臺大文史哲學報　第八十六期
2017年05月　　頁159~188
臺　灣　大　學　文　學　院
DOI: 10.6258/bcla.2017.86.05

From Making Amends to Making Amendments: The Economy of Re/Degeneration, Vitalism, and Suffrage in *Votes for Women!*

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Abstract

Votes for Women! (1907) by Elizabeth Robins has been known as a stridently political play agitating for women's suffrage in Edwardian Britain in the early twentieth century. Looking beyond its propagandist aspects, the paper examines the discursive formations of re/degeneration and vitalism, theories which were once influential, but now discredited as pseudo-sciences, hidden beneath the rallying cry and public outcry over whether women should be granted the right to vote, in a bid to explore the new Edwardian turn to economics over the old Victorian politics: how home formerly conceived as a regenerative core of procreation to deter degeneration is actually a center of domestic economic production by woman laborers, rather than angels, in the house; how the Victorian melodrama of a fallen woman's personal agonies can be transcended and converted, spiritually and economically, into a new reconciliation based on altruistic common good. The transformation of the old to the new is based on an Edwardian economic paradigm of currency and conversion, which helps convert an enormous inheritance fortune into a lasting legacy for the unfortunate, potential wronged woman's revenge tragedy into conciliatory comedy of alliance and union, and making amends to right old wrongs into making amendments for new rights, all these activated by the vitalist New Spirit of the New Woman from the "ferment of feminism" to "political dynamite," to battle the bastion of patriarchy.

Keywords: suffrage, feminist drama, Elizabeth Robins, vitalism, degeneration

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104.10.16 收稿，105.05.17 通過刊登。

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I. Introduction

Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women!* (1907) enjoys the dubious distinction of being one of the earliest plays to employ an exclamation mark in its title.[1] It is there as if to flaunt its exclamatory and declamatory rhetoric, and inflammatory rabble-rousing style, as a fervent gesture and strident "battle cry" calling for concerted action to win women's rights to vote.[2] Often credited as the first play that manages to take "the street politics of suffrage campaign onto the stage,"[3] the resounding "widespread impact" it has managed in advocating the cause of suffrage has been generally acknowledged.[4] The play is indeed unabashedly didactic, making no secret of being an agitprop, or agitation-propaganda, even tentatively subtitled "a dramatic tract."[5] Robins confessed to have written the play "under the pressure of a strong moral conviction,"[6] and believed that it was "for the first time" that the suffrage issue had been dealt with "in a serious fashion."[7] *VW* marked the end of her theatrical career which she "explicitly employed…to forward the agenda of the women's suffrage movement."[8] Known as the preeminent interpreter of Ibsen

1 For typological convenience, however, I will follow publishing conventions in adopting the title without the original exclamation mark, as printed in the edition used in the paper. All the following quotations from *Votes for Women* will be abbreviated as *VW*.

2 Sheila Stowell. *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 9. For a comprehensive survey of how "the battle cry" has been served in drama, see Stowell's groundbreaking 1992 studies.

3 Katharine E. Kelly, *Modern Drama by Women 1880s-1930s* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 109.

4 Rachael Baitch Zeleny, *Behind the Curtain: The Spectacular Rhetoric of the Victorian Actress* (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2014), 187. The director of the premiere Harley Granville-Barker has been credited with suggesting changing the title from *A Friend of Women* to the current form (Kelly, *Modern Drama by Women* 111, Tylee, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 144) and adding the exclamation mark (Ellis). Robins was originally commissioned by actress-manager Gertrude Kingston to work on a play for her own company and planned on the biography of great French tragedienne of the prestigious *Comédie Française*, Rachel Félix (1821-58), Kingston backed away at from the political nature the new suffrage play and nullified the contract (Kelly 109).

5 Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own*, 11.

6 Joanne E. Gates, *Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist* (Tuscaaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 159.

7 Ibid., 160.

8 Zeleny, *Behind the Curtain*, 22.

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in her time, Robins was thought of as "fearfully Ibsenish" by theatre critic Max Beerbohm,[9] and intended to go further than Ibsen in championing women's cause.[10]

Dramaturgically the play is characterized by two distinct styles: Victorian and Edwardian. On the surface it is a typical Edwardian drama set in its contemporary milieu of 1906 and deals with topical issues of the day, where characters are caught between conflicting lure of the new and draw of the old values. Yet it also proves deeply embedded in the 19th century Victorian conventions, developing from the dialectical nature of Ibsenite problem play or thesis play, which in turn is derived from *pièce à thèse*.[11] Albeit with more polemic and ironic realism, Ibsenite modern realist dramas remain grounded in the old-fashioned Parisian boulevard melodrama made popular by Scribe and Sardou. Such melodramas pander to the fortified bourgeois morality of maintaining the façade of social respectability, and often feature a sophisticated woman with a dark secret, the so-called "fallen woman" or "woman with a past" who threatens to tear asunder the seemingly seamless social fabric.

The play is brimming with polemics since it stages two parallel campaigns simultaneously, a suffrage campaign and an election campaign, which eventually become inextricably entangled. On appearance, politics and propaganda predominate *VW.* However, I argue that overwhelmingly political as it may seem, the play employs and deploys politics in such a way that it goes beyond mere propaganda. The highly topical play full of sound and fury is set in the contemporary early twentieth century, but its exposition stretches back forty years earlier to 1867, when National Society for Women's Suffrage (NSWS) was founded to officially promulgate women's rights to vote, and its curtain rises exactly when the more radical suffragette organization The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)

9 Angela V. John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life 1862-1952* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.

10 Robins created the role of Hilda Wangel in Britain for Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1893), and Hedda Gabler was her signature role, garnering general admiration. However, for Robins, the importance of Ibsenism lies only in its realistic acting, rather than its progressive feminism. She wrote *VW* as an attempt to "remake Hedda in a her revolt against the Ibsenite legacy", see Farfan (60-69). Penny Farfan, "From Hedda Gabler to Votes for Women: Elizabeth Robins's Early Feminist Critique of Ibsen," *Theatre Journal* 48, no.1 (1996): 59-78.

11 It can be described as a French sub-genre of dramatic realism depicting the topical disputed social problems from conflicting standpoints, as seen in plays by Émile Augier and Dumas *fils* such as *The Lady of the Camelias* (1852).

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moved to London in 1906.[12] The play therefore traces its historical genesis to the height of Victorian era and culminates in the middle of Edwardian reign in 1906, a distinction illuminated by Tilghman for its theatrical context.[13] Besides, I would like to highlight the modernity of the Edwardian era as marking "a shift of emphasis" as opposed to the Victorian era, in the premium it placed on economic performance in governance.[14] Edwardian politics was increasingly dominated by economic issues addressing the personal well-being of private citizens, a political paradigm shift that can be summed up as "the politics of the people's budget."[15]

Consequently, far from being a mere vehicle of political mobilization for suffrage and election campaigns, the play slants toward the more economic dimensions of modern politics, a shift that I will prove in the paper brings to bear on the woman's struggle from home management to political engagement in *VW*. As presented in the play, the controversial issue of the day, the so-called Woman Question, centers on the duality of homelessness and "helplessness" of women; with the former threatening to overthrow the patriarchal value of feminine domesticity to which most Victorian women were subjected, while the latter standing in stark contrast with the masculine power exercised by the enfranchised and empowered men, many of whom crossed the bar of universal franchise for the first time in 1867, precisely the seminal year from which the dramatic action of the play can be traced to originate.[16]

12 It was the first of its kind in the UK, headed by Lydia Becker. Like the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) it later branched out, it was a suffragist organization aiming at achieving the goal of woman's franchise through parliamentary reforms.

13 Carolyn Tilghman, "*Staging Suffrage: Women, Politics, and the Edwardian Theater*" *Comparative Drama* 45, no.4 (2011): 339-360.

14 Pugh, Martin. *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain Since 1870*. (Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 135. According to Pugh's historical survey of British state and society, the Edwardian era represents a "watershed" which "set the pattern" for the future twentieth century by stressing the importance of economic aspects in politics, such as "the level of unemployment, standard of living, and social welfare."

15 Ibid., 136. People's Budget of 1909 and 1910 is well-known for levying heavy taxes on the wealthy, ushering in the welfare state. It was engineered by Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lord George, aided and abetted by the young Winston Churchill, under Asquith's government. In a way, Robins almost prophetically envisaged the young Winston of the near future in her portrayal of the emerging statesman of Geoff Stonor.

16 The Reform Act of 1867 enfranchised the urban working class males for the first time, extending the number of men eligible to vote by another one million, reaching two million out of seven million men.

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If woman's endeavor to address homelessness and helplessness poses a challenge to patriarchal family value and masculine prowess, it is due to the underlying fear felt by men of the feminine powers of regeneration or reproduction, and vitalism. In the following, drawing on *fin-de-siècle* theories of degeneration and vitalism, the paper will explore how female regenerative power falling outside the domain of patriarchal regulation is demonized as transgressive degeneration, and how the masculine prerogative of political power is overcome by anxiety to vie with the invisible vitalist power of woman's so-called New Spirit. Now both denigrated as pseudo-sciences, degeneration and vitalism theories will not be discussed as valid critical inquiries, rather, they are adopted to further understand the historical process and cultural formation of late Victorian and Edwardian discourses, to offer insights into the cultural ethos of the era.

II. Degeneration and "Ferment of Feminism"

The idea of degeneration had seized European imagination ever since Darwin's theories of evolution took a social turn with the advocacy of Herbert Spencer, and the subsequent Social Darwinism further branched out into different realms such as arts and literature, best exemplified in Max Nordau's influential *Degeneration*[17] whose English translation appeared in 1895 to coincide with Oscar Wilde's trials for "gross indecency" or homosexuality. Many a detractor found a ready justification for incriminating Wilde solely based on what Nordau perceived as his "pathological aberration"[18] Disease and crime, their inextricable linkage already expounded and established in Cesare Lombroso's pioneering physiognomic studies and eagerly embraced by many, are said to work as twin forces that take their shape even before birth, in a sort of genetically coded conditioning that is biologically inscribed. Those who have been branded as crime-prone before they are born, usually the marginalized in race, class, and sexuality, will arguably pass their degenerative genes down to future generations. It is argued that such hereditary decadence eventually contributes to racial decay and national decline, thus feeding the anxiety of Victorian families and society alike.

Consequently, as agents of reproduction, women bore the brunt of shouldering the duties of guarding the purity of family bloodline, keeping possibilities of

17 Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 1-320.
18 Ibid., 318.

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contaminating degeneration at bay. As guardians of sanctified "home sweet home,"[19] Victorian women were regarded as "angels in the house," and their idealized femininity was customized to meet the needs of a patriarchal society in mortal fear of biological contamination. Hearth and home are considered the only domain where virtuous women rightfully belong. Homelessness and women were thus by nature almost a contradiction in terms, and homeless women, one of the major issues concerning the suffragette Vida in the *VW*, presents itself as a social anomaly to be frowned on, rather than a legitimate social issue to be confronted.

Homelessness breeds helplessness, another major issue plaguing Vida, who considers it "the greatest evil in the world"[20] The cause for supporting homeless women seems hopeless because women helping out other women is disapproved of by men in the first place. "Philanthropy in a woman" so Sir John argues, "is a form of restlessness"[21] since women's love and affection should be restricted only to the confines of home. The fact that Vida devotes her "passionate celibacy," inverting a phrase from Wilde,[22] to the cause of serving people outside her domestic sphere proves a disturbing prospect to patriarchy, of which Sir John certainly represents.

Moreover, the issue of helping women also divides women. Suffragettes, who advocate a more radical and violent approach to strive for the right to vote with or without the aid of men, are differentiated from the more moderate and conservative suffragists, who always depend on the goodwill of male parliamentarians to attain their goal, as Mrs. Fred puts it, "the only chance" they have is "winning over the men."[23] Suffragists take great pains to distance themselves from radical suffragettes, whom they consider as having spoiled their last chance for parliamentary reform with their "disgraceful scene."[24]

It is by no means a coincidence that the chief suffragette in the play, Vida, chooses to focus on building shelters for homeless women. Both the ideology and

19 Quoting from the title of Henry Bishop's popular song "Home! Sweet Home!" (1823), to lyrics by American playwright John Howard Payne.

20 Elizabeth Robins, "Votes for Women!" *Types of Drama: Plays and Contexts* (London: Longman, 2001), 960.

21 Ibid., 958.

22 Oscar Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest" *Types of Drama: Plays and Contexts.* (London: Longman, 1997), 474. "The a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to," is uttered by Jack in Act III of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when he uses his withdrawal of consent to the match between his ward Cecily and Algernon as a bargaining chip to promote his own with Gwendoline.

23 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 967.

24 Ibid., 966.

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practice of suffragettes fall outside the bounds of home, independent of men. It is such independence that is greatly feared by men and resented by suffragists. As Sir John acutely quips, they are considered "unsexed creatures" by men like Greatorex because they "want to act independently of men."[25] In stark contrast, suffragists' dependence on men is absolute, since they pin all their hopes of being granted the right to vote solely on the endorsement of men. Suffragettes are in fact "born-again" suffragists who feel they have no choice but to espouse radicalism because they feel "betrayed" by the stalling tactics of male MPs, which amounts to forty years of "politely petitioning Parliament" to little avail from the moderate suffragists.[26]

The question of whether women should continue to defer to patriarchal authority fissures female solidarity, splitting suffragette defection from suffragist allegiance. It is a divide that aligns homeliness with entrenched male authority, and homelessness with no recourse to male resources. The suffragettes are completely disillusioned with any hope that men would ever "play fair" again, whereas the suffragists continue to believe in playing the "old game"[27] that has been played not only since the 1867 Reform Act, but also the games of domestic compliance in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* since 1879.

It is significant that in Vida, Robins "deliberately creates a heroine without a fixed home"[28] Women without a home, such as the homeless poor, as well as the upper-crust unmarried ladies, such as Vida, have in common their exclusion from the patronage and protection of male-dominated home, willing or unwilling. Under the *fin-de-siècle* discourse of decadence, such homeliness implies the absence of regulated female reproduction, showing sure signs of a proclivity to degeneration. Even though always couched in the polite language like "restlessness," the misgivings the upper class harbors about Vida's unmarried status is thinly veiled.

Women outside the patriarchy-regulated family order, summarily addressed as "outcast women,"[29] are thus always already suspected to be "disorderly women"[30] or even "female hooligans,"[31] an impression reinforced by the "customary row" made by suffragettes.[32] It is with added irony that Stonor makes such a dismissal

25 Ibid., 959.
26 Ibid., 966.
27 Ibid.
28 Kelly, *Modern Drama*, 9.
29 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 976.
30 Ibid., 964.
31 Ibid., 966.
32 Ibid., 964.

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when he hasn't an inkling that he is actually referring to Vida, the very woman his aristocratic father has rejected because she fails to fall into line with their class order, deemed a "disorderly woman" by the exalted standard of his noble clan.

Besides falling from grace with domestic order, disorderly women are by definition easily identified with medical disorders, and prone to degenerative disease, an assumption reinforced by Lombroso's criminal anthropological studies and Nordau's degeneration theories mentioned above. They are particularly linked to psychic disorder such as hysteria, not least because the illness was originally thought to be restricted to women only and derived from what was considered their "wandering womb."[33]

Hysteria is mentioned three times in the play, the first two used as adjectives to describe an undefined object, "hysterical…." The first mention is made by Suffragist Mrs. Freddy concerning her *bête noire* suffragettes whom she holds in utter contempt, claiming to dissociate herself from "the little group of hysterical—."[34] She refrains from finishing the sentence because the hysteric "object" is evidently unspeakable to her subjectivity, therefore rather than spelling out the abhorred epithet, she chooses to check herself. Mrs. Freddy again addresses the suffragettes as "a handful of hysterical—,"[35] as she blames them for ruining it just when victory seems within reach. Once again, almost like linguistic untouchables, suffragettes become the hysteric unmentionables who manage to destabilize her language competence. Ironically such an abrupt temporary lapse of speech marks one of the distinguishing symptoms of a hysteric attack. In other words, while mocking the suffragettes as hysterics, Mrs. Freddy, overcome by towering rage and frustration, comes close to slipping into a hysterical fit herself.

As a result, it can be argued that the greatest foe of woman's suffrage movement comes not from men, but from within, with suffragists pitted against suffragettes in a heated deadlock, which conveniently leaves out the need to intervene on the part of men who can easily hold sway over the suffragists simply by feeding them with illusory pledges whose fulfillment is infinitely deferred. Rather than coming to terms with the disenchanted conclusion that women have been

33 Symptoms of hysteria were discovered in men as well, especially since the outbreak of WWI in 1914, with shell-shocked soldiers suffering from war traumas as main victims, later called male hysteria. The term hysteria originates from the Greek word of uterus, and Hippocrates is credited with preaching the concept of a wandering womb, which has been discredited in modern medical science.

34 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 965.

35 Ibid., 966.

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deceived by men for decades, suffragists choose to keep deluding themselves that it is due solely to the suffragette "row" at the Parliament that "the work of forty years (was) destroyed in five minutes!",[36] which proves to be the last straw in what is interpreted unilaterally as the last-minute imminent approval of the bill. Suffragettes therefore become the facile scapegoat to take all the blame for the prolonged suffragist petition failures, since there remains for the suffragists only the question of not pleasing the men enough. Should their petition fail, it can only be attributed to the suffragettes who are accountable for "push(ing) back reform a generation"[37] by having incurred the displeasure of men in the Parliament.

On appearance, suffragette agitations seem to have disturbed harmony between the sexes, pitting men against women, resulting in what Lady John has lamented as "sex antagonism"[38] In fact, before men need to exercise any counter-tactic or exhibit any hostility, they can rest assured that the suffragists will do the job for them properly: sex antagonism exists only within the fairer sex. As if replicating the dominant strategy of colonial Empire, reigning patriarchs such as Stonor, Greaterex, and Sir John are only too content to divide and rule.

However, the ruling patriarchs, secure in their "ossification of authority," are not above resorting to humiliation as a tactic to ensure they remain immune from any suffragette encroachment.[39] The demonization and vilification drive they launch against suffragettes, more than casual ruthless taunting, is engaged actively as a potent political weapon wielded expressly to disarm their will power. Ironically the most serious perpetrator of such sexism comes from a man with liberal pretensions: Liberal MP Greatorex, who has even been dubbed a "Radical,"[40] but his views on gender are disturbingly conservative. He personifies the limitations of political liberalism and the unbridgeable gap between what a politician preaches and practices. In other words, he represents the type of hypocrites in the Parliament in whom the suffragists have misplaced their trust. He dismisses the possibility of Vida's ever joining the suffragettes solely based on his deep-seated gender

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 965.

38 Ibid., 967.

39 Samuel Hynes, *Edwardian Turn of Mind: First World War and English Culture* (New York: Pimlico, 1992), 5. The concept is proposed by historian Samuel Hynes to epitomize how the Edwardian society was suppressed by the "lengthy tenure" of Queen Victoria which "encased and cramped the new."

40 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 957.

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stereotype: the view that a woman has to be uncomely in appearance ("plain"),[41] single in marital status ("discontented old maids"),[42] embittered due to being unloved ("hungry widows").[43] Bluntly hinting at suffragette's lack of sexual gratification, Greatorex chauvinistically tries to defile the movement by simplifying its cause and sexualizing its members. In his capacity as a patriarchal representative, Greatorex manages through such sexualization to exclude suffragettes from the discursive realm of hearth and home, banishing them to the non-reproductive wasteland of degeneration, consequently discrediting their movement.

While under-sexualizing the suffragettes as undesirable or in Shavian term, as "Unwomanly Woman,"[44] he tends to over-sexualize Vida, who, despite being single and a "political woman" whom he claims to resent, doesn't strike him as a "typical English spinster" who smells of Indian rubber.[45] On the contrary, she proves "attractive," "essentially feminine,"[46] and simply too pretty to be one of them, though he finds it "revolting" for decent ladies like her to concern themselves with "Public Sanitation" since it involves filthy affairs such as drainage.[47]

Women who defy the distinctly divided "separate spheres" which consign men to public and women to domestic realms in Victorian society are bound to raise questions as well as eyebrows as Vida does, who, in spite of her impeccable credentials as a beauty, has strayed off the beaten straight and narrow path that domestic woman are destined to tread. It comes as little wonder that she has been dubbed as "the Elusive One" at the beginning of the play by Lady John,[48] who fails to classify her in the neatly laid out boxes for decent Victorian women because she eludes the field of domestic production as an obedient housewife.

Vida's response to the Liberal MP's blatant sexism is at once a witty repartee

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 959.

43 Ibid.

44 Katie Regan Peel, "'Unsuitable for Narrative': Working Women in Victorian Literature" (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2008), 176.

45 Robins. *Votes for Women*, 959.

46 Ibid., 958.

47 Ibid., 959. It is highly ironic that Robins' rendition of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* has been described by critic Clement Scott as "glorified unwomanly woman" (qtd. in John 60). Robins' ardent advocacy of feminism has led the acerbic critic Max Beerbohm to observe that he keeps "peeping under the table to see if she really wore a skirt" while dining with her (Ellis). Angela V. John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life 1862-1952*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

48 Ibid., 958.

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and a robust retort. She follows up his mockery of "discontented old maids" and "hungry widows" with subtraction as well as addition: de-gendering the issue by crossing out maids and widows, while reinforcing the gravity of her cause by bringing attention to the number of "the discontented and the hungry" that has soared to a staggering 96,000.[49] Her concern mainly rests with, yet is not restricted to women, rising above gender categories to universal humanitarianism for the hungry and needy. Their contrasting reactions succeed in reversing their accustomed gender roles: Her high-minded rational explication appears conventionally masculine, putting into shame MP Greatorex's feeble attempt to flirt and taunt, ironically a mindset which he always finds ludicrous and "invincible" in women: their "frivolity."[50] By ridiculing the suffragettes, the suffragist and the politician have become exactly what they set out to assault: a hysteric and a flirt respectively.

The Liberal MP ridicules yet revels in women being frivolous, which is considered essentially feminine, while he degrades and dismisses their attempts to meddle in public affairs, deemed a male preserve: "I can't understand this morbid interest in vagrants."[51] Being dismissive and patronizing toward the women they look down upon is more than a private attitude, but a political stratagem adopted by the MPs concerning the issue of suffrage: suffragettes and suffragists alike are portrayed stereotypically as "dowdy and dull," and their struggles to intervene in public affairs such as welfare and suffrage only manage to keep "the House in roars,"[52] in order not only to diminish and sidestep the legitimacy of the issues by consigning them to the margins, but also to laugh them off the masculine discourse of serious inquiry by denigrating women advocates' social concern as "morbid" and associating them with questionable degenerates such as "vagrants." Again, disease and degeneration are bundled up with homelessness to highlight their exclusion outside the sanctified domesticity of home.

Mobility in woman is thus derided and degraded either as hysterical wandering womb or perilous vagrancy identified with degeneration, threatening to undermine the security of home, the only center of regeneration deemed legitimate. After every attempt at exercising mobility has been maligned and sabotaged, the suffragettes internalize their volatile agency, a subtle transformation summed up by the observant Lady John, who seems to rise above the fray in her capacity as a highly respectable noble dame. She appreciates Vida's charity, yet cautions against

49 Ibid., 959.
50 Ibid., 967.
51 Ibid., 959.
52 Ibid.

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antagonizing the male sex. She alludes in Act I when she attributes what she worries as "sex antagonism" solely to the "ferment of feminism,"[53] an issue later taken up again in Act III, when MP Geoffrey Stonor refers to the "New Antagonism" raging between men and women over the divisive issue of suffrage.[54] However, as I will argue, far from spiraling into a typical Victorian melodrama of a fallen woman's revenge against her wrongdoer, *VW* glorifies solidarity and reconciliation across the sexes, and "the ferment of feminism" is exactly the keyword to unlocking the internally stored energy for reform as regeneration, and activating the metabolic process to convert raw material such as the untutored aristocrat, Ms. Jean Dunbarton, with her curiosity piqued by "the wicked Suffragettes," into a potent new agent for catalyzing suffrage reform.[55]

III. "It's Just 'Ousekeepin' on a Big Scyle": Home Economy and National Housekeeping

Lady John's epithet "ferment of feminism" alludes not only to a new coinage freshly minted in English in 1890s: feminism,[56] but also to a heatedly debated contemporary topic in science: ferment. The production of fermentation has always been embroiled in the long-lasting debate about another strand of biological science popular up to the early 20th century, now completely invalidated as a legitimate science: vitalism. Vitalists hold that there is more to the creation of nature than meets the eye, that beyond the mechanistic view of animate creations as nothing more than the aggregate of physical and chemical properties, or the Cartesian dualism that men is composed of matter and mind only, nature as a whole should be regarded as a holistic "organism pulsing with life, real or potential.[57] The development of fermentation has had direct bearings on vitalist debate, especially

53 Ibid., 967.

54 Ibid., 986.

55 Ibid., 967.

56 The origin of feminism as a specialized term is usually attributed to French Sociologist Charles Fourier's usage of *féminisme* in 1837, which was adopted in Britain only in 1890s, hence a relatively novel neologism in the context of the play. The word did not gain currency in the U.S. until 1910, three years after the play was written. Please see Nancy F Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 12-15.

57 Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17.

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because French chemist Louis Pasteur, as a well-known vitalist, has contended through his experimentation that only the force of life could serve as a catalyst to create fermentation, which means the vitalist force could transcend the mere physical and chemical interplay to activate the creation of life. Flora and fauna, including humans, act according to an "indwelling, mysterious power that physics or chemistry cannot analyze."[58]

The "'Edwardian obsession' with life or vitalism" has been notable,[59] and the ferment of suffragette feminism in early twentieth century has been catalyzed and proved a vitalist force to be reckoned with only after four decades of suppression and ridicule by parliamentary patriarchy. As discussed earlier, ridicule is a humiliation tactic consciously employed by the MPs to relegate the suffragettes off the realm of domestic production through making them guilty by association with delinquency and degeneration. However, such a backhanded stratagem has backfired, and instead of weakening, served only to strengthen their resolve to resort to more violent counter-tactics. As Vida puts it, while ridicule only "crumples a man up," it works the opposite effect for woman by "steel(ing)" a woman's will.[60] This discrepancy perceived between men and women points to the reinforcement of vitalism in the female sex in face of patriarchal oppression, rearing its head as a resisting life force "irreducible to matter,"[61] as an "organizing energy inherent in all organisms."[62]

58 Ibid. According to Frankenburg, "disputes over fermentation became part of a long-running debate about vitalism" (64). Pasteur conducted the most famous vitalist experiment in 1858, proving that fermentation is possible only when living organisms are present, as, according to Bechtel, "irreducibly vital phenomena." (221) Quotation from Peter Baofu, *The Future of Post-Human Chemistry: A Preface to a New Theory of Substances and their Changes* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2011).

59 Anne Veronica Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 165.

60 Robins. *Votes for Women*, 971.

61 Jane Bennett, "*A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism*," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole & Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 47-69.

62 Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 17. Bennett's statement of the central tenets of vitalism is succinct and relevant: the belief that "life was irreducible to "matter," that there existed a life-principle that animates matter, exists only when in a relationship with matter, but is not itself of material nature," and vitalists "lifted instance of "life" outside of the reach of this mechanical world" (Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 48).

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Albeit dismissed as pseudo-science, vitalism retains its progressive qualities as "a radical or renegade discourse" applicable in the milieu of feminist struggles.[63] In the general cultural context, vitalism emerged as a riposte to counterbalance the increased mechanization and materialism of a highly stratified industrialized and urbanized society with anti-deterministic "vigorous organicism."[64] The mechanization of women's roles is best summed up by Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, where a home of mechanic dolls prescribes a metaphor for the straitjacket roles assigned to adult women in the late 19th century. At the Trafalgar Square rally in Act II, a man in the crowd shouts, "three cheers for the dumb lady"[65] when Vida is found momentarily speechless on the podium, petrified by stage fright in her debut public oration. Again recalling the mocking parliamentarians, the man's shout signals more than ill-humored, malicious banter, but exudes a deep-seated masculine *angst* when a voiceless, speechless dummy is preferred to a lively woman highly vocal in voicing her own opinions. Yet the suffragettes have unleashed their pent-up voices like the irreducible growth of organic power, which is comparable to the growth of "organisms as if they had developed under the aegis of a directive, vital force."[66]

The highly domesticized dolls need such a vitalist shot in the arm to shed their mechanized labour as a designated dumb angel in the house. Labor looms prominent as the central issue surrounding the suffrage debate in *VW*. In the Act II rally scene in Trafalgar Square, which grabs most critical attention thanks to eminent director-playwright Harley Granville-Barker's masterful of *mise-en-scène* of crowds, labor issue is advocated by woman speakers as the core platform to justify the overriding need of suffrage for them.[67] The first speaker, an anonymous

63 Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Negritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 17. The recent work of Donna Jones stresses its non-conformist aspects and mines its radical potential by aligning the resistant discourse of vitalism with modernity, negritude, and feminism of Grosz.

64 Morag Shiach, *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64.

65 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 974.

66 Robert J. Richards, "Kant and Blumenbach on the Bildungstrieb: A Historical Misunderstanding," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 31, no. 1 (2000), 12.

67 The impact of the public forum scene was immense, recalling Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (Tylee, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 144). Barker was also chosen not only because of his innovative approach to theater which valued ensemble acting, but also because he "strongly prejudiced in favor of the subject" (qtd. in Tylee, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 144), later even spoke in public

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working-class woman who speaks in Cockney dialect, introduce s herself as a "pore sort of 'ousekeeper," confirming her status as a domestic laborer when someone shouts challengingly from the crowd to mind her own business, "Just clean your own doorstep!"[68] She responds by saying her doorstep cleaning is finished even before her husband is awake, highlighting the fact that women execute the lion's share of domestic chores, yet receives meager credit.

She goes on to argue, using the impromptu example just hurled at her from the crowd, that it is ludicrous to claim that women "got no business" engaging in public affairs due to the received idea of "separate spheres." Home is precisely a private sphere where labor is constantly produced, yet its laborer also constantly devalued and underappreciated. She makes further argument linking woman's domestic labor to politics: "Wot's politics? It's just 'ouskeepin' on a big scyle."[69] Defining politics as large-scale housekeeping, she may unwittingly have also defined economy, since its etymology derives from the Greek word *oikos* (οἶκος), which refers to household. Managing a household proves a perfect epitome of political economy, which a woman excels because even her husband knows that she will make sure the income brought home would be worth its while when she makes the full value of "a pound to 'im" into "twenty shillin's to 'is wife" and "myke every penny in every one o' them shillin's tell."[70] The ability to "tell" is to manage well, and managing domestic affairs well is veritable top credentials for a competent politician.

Judging from her public address, far from being one of the "Silly Suffragettes!" as mocked by the crowd,[71] the working woman argues intelligently, cogently and convincingly about the intimate ties between domestic labor and political economy, and in particular woman's sterling qualities and qualifications for getting involved, hence the urgent need of being granted suffrage to engage in political affairs concerning public interests. The kind of labor in question rises beyond the industrial labor produced mechanically for augmenting value and maximizing profits. Instead, it is the labor infused with vitalism, the undefinable, unverifiable, yet palpable force of spirit driving human life. As such, labor is interpreted as "the energy of will, as the process of growth and creativity that drives both the individual and the human

forum in favor of suffrage and endorsed the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. In other words, alongside Bernard Shaw, he was one of Robins' veritable "male helpmates" in creating the suffrage drama. (Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own,* 7).

68 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 969.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

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species,"[72] and as the ultimate external expression of internal vitalism: "the space where this vital energy receives its fullest expression."[73] Such vitalist energy is on full display in a woman's regenerative power of labor, as demonstrated by the working woman, both as a mother and as a laborer.

Asserting woman's genuine status as laborer of the house not only exposes the inadequate "national housekeeping" by men in the Houses of Parliament, but also explodes the carefully cultivated myth of angel in the house, when the working woman points out that most female laborers "can't afford the luxury of staying at home" (*VW* 969),[74] thus blasting away the projection of a feminine wraith spirit fantasized by men with the harsh material reality of managing jobs and economizing housekeeping. Yet such labor is also infused with spirit, not the angelic kind, but that of the indomitable vitalist New Spirit, as contended by Vida at the end of the play.

Vida's speech in Act II, following the working woman's, works both as a private confession and public persuasion: her public address is derived from personal pains, yet couched in a metaphoric language that speaks reassuringly to the audience. When she rails against the futility of "justice and chivalry" promised by men, she speaks from her betrayal by the class snobbery of patriarchal hierarchy; and when she speaks of the misplaced conviction that "justice shouldn't miscarry," she supposedly has in mind her own infant miscarriage[75] or abortion due to her aborted prospect of marriage. Her distrust of masculine chivalry in which the suffragists have been hardened into believing is based on tried and true experiences, which she is loath to see repeated by other women. Addressing the plight of a single mother abandoned by her lover employer and accused of infanticide, she is coming to terms with the death of her own child:

> …What man has the knowledge that makes him a fit judge of woman's deeds at that time of anguish—that hour—(lowers her voice and bends over the crowd) —that hour that some woman struggled through to put each man here into the world. I noticed when a previous speaker

72 Morag Shiach, *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009),16.

73 Ibid., 16. D. H. Lawrence, also a famed vitalist, advocates a "repudiation of egoism" and 'commitment to labour" (Shiach 13), while one of the leading suffragettes of the day, Sylvia Pankhurst, also shows a keen interest in labour issues (Shiach, *Modernism, Labour, and Selfhood*, 13).

74 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 969.

75 Ibid., 976.

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> quoted the Labour Party you applauded. Some of you here—I gather—call yourselves Labour men. Every woman who has borne a child is a Labour woman. No man among you can judge what she goes through in her hour of darkness—.[76]

Equating woman's birth labors with man's work labor and granting them equal value, Vida battles not only for equal rights but also for transcending her private anguish. Having paid a dear price for acquiring the New Spirit, Vida knows all too well that woman relates intrinsically to labor not only as domestic housekeepers but also as mothers, who give birth to children through excruciating labor pains. The pains are physically inscribed and spiritually fortifying, fostering the seeds of vitalism to outgrow frustrations. Though she never discloses any personal information about losing her child, she tries to sublimate her private loss into a universal struggle for preventing further losses, which resonate with the crowd, at least the women present, and especially one woman: Ms. Jean Dunbarton.

The private agonies she has suffered at the hands of men are not forgiven nor forgotten, but simply transmuted and transcended. Her transcendence takes the form of a spiritual awakening and conversion from ignorance to enlightenment, which helps her to overcome the irreparable loss of her child and funnel her grieving to work for the children of the future. Anticipating the slogan of the second wave feminism, "the personal is political," Vida attempts to overcome the personal by sublimating both birth labors and death agonies and elevating domestic housekeeping into national housekeeping.

IV. A Pilgrim's Progress from Capital to Conversion

The unexpected emergence of women as a potentially vital political force threatens to upset the male-dominated political hierarchy, triggering immediate backlash from the exclusively male parliamentarians, leading to what Lady John has lamented as "sex antagonism."[77] Therefore, besides the internal strife between suffragist and suffragette, prospective antagonism is also anticipated between Vida and Geoffrey Stonor, and to complicate matters further, also with Ms. Jean Dunbarton, who seems to be Vida's rival for winning MP Geoffrey Stonor, the

76 Ibid., 977.

77 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 967. The first female MP in Britain emerged only in Dec. 1918, when Countess de Markievicz was elected to the House of Commons.

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highly eligible bachelor who "could have married any one in England."[78] Nothing of the sort happens, however, along conventional Victorian melodramatic "woman beware woman" lines, nor does it spiral into the wronged woman's revenge drama on her wrongdoer, so feared by Lady John. Instead, what characterizes the relationship between Vida and her old flame Stonor, far from wallowing in tearful histrionic recriminations, is rationally gauged economic exchange and negotiation to settle indebtedness, whereas the potential rivals' interplay is largely pedagogical: Jean's education based on mentorship, with Vida acting as the guide leading her from darkened ignorance to elucidated enlightenment.

If domestic reproduction and non-domestic degeneration are clearly demarcated, the production of knowledge also takes up two contrasting shapes in the play: one is Vida's hands-on personal experience, the other Jean Dunbarton's observation and conversion. Vida is an autodidactic learner who, as in common parlance, learns it the hard way: acquiring knowledge about the hardship of being a single mother by going through the whole process of pre-marital sex, childbirth out of wedlock, and premature death of infant. Jean Dunbarton, in stark contrast, has fate smile on her more favorably: a young Scottish heiress of a massive fortune from a conservative family of Covenanters, and dubbed "the spoilt child of Fortune,"[79] she is tutored and guided by Vida as a protégé.

A far cry from the placid and domesticated angel of the house expected of Victorian ladies, Jean is known for her "impulsive" nature,[80] bursting with inquisitive verve, which draws her to social agitation on the streets, and the prospect of joining the impassioned protest of suffragettes fuels her fervid imagination. Her natural curiosity about the world outside has been held in check by a sheltered life which deters her from discovering the harsh social realities such as homeless women, which is considered the kind of "sordid story" from which her pristine purity must be shielded for fear of being contaminated by degeneration.[81] In fact, in her upper-class milieu, a woman's worldly ignorance is actively nursed and encouraged, as satirized in Oscar Wilde' society comedies such as through Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895): "I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance."[82] No effort is spared to ensure a woman stay in a blissfully ignorant state, remaining the "beautiful, tender, innocent child" expected by

78 Ibid., 957.
79 Ibid., 956.
80 Ibid., 981.
81 Ibid., 963.
82 Wilde, *The Importance*, 459.

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patriarchs.[83]

Resisting the efforts to infantilize and sanitize her, Jean is keenly aware that her *ingénue* image makes her look "horribly ignorant"[84] and determines to redress her inadequacy by trying to "know something about life."[85] Her heightened interest in suffragettes, whom she calls "the wild ones,"[86] demonstrates that they have aroused the corresponding wild side embedded in her, now susceptible to being ignited by the spark of volatile energy stored inside, which signals her close affinities with vitalism, as her spontaneous surge of vivaciousness is akin to French psychologist Henri Bergson's concept of *élan vital*, and what German naturalist Friedrich Blumenbach refers to as *Bildungsdrieb* (formative drive/force). Jean's intuitive "formation drive" is an impulse to learn and educate herself, driven by her impulse to lift the veil of ignorance about women's conditions. It is exactly such an impetus that shapes her formative education under the wings of Vida and contributes to her *Ausbildung*, which also means education in German, as a converted suffragette.

Vida's education as a suffragette is through self-learning, similar to playwright Elizabeth Robin's personal experience of conversion,[87] which she describes as having "some real education."[88] The manner with which she describes her discovery of the harrowing travails of homeless women is tantamount to describing a Dantean journey into the inferno. In fact, she does invoke Dante a couple of times from his *Paradiso* to *Inferno*, drawing on the analogy of her inquiries as a "pilgrimage" that takes her "into the Underworld."[89]

83 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 979.

84 Ibid., 963.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 974.

87 Elizabeth Robins converted to the cause of suffrage and joined the suffragette movement after attending the outdoor meetings of The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which had relocated from Manchester to London in 1906. The formation of WSPU put an invigorating radical spin to the prodding and sluggish movement after decades of aborted lobbying. Inspired by the "confrontational tactics" of militant suffragettes such as Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters (Kelly, *Modern Drama by Women*, 109), she became a convert and wrote the play as well as the novel *The Convert* (1907) based on such experiences, which parallel the plot of *VW!* with the same set of characters.

88 Robins, *Votes for Women*, 962.

89 Ibid., 961. Vida first uses Dante to retort Greatorex's taunting that it is a mistake "in letting women learn to talk" when she pretends to confer by saying that when women are "all dumb" they can no longer discuss "Paradiso" (*VW* 965). She mentions Dante again when she is caught by Jean reading *Inferno*, and ruefully quips that she is actually "in a

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Vida's forlorn infernal pilgrimage ironically emerges as a progression of enlightenment, which she further helps to channel into a one-woman crusade, a drive to convert and recruit like-minded women to join their movement. Her experience contrasts sharply with Jean's innocence, and in the wake of her own voyage of visiting women's miseries, she turns into a confirmed feminist and suffragette, ready to hand down her self-education to the inexperienced Jean the way Virgil guides Dante into the nether world in *Divine Comedy*.

One of the major lessons that Jean has learned is to struggle for respect rather than respectability. Bourgeois respectability has been a perennial concern of the middle class, which can be easily attained by women through playing the patriarchy assigned social roles of dutiful wife and mother in the private sphere, and regarding respectability in the public sphere, social activities such as charity are considered a fitting enough cause for respectable women to embrace. Whereas respectability is class based and can be cultivated and maintained, respect is rights-based and can be attained only by strenuous striving. Lady John represents such a distinction as a leading exponent of social respectability without advocating social rights for respect. She admires Vida's charitable efforts to help homeless women, yet balks at the idea of embracing suffrage for women, repudiating flatly that if defending suffrage is respectable, she doesn't "want to be respected," underlying the demarcation between a respectable and respected woman.[90] In contrast, born into highly respectable peerage, Jean is not wary of losing the prerogatives of her elite birthrights; instead, she awakens to the urgency of wresting universal equal rights by entering the fray of suffrage, even at the risk of losing her class respectability in order to win general respect for women.

Women have been long instructed into believing that politics is the sole preserve of men, and it is "very unfeminine" or isn't "womanly" to engage in public affairs.[91] Further, men employ the strategy of mortifying ridicule to indoctrinate women with the fear of losing respectability by engaging with politics, which, however, is turned on its head by suffragettes, treated as an edifying course of learning how to win respect in which they have "educated (themselves) so that (they) welcome ridicule."[92] As attested by the eloquent Mrs. Ernestine Blunt who utters the above quote at the rally, such a non-conformist counter-intuitive line of thinking

worse place," and continues to discourse on the vile and despised limbo of fearing "the pangs of partisanship," obviously to instruct and insinuate Jean to take a stand on endorsing the suffrage movement (*VW* 968).

90 Ibid., 960.

91 Ibid., 971.

92 Ibid.

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comes to fruition only via unconventional education. The general course of Jean's unconventional education takes two forms in the first two acts of *VW*, first as an observer in an informal private forum for debate in Act I, then as an auditor at a public rally of speeches in Act II, before concludes in the Act III as a convert. If Vida's self-education is realized as a rude awakening, Jean's education is conducted more as an enlightened awakening, charted as a gradual progress spearheaded by awareness-raising.

Jean's consciousness is first raised when her ignorance is exposed in Act I, as she listens in on the animated debate surrounding women's current issues such as homelessness and suffrage. She commiserates with the plight of the homeless women, her sympathy enhanced particularly by her own contrasting condition of imminent marital bliss. However, her interest in suffrage is aroused in a more or less superficial manner, enticed by the promised excitement of witnessing the agitations of the notorious suffragettes. The cheap thrills of spectacle, however, turn into elevated considerations of debate, leading her eventually to take part in the rally in Act II, completing her educational course first as a mere inquisitive onlooker, then a concerned observer, before joining the fray as a convinced participant. In particular, the part of Vida's speech that recaptures her "dark hour"[93] ironically dawns on Jean as double enlightenment: first personally shedding light on the murky past of Vida and grasping the hidden private relations between her and her fiancé Stonor; second publicly comprehending the insight disclosed by the predicament of "outcast women" deprived of their proper rights. The spectacle at the rally, therefore, functions as an instructive platform to clarify and disseminate enlightening concepts, even as a stage to rehearse reforms and revolutions. What has been expected to be nothing more than an entertaining spectacle turns out to be an edifying theater of ideas that convinces and converts.

The successful education of Jean can best be seen at the end of the rally scene in Act II, when she, inspired by Vida's fiery speech, converts to the cause and resolves to join the suffragettes. When the crowd begins to disperse, Stonor calls out to her amid the din but she refuses to comply. On appearance the brief exchange seems casual and harmless enough, yet reveals the profound inner sea change that Jean is undergoing:

> STONOR. (calls). Here—follow me!
> JEAN. No—no—I—
> STONOR. You're going the wrong way.

93 Ibid., 979.

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JEAN. This is the way I must go.
STONOR. You can get out quicker on this side.
JEAN. I don't want to get out.[94]

This proves the turning point where the erstwhile perfect couple are drifting apart, literally and figuratively. The irony is Stonor only grasps the literal level, yet Jean comprehends it figuratively that she is determined to stop following in his footsteps, treading the straight and narrow path carefully chartered for her, and to ignore his caution that she is headed "the wrong way" by joining the suffrage movement, since she has finally realized how to chart her own path and go her own way.

At the conclusion of the rally, Jean has already metamorphosed into a convinced suffragette through the educative lectures she has attended. At the call for financial donation or labor contribution, she rejoices, "Oh, I'm glad I've got power!" [95] She finally realizes that she is empowered to make changes simply by tapping into the financial resources at her disposal. The vitalist *élan* in her has sparkled into life, and freed from the shackles of her patriarchal fiancé, she has attained her feminist autonomy by activating the use of her own assets and revitalizing her considerable wealth, so far lying dormant, into serving women's causes. In other words, her conversion is two-fold: on the one hand she is a new champion freshly converted to the movement, on the other she is converting her capital into a true free-flowing currency that produces genuine values. In short, by converting her capital into a currency, she expects to create a legacy out of her inheritance: the heritage of women's suffrage that in its vitalist spirit shall live on.

V. "It's a Question of Economics": "In Debt to Women" as "Political Dynamite"

If conversion can shift from a belief system to an economic system in the case of Jean, compensation can also take an economic turn, transforming from righting personal wrongs to making public rights in the case of Vida. The "sex antagonism" that has worried Lady John never quite materializes. Far from desiring "just to play Nemesis" as assumed by Lady John, Vida targets an aim loftier than playing a mere avenger. Instead, her edge of antagonistic vengeance is blunted in such a subtle manner to remain subdued enough to enable a possible reconciliation, yet sharp

94 Ibid., 977.
95 Ibid., 977.

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enough to strike a new deal in her favor. Vida remains a woman with a past popularly seen in Victorian melodramas, yet she is also a woman with an agenda, and part of her agenda is to render hers a usable past to facilitate her negotiations with the man who has done her wrong: Jean's fiancé Geoffrey Stonor.

It would seem churlish to condemn Vida's manoeuvers as calculating, taking into account her victim status, yet they are indeed finely calibrated to produce the greatest possible benefits, therefore deserve close analysis. Her primary gambit is to maximize the damages suffered at the hands of Stonor, claiming that the extent of her losses is so enormous that it borders on being beyond repair. Stonor is more than willing to compensate, yet according to Vida, he can't possibly repay her dead child born, nor can he repay her for her "old faith" in men.[96] Human life and human trust are not replaceable and open for exchange in equal value, hence what Stonor is obliged to make up for goes beyond material rewards in compensation.

Vida's opening move places her in a vantage position to stake the claims that befit her claimed damages, and Stonor is put at such an unfavorable nadir that he can only strive to match her claims. It is thus established that her damages are irredeemable, and Stonor's desperate attempt at redemption, in both religious and economic sense of the word, lies only in her approval. Though he can hardly suppress his rage at Jean's accusing exposure that she has discovered his fiancé to have deserted his child's mother, since it is actually Vida who "did the deserting" by abandoning the alliance,[97] he is obliged to stomach his personal wrong in the name of the entire patriarchy he stands for, and for the sake of exorcising his guilt over the dead child he has never met, who haunts him like a "ghost" that gives him "no rest."[98]

It is significant that it is Lady John who keeps broaching the subject of revengeful "reparation" since such an old-fashioned, melodramatic notion of vindication belongs to an older generation like hers.[99] Regarding the issue of sex antagonism, the fresh approach of the new generation, or more precisely the New Woman like Vida, is not to seek hostile recompense, nor offer friendly reconciliation. Instead, it is actively soliciting friendliness from the supposed offender, such as when Vida asks Stonor to become "a friend to Women."[100] It appears at first glance an ill-considered and unreasonable move for the wronged party to proffer the olive branch first to the offending party, yet in fact Vida is driving a hard bargain by

96 Ibid., 983.
97 Ibid., 984.
98 Ibid., 986.
99 Ibid., 982.
100 Ibid., 981.

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soft-pedaling the compensation issue. By her conciliatory token, she is in fact settling nothing less than a wholesale acceptance of her "be a friend" terms.

Only when her supposed wrongdoer Stonor, whom she refers to as being "in debt to women," the only thing close to being an accusation she has ever leveled at him, agrees to take concrete actions toward "putting an end to the helplessness of women," can she consider their debt cleared, and her role as a creditor relieved. Contrary to what Lady John and Jean have believed, as a woman, she has long transcended the "old wrong" or the level of personal vendetta,[101] and committed herself to furthering the cause of helpless women at large. Consequently, when Stonor offers her "what (he) believe(s) is called 'amends,'" she rejects it out of hand. Her rebuttal, however, initially looks like a facile attempt to angle for more by upping the ante: "Pay, then—pay," while in fact her show of eagerness is an ill-concealed attempt to edge him closer to granting her the genuine article: Her reasoning goes that since he is unable to redeem what is beyond redemption, and she unable to accept any conventionally expected monetary payoff, the best offer he can manage for assuaging his guilt and not "live in debt",[102] would be closing the desired political deal with her and espousing the cause of suffrage. Rather than making personal amends, making political amendments at the Parliament is the best reconciliation and restitution.

Terms of economic exchange and political negotiation such as "bargain-driving," "hard-and-fast bargain" abound in the final showdown Act III (*VW* 986), giving the private tête-à-tête between parted lovers not an ounce of mawkish sentimentality, but a ton of calculated sobriety for behind-the-scenes, under-the-table give-and-take settlement. Dismissing the sentimental reason of unconsummated love, as doggedly pursued by the jealous Jean, Vida maintains that men are blinded by their "vanity" so they can't see that it's simply "a question of economics" that she aims only for a fair exchange through plain dealings, and insists that Stonor "pay me in kind"[103] for her wrong by paying to "end the helplessness" of womankind.[104] Her seeming cold-hearted calculation and level-headed analysis are borne of poignant experiences wrung from her traumatic "helplessness" in their aborted affair, which has degenerated into "a curse."[105] Yet she manages to transform the curse into a blessing in disguise by sublimating private anguish and transforming a personal evil

101 Ibid., 982.
102 Ibid., 983.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 982.
105 Ibid.

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into a common political good. For Vida, a fair deal for the man who has "served one woman…very ill" to pay in kind is to "serve hundreds of thousands well."[106]

For Stonor, offering to propose legislative amendments for the passage of women's suffrage constitutes not only a personal resolution of the private woes between him and Vida, but also a political bonanza that promises to steer him clear of the election whirlpool he has increasingly found himself entangled. His aristocratic complacency and nonchalance combine to have left him trailing the upstart Liberals in his campaign for the Parliament seat and he desperately needs a persuasive platform to lure and secure his swinging constituency. The new proposal is expected to serve as the "political dynamite" that will administer a shot in the arm to the superannuated hierarchy of House of Lords. By converting to the cause of suffrage as a new "friend to Women," Stonor lands on a "dynamite" that promises to touch off and collapse his heavily fortified vested interests yet resurrect his moribund political career.

The dynamite here, besides the conventional meaning of an explosive that can blast away the bastion of ruling patriarchy, also suggests dynamism and transformation. Just like the recent usages of suffrage and feminism brought up in *VW*, dynamite, recently invented by Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel, is also a relatively new terminology coming into currency only in the mid-19th century, which, however, derives from the ancient Greek origin *dunamis*, meaning power. Suffrage proves the badly needed potent *dunamis* for generating enough dynamic power to salvage him from the degenerative patrician gerontocracy. Its regenerative and restorative efficacy springs from the vitalism long thought to be masculine and patriarchal, yet ironically turns out to be feminine and feminist. Reversing the Medieval image of a knight in shining armor coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress, it is a woman who in the eleventh hour emerges as the unexpected savior of a man in trouble, with votes for women as his means of redemption.

VI. Conclusion: "New Spirit's Abroad" to "Right the Old Wrong"

On appearance, the motif of last-minute salvation characteristic of Victorian melodramas brings *VW* to an end, yet the salvation of the suffrage bill, Jean's marriage, as well as Stonor's career is all made possible only by an Edwardian preoccupation with economics: a pledged parliamentary amendment in exchange for

106 Ibid.

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personal amends for Stonor, a transference of the libidinal economy of personal desires into sublimated conversion for the ladies: private grievances to public good for Vida, and private capital into public currency for Jean.

The proposed "Reform" also marks Stonor's reformation as a politician,[107] since from the sentimental drama of a stereotypical "reformed rake" who repents his old sins, he has evolved into a reformed aristocrat newly committed to regenerating his lackluster career with an invigorating agenda, the so-called his "political dynamite." His fiancée Jean has also undergone a self-reform as a prospective bride who extends her own impending conjugal bliss to empathize with her "unfortunate sisters." [108] Their union is thus born of a solidarity of sisterhood with gender-crossing "friend of woman," and promises a revitalized regeneration expected to save the decayed *noblesse oblige* and decadent moral malaise of the aristocracy from irreversible degeneration.

Ms. Levering, appropriately called Vida (life), devotes her ruined life to completing the lives of future generations, in order "to make a decent world for the little children to live" by improving the lot of their mothers.[109] Not only does she dedicate her own *Vida* to others, but also attempt to re-form other lives by inspiring other women like Jean, whom she has tried to "coin her sympathy into gold for a greater cause."[110] Coining here denotes double metamorphoses, economically minting and mining Jean's considerable fortunes into convertible currency to support the movement, which like any other political movement, has to be accompanied by the movement of capital; and spiritually converting her into an idealist with her "ardent dreams," and rising above her obsession with the "old wrong" to align herself with Stonor as trusted allies in suffrage in a revitalized alliance of faith.

Vida believes suffragettes can turn militant to match the political might of men because women can be disarmed only by the "weakest" arms of children, rather than by "the strongest arm" of patriarchal forces.[111] In other words, woman's power is sourced by her innate regenerative instinct. She finally christens a name to such invisible, ineffable, yet palpable presence: "The New Spirit."[112] A vitalist force charged with energy "that's abroad," just like dynamite, women's militancy can be marshalled contingently, in the manner that dynamite can be used contingently for construction or destruction, dismantling fossilized values based on "ossification of

107 Ibid., 986.
108 Ibid., 977.
109 Ibid., 987.
110 Ibid., 982.
111 Ibid., 987.
112 Ibid., 985.

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authority" while building new values inductive to the universal rights of men and women alike. Robins' *VW* not only engineered a plot ploy for Stonor, but planted a veritable "political dynamite" on stage in 1907 that took another decade to explode, in February 1918, for the Representation of the People Bill to receive Royal Assent, and its enactment gave women over the age of thirty the right to vote, leaving a lasting legacy by converting amends to amendments on stage, and merging dramatic truth and political reality in life.

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從彌補到修正：《女性要投票》中衰落／重生論、生機論，與投票運動之經濟流動

王 寶 祥*

摘 要

本文關注 《女性要投票》中 「新女性」對抗維多利亞父權政治層面外，易被忽略的愛德華時代新經濟轉向。 以十九世紀末的偽科學: 衰落論與生機論為切入點， 探討家庭作為維多利亞社會之核心價值， 女性做為「家中天使」捍衛血親免受 「家道中落」 汙染之形象， 如何終不敵愛德華時期女性作為家中勞動者貢獻核心經濟生產之真相。 除了爭取從齊家到治國的參政權，此劇亦從經濟角度，探究女主角如何捐棄維多利亞舊時代的通俗劇復仇劇碼，以協商的新經濟計算， 換取不計個人恩怨， 但求群體女性投票權福祉的利益交換。 結論為超越個人彌補，朝向集體法律修正案的正向轉折，突顯新女性藉由生機論振奮而起的新精神，突破父權重重物質宰制，成功爭取生氣與重生。

關鍵詞：投票權　女性主義戲劇　伊莉莎白羅賓斯　生機論　衰落論

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