the free theatre movement with generating a renaissance in drama towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴⁰

Many have associated the free theatre movement with male authors of ‘woman question’ plays (such as George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and Harley Granville-

⁴³⁸ ‘Miss Edith Craig’, *Vote*, 12 March 1910, 323, cited in *EC* 13.

⁴³⁹ *PPAR1911-1912*, 7.

⁴⁴⁰ Williams 1983: 171, cited in *WAT* 16.

Barker)⁴⁴¹ and the actress-managers who performed in and promoted these woman-centered ‘new dramas’ (including Janet Achurch, Florence Farr and Elizabeth Robins).⁴⁴²

The centrality of male authors and female performers/promoters in the late nineteenth-century ‘free theatre’ movement is a crucial part of the Introduction to this dissertation, where I discuss feminists’ role in the first performances of Ibsen on the English stage.

Robins, Craig and St. John’s engagement in the debates around censorship can be understood as part of a feminist stream within the influential ‘free theatre’ movement. In fact, their involvement in this movement through their roles as playwright, director and dramaturg extends our understanding beyond the conventional description of the free theatre movement as one centered primarily on male playwrights and female actors/actresses. Edith Craig intentionally structured the Pioneer Players as a subscription society, enabling them to exploit legal loopholes to produce works that might otherwise censored by the Lord Chamberlain’s office. Craig directed a number of controversial dramas to large ‘private’ audiences in London. In this sense, Craig’s company, like the other English free theatres, functioned as what Raymond Williams calls an ‘alternative’ cultural formation; they offered to produce drama ordinarily ignored by existing institutions (1983:70).

However Robins, Craig and St. John also took what Williams termed an “oppositional” approach to the practice of stage censorship, in that their productions were mounted in “active opposition to the established institutions, or more generally to the conditions within which these exist” (1983:30, cited in *WAT* 25). In fact, the Pioneer Players proved to be a nexus for the anti-censorship activism of all three subjects of my

⁴⁴¹ See Watson (1970), Stokes (1972) and Woodfield 1984. .

⁴⁴² See Gardner and Rutherford (1992) and John (1995).

dissertation. Elizabeth Robins, who was never a member of the company, staged an anti-censorship protest along with Harley Granville-Barker following the Pioneer Players' production of Laurence Houseman's drama *Pains and Penalties: the Defense of Queen Caroline* (1911). At the time of this campaign, Robins was no longer acting; she had already penned the dramas *Alan's Wife* and *Votes for Women* and was working prolifically as a writer. The Pioneer Players mounted a similar protest after their production of St. John and Thursby's play *The Coronation*, calling upon the audience to form the 'Coronation Society' to oppose stage censorship. Christopher St. John challenged stage censorship not only as a playwright but also as a dramaturg; she presented the Lord Chamberlain's office with controversial foreign plays which she had translated and/or adapted for performance in England. St. John also publicly denounced the "practical censorship" of commercial theatres dropping production of controversial plays. Freedom of expression—a value shared with the other free theatres—was fundamental not only for the flourishing of artistic culture in England, but also for the promotion of social change advocated by suffrage activists Robins, Craig and St. John.

II. Robins, Craig and St. John and Modernism's 'Culture of Celebrity/Personality'

As discussed in my Introduction chapter, one feature of dramatic and literary modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an interest in exploring and representing subjectivity. Interestingly, these ideas burgeoning about subjectivity correlated to a rising modernist culture of celebrity, or personality. One connective thread between the chapters of this dissertation is the varied ways in which Robins, Craig and St. John participated in or appropriated certain facets of this modernist

culture of celebrity. As Lawrence Rainey argued in *Institutions of Modernism* (1998), both canonical Anglo-American modernists and key figures of the historical avant-garde engaged in “authorial self-construction” and developed “new strategies for reputation building—involving theatricality, spectacle, publicity and novel modes of cultural marketing and media manipulation” (4). For example, between 1912 and 1914, Italian Futurist theorist and showman Filippo Tommaso Marinetti presented a series of controversial, widely attended and highly publicized lectures introducing his ideas to London audiences; around the same time, Ezra Pound also gave a lecture series (on the poetry of Provence), but with an intentionally small and ‘elite’ audience.⁴⁴³ Later, Pound followed the theatrical Marinetti’s lead in some respects (i.e. appropriating French terminology, using more provocative language and adopting a confrontational stance in his essays) in Pound’s quest to promote himself as a literary critic and Imagist, and later Vorticist, poet.⁴⁴⁴

American-born Elizabeth Robins, who forged her career as a leading Ibsen actress in London, probably had the most conventional approach to cultivating her celebrity persona. Even though she retired from the stage in 1902, Robins’ numerous autobiographies focused on her professional career on the stage, suggesting a primary identification with the acting profession on her part (Farfan 125).⁴⁴⁵ As I argued in Chapter 2, Robins’ early experiences performing in Ibsen plays—particularly in constructing a character through subtext—influenced her representation of subjectivity in

⁴⁴³ See “The Creation of the Avant-Garde: F.T. Marinetti and Ezra Pound” in Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*. Yale UP: New Haven, 1998, 10-41.

⁴⁴⁴ Pound’s appropriation of these elements of Marinetti’s self-presentation is ironic, given how careful he was to define the literary movement of Imagism by contrasting it against futurism (Rainey 29-31). However, Rainey notes, Pound was considerably less successful than Marinetti in this approach (30, 38).

⁴⁴⁵ Robins’ autobiographical works about theatre performance included *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928), *Theatre and Friendship* (1932) and *Both Sides of the Curtain* (1940).

the dramas she later wrote. Robins' drama *Votes for Women* (1907) also contains several significant autobiographical elements; these include representations of specific characters resembling Robins and her circle, the realism of the Act II Trafalgar Square rally (based on the event at which Robins became persuaded to join the suffrage movement) and the rhetorical role of autobiographical 'testimony' by the speakers at the suffrage rally.⁴⁴⁶ In 1928, Robins delivered lectures on Ibsen (for the BBC and for the Ibsen Centennial), in which she theorized Ibsen's importance to drama and to the art of acting, implicitly positing herself as an expert on Ibsen's drama and theatrical performance. Later that year, Leonard and Virginia Woolf published Robins' essay version of *Ibsen and the Actress* in a Hogarth Press series associated with literary modernism. .

Edith Craig, although she had a successful early career as a working actress, eschewed the typical celebrity role exemplified by her mother Ellen Terry, the most iconic actress of the Victorian era. Instead, Craig claimed for herself a distinctive identity as a theatre director with full artistic control over the production. Craig described this new professional role in her *Munsey's Magazine* article entitled 'Producing a Play'.⁴⁴⁷ As discussed in Chapter 3, Craig's description of her theatrical position shows the influence of Adolphe Appia's theorizations of *mise-en-scène* upon Craig's lighting and stage-design oriented directorial aesthetic. Throughout Europe's leading art theatres during this period, the figure of the Director was gaining prominence in the development of modernist theatre. Much like modernist directors Stanislavsky, Myerhold, Gordon Craig and Lugné-Poe, Craig assumed not only the activities of the art theatre artistic

⁴⁴⁶ As Barbara Green argues, autobiography was central to the performative activism of suffrage spectacles (8).

⁴⁴⁷ Edith Craig, 'Producing a Play', *Munsey's Magazine*, June 1907; Theatre Museum, cited in *EC* 78.

director—as accomplishing the ‘total work of art’ in production—but also the role of visionary leader and figurehead with a singular and unifying vision.

Playwright and dramaturg Christopher St. John was perhaps the least visible of all three in terms of public persona.⁴⁴⁸ However St. John’s pageant works—and particularly her drama *The First Actress* (1911)—reveal her canny engagement with the ‘culture of celebrity’ for the ends of her theatrical and feminist project. As discussed in Chapter Four, St. John wrote her drama with specific casting in mind, adeptly linking the famous actresses from British theatre history with the contemporary stars of her day; in so doing, she advanced her pro-suffrage argument while maximizing audience pleasure through these metatheatrical moments of celebrity recognition. To a certain degree, St. John’s work as a dramaturg involved not only introducing new foreign plays and theatrical movements to contemporary English audiences, but also promoting unknown playwrights as notable figures in their own right (Evreinov, Hroswitha, etc.)

III. New Politically-Inflected Modernist Theatrical Aesthetics

Finally, although all the feminist dramatists featured in my dissertation acted, wrote and directed realist and naturalist plays as well, a discernable strain of politically-inflected modernist theatrical forms emerge throughout these chapters. Robins, Craig and St. John introduced theatrical conventions and formal experiments that anticipated by ten and twenty years the innovations associated with Brecht’s epic theatre projects in Germany and those of the Federal Theatre Project in the U.S. It is possible that an understanding of suffrage aesthetics can revise and invigorate the ways in which we

⁴⁴⁸ Of course, Christopher St. John’s prolific work as a writer and editor leaves multiple traces of her name in the literary archive—although there is quite a bit of confusion over her gender.

understand British theatrical modernism. Lisa Tickner has already compellingly argued the converse of my claim: that the suffrage movement took the lead in appropriating the arts (including drama) for the purposes of a mass political movement. Reflecting on the colorful and theatrical mass suffrage demonstrations, dramatist Cicely Hamilton noted:

There were two respects in which the Woman Suffrage Movement differed from the general run of political strife. It was not a class movement; every rank and grade took part in it. And it was the first political agitation to organize the arts in its aid – how drab was the ordinary procession of protest before the suffragists took to the march!....On decorative art, as aid to propaganda, followed the arts of entertainment – music and the drama (1948:7).

Though Robins, Craig and St. John all participated in these mass suffrage demonstrations, Craig played the most influential role in these activities out of these three women. Not only did she design banners to be used in processions, but Craig also organized and co-designed the scheme for one of these spectacular marches.⁴⁴⁹ Along with other suffrage activists, Craig applied her considerable theatrical background and design experience to “dramatize the cause by means of costume, narrative, embroidery, performance, and all the developing skills of public entertainment at their disposal” (Tickner 56).

However Robins, Craig and St. John also inaugurated a political strain of modernist theatrical experimentation by incorporating explicitly political aesthetics into their theatrical works. Robins’ groundbreaking *Votes for Women* (1907) thrilled audiences and critics by thrusting a hyper-realistic Trafalgar Square suffrage rally

⁴⁴⁹ See my discussion in Chapter 3.

scene—complete with a huge on-stage crowd—into the West End theatre space. This unusual and confrontational staging implicated audience members as members of the unruly urban crowd—and potential ‘converts’ to the suffrage cause, as was Robins herself. In addition to bringing the spectacular aesthetics of the suffrage movement into the bourgeois space of the commercial theatre, Robins’ resolutely maintained the opening and closing drawing room scenes. In so doing, Robins established a dramaturgical structure that linked ‘private and public realism’, knitting together the personal stories and fates of characters with the political actions of Britain’s citizens and leaders.

In Edith Craig’s diverse oeuvre, this strain of ‘politically inflected’ modernist theatrical form appears mainly in her production of the *Pageant of Great Women* (1909), which she co-created with playwright Cicely Hamilton. Inspired by Craig’s tableaux of W.H. Margetson’s image of Woman, Justice and Prejudice, the *Pageant of Great Women* reflected the craze for historical pageants in the early twentieth century as well as modernists’ fascination with the middle ages. As discussed in Chapter Four, Craig’s and Hamilton’s *Pageant* exploited the propagandistic potential of the medieval pageant form to feminist ends. This centuries-old civic theatrical form provided a structure flexible enough to promote a sense of collectivist action among suffragette performers—both professional and amateur—throughout Britain. With its large cast—numbering between fifty and ninety great women from history—the *Pageant* theatrically paralleled the logic of the mass suffrage demonstrations in London. The sheer size of the suffrage marches (with tens of thousands of participants) provided compelling visual evidence as to the numbers of British women demanding the right to vote. Similarly, as large numbers of female bodies representing great women from throughout history enter the stage space,

the *Pageant of Great Women* accumulates a visual testimony of women's contributions to human societies and rightful claims to full citizenship.

As discussed at length in Chapter Four, Christopher St. John's mixed-form drama *The First Actress* likewise draws upon the newly forged associations between the politics of suffrage activism and the medieval drama genre. In the final 'dream sequence' scene, St. John invokes both the transcendent allegorical aesthetics of the medieval mystery play and the 'testimony of history' provided by the actresses throughout British theatre history who encourage the 'brave pioneer', Restoration actress Margaret Hughes. As evidenced by the accumulation of actresses who enter the stage in historically accurate costumes, St. John's play recalls the suffrage movement's logic of mass mobilization (through spectacular demonstrations in a politics of bodily representation) as well as the contemporary feminist project of researching, disseminating and, in this case, embodying women's histories.

Through the closing speech of *The First Actress*—delivered by the character the 'Actress of Today' (played by Lena Ashwell)—St. John gives voice to a viewpoint likely shared by Robins and Craig. Comparing the exclusion of women from the Restoration stage and the equally "arbitrary division" between male and female professions and spheres that still existed in 1911, the Actress of Today prophesies that in the future, "we shall not forget that [this arbitrary gender division] was first made to look foolish when women mounted the stage" (17). In so doing, St. John asserts the theatre's unique potential to move a culture towards practices reflecting greater justice and equity.

Robins, Craig and St. John's hope in the power of theatre and its aesthetics of spectacle to spark social change was not misplaced, as history has demonstrated. In turn,

equipped by their feminist commitments, these theatre artists articulated critiques of the commercial theatre establishment, took leadership roles in combating stage censorship and developed collaborative working processes and new forms of cultural production. Moreover, propelled by the avant-garde impulse to continually experiment with theatrical form, Robins, Craig and St. John incorporated the spectacular aesthetics of the mass suffrage movement into new forms of modernist political theatre.

In characterizing Robins, Craig and St. John's theatrical work as tributaries of British avant-garde experimentation feeding into the large and swirling streams of international dramatic modernism, I have run the risk contributing to the assumption that canonical modernist texts and performances of the historical avant-garde are the 'ones that matter'. Yet I believe this critical relocation is not merely a matter of 'mainstreaming' these feminist artists in relation to their masculine counterparts in order to claim legitimacy for their work. As Marianne DeKoven has argued, now that a broad category of 'female Modernists' has been established, "the interconnectedness in historical situation between male and female Modernists has become much more important" (182-183). What I hope to have provided using this critical frame is simply a more accurate description of Robins, Craig and St. John's engagement with a range of modernist and avant-garde artists, works and movements over the course of their theatrical careers.

At the same time, in doing I join a number of recent feminist and interdisciplinary theatre critics who challenge a number of divisions common to the fields to which my dissertation belongs. In my focus on the social and communal art forms of theatre and performance—which are occasionally disparaged, but more often ignored, as if they

were the ‘bastard children’ of modernist studies—this dissertation also contributes to the growing body of work that challenges traditional accounts of modernism as exclusively centered on Anglo-American masters’ literary production.⁴⁵⁰ Even within the field of modernist theatre studies, discussions tend to center almost exclusively on male playwrights, directors and designers.⁴⁵¹ This dissertation inserts the important dramatic interventions of Robins, Craig and St. John into discussions of the range of varied modernist theatrical experiments occurring in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain and Europe. My project questions the privileging of the ‘radical’ European avant-gardes over the more nuanced British avant-gardes of this period, and describes a complex interchange between these movements. In addition to re-evaluating the theatrical contributions of Robins, Craig and St. John, this dissertation is, I hope, a step in expanding critical understanding of the relationship between the performative activism of the suffrage movement and the kinds of questions and experiments circulating among the British and international theatrical avant-garde.

⁴⁵⁰ For example, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Michael Levenson calls for expanding the subjects of study from this period to incorporate a range of works and movements. Levenson acknowledges that these works and movements are “sometimes deeply congruent with one another, and just as often, opposed or even contradictory” (3).

⁴⁵¹ See, for example, the four essays on modernist drama by James McFarlane, James Fletcher and Martin Esslin in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Eds.) *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (1991) and Christopher Innes’ essay “Modernism in Drama” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (1999).

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