AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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American women’s quest for equality came into focus in the early 1900s. Amidst the cultural and societal forces pushing for suffrage, some chose the mechanism of theater. This thesis is a work of rhetorical criticism. It applies Lloyd Bitzer’s situational approach to two suffrage theater artifacts: Mary Shaw's *The Woman of It; or, Our Friends the Anti-Suffragists* (1914) and *The Parrot Cage* (1914). The question that is the focus of this thesis is: how fitting were Mary Shaw’s plays as responses to the exigence of a lack of suffrage? The analysis that follows demonstrates the continued importance of proper audience identification for social justice movements.
Identifying Audiences:
A Rhetorical Analysis of Mary Shaw’s Suffrage Plays

by
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Amanda R. Wright, Author
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

On August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified. This historic moment was the product of generations of women striving to create a more just version of America. Many of those in the beginning of the movement—Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906)—never saw the fulfillment of their life’s work. These women and the suffragists who followed in their footsteps were inventive in their activism, using everything from pageantry to parades in order to raise awareness and garner support for their cause.

In the following study I will examine women’s use of theater as a tool for gaining suffrage in the United States in the 1900s. Because theater has been a powerful mechanism for change, it is ripe with opportunity for exploration and analysis. Knowledge gained from this undertaking will promote an understanding of how to use theater as a tool more effectively for social justice movements. While this study will examine two specific historical artifacts, conclusions can be drawn that are still salient today.

A review of the literature on suffrage theater demonstrates at least two tendencies: (1) general histories of the movement, and/or (2) a specific focus on instances of suffrage theater in Europe. Books such as How the Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays, Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies, and A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era note the existence of suffrage plays. But they fail to analyze the rhetorical efficacy of
the drama written. That is to say, much of it seems to be descriptive in nature; authors seem to be relating historical facts for the sake of recording history. While this is useful in creating a historical space for women’s voices, it neglects to critically analyze the efforts of female playwrights and the dramas created by women.

The second tendency is often woven in amongst the historical description. The literature that does analyze the effectiveness of women’s suffrage theater is mainly about the suffrage and feminist movements that occurred in Britain and France. Specific attention is paid to what are termed “parlor plays.” Parlor plays were dramatic works, often in monologue or dialogue form, that were meant to be performed in private residences. The dramas would be read by women present and were effective ways of creating awareness of the issues deemed cogent by the suffragists (Stowell 32). While this is interesting information, it does not examine the effectiveness of using such techniques in the suffrage movement. This gap in the existing literature leads me to my research question: how effective were these rhetorical artifacts in persuading the audiences that attended them?

To be clear, the work that has already been done is a valuable source for information on the historical context that surrounds American suffrage theater. But it fails to provide an understanding of the rhetorical strategies used by suffrage dramatists. Previous accounts have overlooked the rich rhetorical nature of American suffrage theater. They have obscured the ways in which these dramas were used to create awareness of the suffrage movement or to normalize the world envisioned by the suffragettes.
This silence in the discussion of suffrage theater is the justification for my thesis topic. By using rhetorical criticism, I can add needed nuance to the existing analysis of women’s drama. My method of analysis will be drawn from Lloyd Bitzer’s discussions of the rhetorical situation. Using Bitzer’s model, there is an opportunity to contribute something of substance to the discussions taking place.

The artifacts that are the focus of my thesis are two plays: *The Women of It; or, Our Friends The Anti-Suffragists* (1914) and *The Parrot Cage* (1914). Both were written by an American woman and famous actress, Mary Shaw (1854-1929). She was best known for her roles in George Bernard Shaw’s (1856-1950) *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and Henrik Ibsen’s (1828-1906) *Hedda Gabler*. Shaw’s popularity as an actress and lecturer in the 1900s helps to justify her plays as the artifacts to be analyzed. That she wrote two plays with similar messages but communicated in different ways adds a layer of additional interest to the study. The two artifacts offer the opportunity to compare and contrast the efficacy of two different proposed responses to the same exigence: women’s lack of suffrage.

Shaw’s plays were performed in 1912, 1913 and 1915 (Friedl 34). *The Woman of It* depicts the club meeting of a group of anti-suffragists. Several women attending the meeting are undecided about the issue of suffrage and are visiting the club for the first time. The visitors are eventually persuaded to become suffragists by the preposterous arguments made by the anti-suffragists. *The Parrot Cage* is the story of a free-spirited parrot that longs for life outside of the cage and ends with her eventual escape. Both plays, though employing different tactics, argue that women’s suffrage is natural and desirable.
With an idea of what I will examine, it is important to know how I will examine it. I will apply Lloyd Bitzer’s method of the rhetorical situation. Bitzer describes the rhetorical situation as:

… a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced in the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (“Rhetorical” 64).

Thus, the rhetorical situation is made up of three components: the exigence, or, “an imperfection marked by urgency,” the audience, “those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change,” and finally constraints, “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (“Rhetorical” 64-65).

By analyzing these components when dealing with a piece of rhetoric, one can examine how effective the rhetor was in creating what Bitzer calls a “fitting response” (“Rhetorical” 66). That is, how well did the rhetorical response recognize the situational exigencies? Did the response connect with the audience that was capable of changing the situation? Did the response identify and adapt to the situation’s constraints? Most basically, Bitzer’s situational approach is predicated on rhetoric as a direct reaction to situational components. In short, rhetoric is created and shaped in response to the world.

Using the rhetorical situation engenders at least three beneficial avenues for analysis. First, Bitzer provides the necessary foundation for discussing a piece of rhetoric, giving me the tools and the vocabulary from which to draw conclusions. His theory clearly breaks down complex situations into three components that interact with
each other: the exigence, the audience and a set of constraints. Second, using the situational model, I can also begin to account for the choices made by Mary Shaw in the creation of her rhetoric—why she may have highlighted certain suffrage issues and not others. Third, and most directly implicating my research question, I can determine the effectiveness of Shaw’s rhetoric with a situational approach.

This project will develop in four stages. First, I will review the literature and research already devoted to the topic of suffrage generally and suffrage theater specifically. In doing so, I will give the reader a more complete understanding of the power of the suffrage movement as both a historical and cultural phenomena. Examining these events will serve to contextualize the efforts of Mary Shaw and the plays she wrote. This general sketch of the movement will then serve to inform the three components of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation.

After the review of literature, it will then be useful to examine Bitzer’s method more closely by exploring the functions of its constituent parts. With a better understanding of each situational component we can look to criticisms of the method. This will serve to identify strengths and potential weaknesses of the method. This clear understanding of the rhetorical situation will provide the foundation for the application of the method to Shaw’s artifacts.

With the application of the method, the rhetorical nature of Shaw’s plays can be explored. Through Bitzer’s method, we can see how each situational component interacts and influences how each play is constructed. Additionally, it will be possible to see which situational components Shaw interpreted appropriately or inappropriately.
Finally, from this analysis, conclusions can be drawn about the rhetorical efficacy of Shaw’s plays and the utility of Bitzer’s method for historical artifacts. In the concluding chapter, I will focus these insights on three potential avenues for future research. I will also look to how results from this study are applicable to current social justice movements.

My thesis is a bridge that connects the spheres of theater and rhetoric by focusing on women’s theater generally and United State’s suffrage theater specifically. By utilizing Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation, I will be demonstrating a new area of application for established theories, feminist theater. In doing so, I will answer the question of whether or not Mary Shaw’s plays were a fitting response to the exigence of suffrage. Most basically, I hope to shed new light on an important but neglected part of the suffrage movement. To do so, let us first look to a more in depth review of the literature related to suffrage theater.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women’s suffrage in America was a movement that had far-reaching influence. This influence extended into lives, laws and belief systems. The suffrage movement was about voting rights. But it was also about women’s changing roles in a developing democracy. The suffragists opened a new chapter in American history, providing a better future for those who would come after. Through their sacrifices, the future of women in America improved immeasurably.

In this chapter I will first give the reader a basic understanding of the historical, cultural and artistic changes that were occurring in the suffrage era. This will give some sense of the context in which suffrage theater and, more specifically, Mary Shaw’s two suffrage plays were crafted. Second, I will review strategies used by the suffrage movement to remain a viable force within society. I will then examine suffrage theater generally before looking, finally, to the current body of work on Mary Shaw and her plays. This will demonstrate that Shaw’s plays, The Parrot Cage and The Woman of It; or, Our Friends The Anti-Suffragists, are under-examined as both suffrage theater and rhetorical artifacts worthy of analysis.

**Historical and Cultural Context**

It will be necessary to gather a macro-level understanding of the suffrage movement as a political force before turning to the more specific societal and artistic changes that suffrage brought about. The roots of women’s suffrage in America can be traced back to the Revolutionary War. Before the war, women “had been expected to manage the household in clear subordination to the male head and in a manner that was private and uncoordinated with the actions of other women” (Giele 29).
However, as the revolution escalated, women were asked to contribute to the effort by boycotting certain products, not consuming tea and purchasing locally made textiles. Women’s actions became tied up with important political changes that were taking place. As a result, they gained “a new sense of their own self-worth and their importance to the nation” (Giele 29).

After the revolution was over and the Constitution was ratified, women were left with an increased sense of their own importance, but without the political power to do much about it. One barrier to political action was education. A sample of early women leaders found that, of those born between 1700 and 1770, only one-fifth had an education beyond a primary level. These numbers rose to three-fifths between 1770 and 1780, and climbed even further to three-fourths in 1800 to 1810 (Giele 31). Instead of being educated somewhat indiscriminately in homes, women were now being sent to boarding schools or academies in the area. As a result, women’s literacy went up and the profession of teaching became a viable career choice for women (Giele 31). Besides teaching, women could also be found working in the textile industry (Conway 15). Having access to employment outside of the home gave women a new arena in which to gather with other women and form communities. These communities of women would become more important as history progressed.

With the establishment of the new government in place, the country turned its attention to expansion. America was a new experiment in democracy that swept its citizens in a wave of idealism: “Faith in the power of self-government brought reformers to glorify the ideal of the American Republic even in the face of undemocratic processes and to exhort their fellow citizens to achieve the immanent
possibilities of the nations” (Buhle and Buhle 2). In this new, idealized nation, those who engaged publicly in behaviors deemed immoral were strongly disapproved of. Because of such patriotic zeal, “Frontier violence, widespread drunkenness, and reported licentiousness were fervently attacked as violations of America’s sacred trust” (Buhle and Buhle 2). Within this changing and mutable culturescape, women were charged with the responsibility of maintaining a haven at home for the men in their lives from the “licentiousness” (Welter 21). To be worthy of this task, a good woman would portray four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 21). For a woman, “piety” was the wellspring from which all other virtues must flow. Religious observance in general was an important part of the early-American woman’s experience.

Religion played a large part in the foundations of the suffrage movement. Women were the primary audience for prayer meetings during the revivalist fervor of the 1820’s and 1830’s (Buhle and Buhle 6). Religion provided women with a place where they could gather together and speak. As was previously established, getting women out of the house and engaging in things that were beyond the scope of the home was important in developing communal and political awareness. Churches and church gatherings were also seen as viable alternatives to the home for women because “[they] did not take her away from her ‘proper sphere,’ her home. Unlike participation in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive” (Welter 22).

Developing from the fertile soils of the church, the abolition and temperance movements of the Civil War era sprung forth. Both movements served as training
grounds for future activists, giving women the experience of organizing around a movement. These groups produced prominent leaders for the suffrage movement. This proved to be the starting point in the vigorous fight for women’s suffrage.

Turned away from an 1840 British convention on slavery because of their gender, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) returned home to organize their own convention (Graham 5). In 1848 they assembled their convention in Seneca Falls, New York. It was here that Stanton delivered her famous speech, the “Declaration of Sentiments.” Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, Stanton’s speech was the call to action that inspired a movement:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they were accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of the women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled. (164)

At this point, those fighting for suffrage comprised a relatively small, but surprisingly cohesive, group.

That harmony of motive was not to last. In 1869, the suffragists split into two distinct camps. The split came in response to disagreements over the 15th Amendment and resulted in the formation of two suffrage organizations: the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), favoring a constitutional amendment to achieve suffrage, and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), focusing instead on a state-by-state reformation process (Giele 60). The two groups worked independent of each other until 1890, where they merged to form the popular suffrage
group the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), to which Elizabeth Cady Stanton was elected president (Graham 6). The reemergence of unity accrued obvious benefits. The fight for suffrage became more organized, extending and solidifying the range of its advocacy. This solidarity produced a powerful and tangible result. The 19th amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, signaling the end of the suffrage movement. These details provide the historical template. It is important that we now turn to the cultural nuances of the suffrage movement.

In the 1900s, the suffrage movement was already a well-established cultural reality. The suffragists had been organized as a movement for at least fifty-some years. Important evolutions were occurring in American culture. The government too was changing, now taking over responsibilities that used to be fulfilled by the home, such as education and mental health care (Baker 640). Because these issues were now political, women could argue that they were uniquely qualified to vote on these matters: “[the suffragists] noted that the vote would not remove women from the home and that electoral politics involved the home and would benefit from women's talents” (Baker 642). Women’s efforts during World War I also enabled women to show how capable they really were by “tending farms, working in factories, transporting freight, and performing numerous other jobs usually reserved for men” (Lunardini and Knock 633).

These changing roles of women were working their way into the popular consciousness of America. This shift was happening on the stage as well as the screen: “Whether the newsreels’ images of suffragists was derogatory or sympathetic, suffrage became an immediate issue when it was projected on movie screens” (Sloan 417).
Through the use of emerging technologies such as film and the established medium of the stage, authors were able to explore new roles for women and to promote those that the author preferred. While the audience may have been attending to be entertained, the suffragists also saw this as an educational medium.

The media of the 1900s were venues that were opening up to the suffragists. Through the books, magazines, movies and theatrical events of the time, women were able to reach their ideological opponents on an important emotional level. They sought to shape and alter mindsets because, “Social change […] necessitated a shift in the ways in which people perceived the gendered roles and actions of men and women, along with interconnected legal reforms” (Heider 97). By changing perceptions, suffragists could then change how people reacted to the idea of suffrage.

To some, the right to vote was seen as one more opportunity for women of loose morals to become entangled in the tempting affairs and arms of men. Therefore many of the anti-suffrage movement’s arguments were predicated on the moral corruptibility of the common woman. However, this line of reasoning had several flaws that suffragists were able to exploit. The characterization of weak-willed women left no room for women of strong values who had been able to vote in states such as Wyoming in 1869, Utah in 1870, and Washington in 1883 without any apparent deleterious effects (McCammon 52). It also highlighted what was, at base, a rather obvious and odious double standard: moral standing was not a measure of whether or not a man could cast a ballot. The resulting caricatures were nonetheless powerful. Because they were men, they were responsible enough to vote. But if they were women, the ballot would lead into the chasm of chaos. Anti-suffragists urged,
with no trace of irony, that women voting would lead to the perversion of children and the downfall of the American way of life (Higgins 193).

With such concerns for morality in their minds, not everyone supported suffrage to promote women’s equality. E. Ritchie wrote in a 1901 edition of the *International Journal of Ethics*,

… women’s activity is too seldom guided by rational motives it is just the substitution of the merely emotional and impulsive springs of conduct for the judgments of reason which is the most characteristic and the most fatal fault of democracy. (73)

This attitude helps explain why the increased visibility of the suffrage movement did not necessarily mean an increase in women’s equality. It also explains why women, who could organize and march, still found it difficult to be heard. They were still seen to possess a fatal flaw: “We must recognize frankly the lack in the average woman’s character of vigor and soundness of judgment, and her dangerous tendency to be led by an unbalanced and unrestrained emotionalism” (Ritchie 76). Thus, to some, women should not be educated and allowed to participate fully in society because of their inherent worth, but because without education women were dangerous, emotional creatures. More succinctly, if paternalistically, put, “Our safety depends on the intellectual development of our women-folk” (Ritchie 75).

Not everyone thought that women possessed such a fatal flaw. Instead, women were seen by some as being almost too pure to be sullied by the sordid affairs of politics. In order to protect them for motherhood or to preserve them as paragons of morality, women needed to be separated from the indecency of the public sphere. Lymon Abbot wrote in 1909 that “[women] have a far greater function to perform, a far greater service to render, and one with which falsely called economic
independence and falsely called political equality, if brought about, would tragically interfere” (573). Whether it was because women were unstable or too pure, the suffragists were fighting against powerfully ingrained notions of what women’s roles were supposed to be.

At the center of the suffrage movement women were willing to defy gender roles, face the threat of public scorn, loss of loved ones and more. They recognized that the need for women to participate fully in society carried with it potential risks. They felt, in short,

... that women, like men, are bound to take part in modern life, that, like men, they are bound, if they open their eyes to realize that their action has social and political consequences, that they must choose between shutting their eyes again and trying to use them properly. (Stawell 332)

Starting with political equity, women would be able to fight for women’s rights on a much broader and further-reaching scale. With an understanding of the cultural and political climate, it will be illuminating to look closer at the suffrage movement itself.

**Suffrage Strategies**

As discussed earlier, getting women out of their homes and into their communities was vital if women were to develop political awareness. Women were now working outside of the home and becoming more educated for a variety of reasons. With the rise of industrialization came an increased need for able-bodied workers. With new innovations in domestic technology, women had more free time on their hands to spend educating themselves (Fraser 856). More education and more free time meant that women had an increased opportunity to participate in social action. Engaging in public activism such as meetings, rallies, parades or staged tableaus meant building communities and facing new difficulties: “For the American
women who fought for the right to vote at the turn of the twentieth century getting heard was easy, but being listened to was a challenge” (Orenstein 139). Women could create a stir almost anywhere they turned up in large numbers. But getting their audience to seriously engage in what they proposed was another matter.

One tactic used in the fight against suffrage to prevent women from even showing up was the use of smear campaigns against those who were the public face of the movement. Because the continued performance of stereotypical femininity was held to be almost sacred, those in the anti-suffrage movement would seek to depict suffragists as the representations of everything that was thought to be unfeminine. Orenstein describes one such pageant where the women quite purposely fought against the masculine stereotype purported by their detractors:

…performers appeared in two contrasting groups. In one, representing women without the right to vote, they dressed in black gowns of mourning, their hands bound with chains, and they stood below their sisters. The other group, "gold-crowned and brightly-garbed," led by a woman carrying a torch and dressed as Liberty, represented women with the franchise and presented an ideal, heavenly image. (141)

By portraying themselves within the traditional paradigm for femininity, the women were able to regain the credibility lost to the efforts of the anti-suffrage movement. These tactics by suffragists were not just for their theatrical events, but were also employed when marching and meeting in public (Orenstein 139). Maintaining a favorable public image at all times, while performing or while meeting, meant that it was harder to damage the reputation of the movement. Ritchie, who may have grossly mischaracterized the capabilities of women, was right about one thing: “A little folly, even well intentioned folly may discredit the best causes, and reforms of grave
importance have often been retarded by an unlucky association with fanatical and reckless partisanship” (76).

Some, however, were not as lucky to receive the vague finger wagging of the anti-suffragists. Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927) is an example of one who was a target for the ire of anti-suffragists. She was the first woman to run for president in the 1872 election, the first woman to hold a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, and was a well known spiritualist and lecturer (Higgins 203). While the American public was beginning to warm up to the notion of the “New Woman” promoted by the suffragists, they were not ready for the radical version of woman that Woodhull promoted. She sought to be a “public woman,” crafting “a female analog of the public man of politics” (Friskin 91). It is unfortunate for those who were trying to keep the suffrage movement’s name out of the tawdry ranks of loose women, that a public woman was, in those times, another name for prostitute (Friskin 92). While this may not have bothered Woodhull, sex radical and promoter of free love that she was, it did not make her very popular among those seeking enfranchisement (Frisken 89).

Those who self-identified as anti-suffrage, or remonstrants, made Woodhull into a lesson for other women involved in the suffrage movement (Maddux 285). The fear of such treatment must have been horrific to the common woman. Threats of public shaming were significant in an era where most of what a woman had in value was linked to her person and her reputation. Woodhull served as an effective reminder that if one was to step too far out of bounds, one must be prepared to have everything about oneself questioned and put on display (Friskin 92).
Because of the threat of backlash and the portrayal of the suffrage movement leading to moral degradation, some women were dissuaded from joining the movement. They would then proceed to join those movements that were perceived to be safer, or less radical, such as those temperance organizations that distanced themselves from suffrage (Heider 89). More importantly, whichever movement women chose, “women's political consciousness grew, and more women became aware not only of current societal problems but of women's lack of formal political power to address the problems (McCammon and Stirring 457).

Many suffragists were also activists for other issues such as education and safer working conditions. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), along with good friend and activist for suffrage, Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), employed this method to great success while speaking on the lyceum circuit (Hogan and Hogan 415). Important in the early stages of the suffrage movement, lyceums were establishing themselves throughout the country as places of learning. Reaching the heights of popularity in the 1870’s, lecturers would tour the country, giving prepared speeches for audiences that had paid a small fee (Ray 184). Stanton’s topics were those that would interest the audiences attending the lyceum, while also being careful not to offend. Thus, she covered topics “including urban decay and industrialization, and she sometimes shared the moral idealism of the social gospelers” (Hogan and Hogan 418). These forums also functioned to merge the private and the public:

Like the matinees of England, women in particular came to the lyceum to be educated and entertained; most had probably never heard a speech about women's rights. Stanton targeted such women in her lectures, and in her own estimation, at least, she raised their personal and political awareness. (Hogan, Hogan 419)
The women in the audience were able to see a vision of themselves portrayed and were then capable of examining it and critiquing it (Nester 42). On a more basic level, the mirroring served to confirm the merits of the larger reform agenda of suffrage.

While the peak popularity of lyceums was before Mary Shaw began speaking and touring, the lyceums helped to pave the way for Shaw’s own speaking engagements. Ray points out that, “Activists also described the lyceum as a medium through which women throughout the country could be motivated, inspired, and encouraged to see the relevance of the woman’s rights movement for their own lives” (186). In a world dominated by the male professional, it would be breath of fresh air to see a woman discussing things of personal relevance from, most importantly, a female perspective.

Another avenue for consciousness raising and identity formation was found in the “paratheatrical” events taking place in the homes and salons of the era. This was an accepted method of dealing with the current events of the day, using theatrical events to process and critique the current socio-political environment (Kelly 540). These events also served a more private and radical function. Certain issues that were considered more sensitive could be discussed with greater freedom than in a larger, more public arena. Smaller venues allowed for freer expression and also avoided some of the pitfalls that more public spaces accrued, such as damaging or undermining perceptions, as was discussed earlier. While parathetrical events were safer, they lacked the larger scale impact of traditional theater productions. Examining how the suffrage movement used theater to advance its cause will give us a better context from which to examine the work of Mary Shaw.
Suffrage Theater

Theater has long been a reflection of the society that creates it. We often look to the dramatic works of the cultures that have come before us in order to gain a better picture of who they were, what they thought was important, and how they interacted on day-to-day issues. The drama of the Greeks and Romans shed light on the importance of the gods in the minds of those who created them. Shakespeare hints at an England that was remembering fondly its pastoral roots in a time of increasing urbanization. Likewise, examining theater at the time of suffrage can help us discern a more intimate picture of the movement and the people.

When looking for references to both suffrage and theater, the playwrights Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) were mentioned more frequently than others. Susan Barstow discusses Ibsen’s popularity in London, particularly among matinee goers. This is hardly surprising given that Ibsen’s “woman plays” were often premiered as matinees in order to determine their popularity. If it looked as though the play would attract large enough audiences, it would then be transferred to an evening showing. All but one of Ibsen’s longer running shows, An Enemy of the People, followed this routine (Barstow 388).

While Ibsen was popular, he was not universally acclaimed within the suffrage movement. Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952), an actress and then later, writer, was intimately connected and invested in the dramatic works of Ibsen. She made her break starring in Hedda Gabler, which was also the start of her almost ten year connection to Ibsen’s plays (Farfan, “Hedda” 69). By the end of Ibsen’s career, however, Robbins was less enthralled with his portrayal of women. She was grateful for his desire to
create a more three-dimensional portrayal of women, allowing them to have both a positive and negative characterization (Farfan, “Hedda” 68). That was where her gratitude stopped, however. She criticized him for his inability to demonstrate some sort of understanding of the female consciousness. This feminine consciousness is what Robins would have required for him to be considered a feminist playwright (Farfan, “Hedda” 69). She even went so far as to write her own play, *Votes for Women*, which was popular among the suffragists (Farfan, “Women” 7). By writing her own play, Robins was no longer reliant on others to create works that expressed her views. She could instead join the debate directly without the moderating influence of another author’s voice.

George Bernard Shaw was also an advocate for women’s suffrage. Mary Shaw was made famous with her role his play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. More than just writing about the reality of women’s experiences, Shaw also participated in activism for women’s suffrage in Europe. He:

>. . . signed The Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage resolution, ‘A Declaration of Representative Men in Favour of Women’s Suffrage,’ [and] not only marched in processions, made speeches, contributed money, and signed declarations, he also wrote two suffrage plays. (Weintraub 36)

Of the two suffrage plays written by George Bernard Shaw, *Press Cuttings* and *Fanny’s First Play*, the former was initially banned by the censor, but later performed twice for private audiences (Weintraub 37). Vocal support from well-known figures of the time, such as Shaw, served to raise the profile of the suffrage movement.

Shaw and Ibsen’s popularity aside, the matinees were particularly important because women made up most of the audience. In fact, the ratio between men and women in an audience was sometimes as low as 1 to 12 (Barstow 386). This is
explained by the fact that matinees were one of the few places that an upper-middle class woman could go alone. Here, she could leave behind, if only for a few hours, the monotony of domestic life (Barstow388). Barstow further argues that,

… what the late-Victorian matinee offered, above all else, was a space in which female spectators could reflect on their own situation. In public, in the company of other women, matinee spectators were able to observe domestic, middle-class femininity as it was performed and critiqued. (389)

Finally, women were beginning to see themselves and their lives performed in front of them. Watching such representations meant that women could see that their personal frustrations and experiences extended beyond their own lives. Those experiences could act as points of reference from which to create activism because they were common to many women.

Watching theater that reflected middle-class women’s reality allowed a new consciousness to develop, a more critical awareness of the political sphere within which they lived and to which they could actually contribute. This awareness, Barstow reminds her readers, resulted in an awakening to a more modern outlook:

Although there were concomitant developments in literature and journalism, it was at the matinee that many middle-class English women first beheld women like themselves protesting against the constraints of Victorianism and gesturing toward the development of the New Woman. (389)

As discussed earlier, women’s gathering together was a basic tactic of gaining awareness of the suffrage movement. Because theater could be an organized and safe place for women, it was a useful opportunity for women to leave their homes and engage the public sphere.

Getting women to attend suffrage shows was only half the battle. The attendees still needed to be persuaded about the value of suffrage. Early depictions of
women in suffrage plays were based on creating congruence between the reality of
women participating in politics and women continuing to act as the moral center of the
family. By doing so, women were able to remain moderate enough that they could
engender widespread appeal. Arguments for the continuation of women’s roles in the
family were not just used by the anti-suffragists. The suffragists were also quick to
defend a woman’s place as a moral compass for her family, “the only difference
between them was that one group felt that the vote for women was needed to preserve
traditional ideals, while the other did not” (France 34).

Creating congruence was necessary to remain appealing as a movement.
Portraying such a large change to the political status quo meant discussion and
attention would almost be inevitable. Even the most basic discussions about the who
and what a woman was were in some ways, revolutionary. It was such new ground
that to many, it was disconcerting if not downright frightening. Kelly notes this
tension as it applies to the paratheatrical and the theatrical:

Women artists, in particular, poised between the private realm of domesticity
and sentimentality and the public realm of professionalism, used theatrical and
paratheatrical forms to display and critique changing expectations for women's
lives. For, of all the social "questions" occupying the day, the woman question,
with its implications for marriage, childbearing, sexuality, labor, citizenship,
nationhood, and selfhood, proved to be one of the most tenacious, with
implications so various and disturbing that some observers registered a degree
of panic that modern womanhood was threatening the future of the race. (541)

While women had been participating in the workforce for sometime, society was still
unsure about how women were to behave. Artistic portrayals of women allowed
artists to challenge the notion that women were supposed to be, “in the first place
‘good,’ next to be ‘charming,’ – that is, pleasing in appearance, tactful in speech, and
refined in manner, […] prudence and self-control, candor and courage in thought and
speech, vigor and wisdom in action, were of quite subordinate importance” (Ritchie 74). Ritchie again provides a glimpse into the thinking that the suffragists had to overcome.

**Mary Shaw**

Mary Shaw stood in direct opposition to Ritchie’s views of what constituted a woman. Believing that having the vote did matter, Mary Shaw spent much of her life campaigning for women’s suffrage. Shaw was born in Boston, in 1854 and debuted in the Boston Museum Stock Company at the age of 26 (Irving 1-2). In 1892 she became a charter member of the Professional Women’s League, a group dedicated to the advancement of women in the arts (Shanke 98). Involvement with such groups gave Shaw the experience, training, and connections that enabled her to be effective in the behind the scenes, bureaucratic, work for suffrage.

That said, a good deal of her suffrage work was not behind the scenes. In 1899, Shaw earned the opportunity to travel to London to represent the American theater at the International Congress of Women, another organization dedicated to the promotion of women and civility. The gathering was quite large, with nearly 3,000 people attending. Because her presentation was so well received she met with two well known British Actors and a head of state:

... [her audience] hastened to honor her. Henry Irving entertained her in his theater. Herbert Beerbohm Tree invited her to act with his company. [...] she received an invitation to lunch with Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle and to travel there from London in a special train bearing an enormous banner: *Her Majesty Queen Victoria’s Guests.* (Shanke 100)

Although much of her time was taken up with committees, meetings and it seems the occasional invitation from the Queen, Shaw was still dedicated to maintaining her
career as an actress. By continuing this career she was able to continue touring the country promoting suffrage and the arts.

Much of the literature present on Mary Shaw focuses on her role as a popular actress in the theater at the time of women’s suffrage. A popular anecdote in such histories is the account of Shaw’s participation in George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1905). The play tells the story of a woman who runs a brothel in order to better her own position and to educate her daughter. However, topics such as prostitution were considered scandalous and, by some, unfit for public consumption. On the opening night in New York, the police commissioner had the play closed and those involved in the production were arrested (Friedl 33). Clearly, Shaw was not afraid of scandal.

Nor did the threat of scandal impact Shaw’s career. She was especially well known for her performances in Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1903) and *Hedda Gabler* (1904), an all women performance of *As You Like It* (1893), and a six night run of Elizabeth Robin’s play, *Votes for Women* (1909) (Friedl 33). Using the attention and excitement the somewhat controversial plays created, Shaw would often speak in front of the local women’s clubs (Auster 80). Speaking in front of these groups gave Shaw the opportunity to encourage women to “decide for themselves how they felt about the dramas” (Auster 80). Using the attention garnered from controversial plays, Shaw engaged the questions of the day with women who may have not been challenged in this way before. Controversial works were, at worst, still opportunities to engage in dialogues.
Perhaps best known for her role as an actress, Shaw was also involved in the creation of theater through playwriting. She wrote the two suffrage dramas which are the focus of this thesis: *The Woman of It or Our Friends, The Anti-Suffragists (A Satirical Comedy In One Act)* and *The Parrot Cage*, both published in 1914. To better situate the reader for the analysis that will follow, I will provide a short synopsis of each play.

The first, *The Woman of It*, is set at an anti-suffrage meeting where six women have gathered together for their regular meeting. Three new women—Miss Moore, Miss Berry and Miss Foster—are guests at the meeting trying to make up their minds about suffrage. After some socializing, the women settle in to hear Mrs. Allright’s annual speech to the Legislative Committee, asking the committee to reject any attempts at suffrage. This is followed with speeches by Miss Noodle, Mrs. Pure-Drivel, and Mrs. Grundy. Each speech highlights for the three guests popular appeals made by anti-suffragists: suffragists are bad mothers and wives, voting would remove a woman’s femininity, and women, if given the chance, would undermine the authority of the church. The play ends with the three guests leaving, having declaring themselves suffragists. They congratulate the anti-suffragists, calling their speeches a “delicious farce,” and stating that, “You and the suffragists are both working together, in different ways, to convert all women to suffrage, aren’t you?” (Shaw 296).

The second play, *The Parrot Cage*, contrasts strongly in tone to the rather light-hearted *The Woman of It*. This play is set inside a birdcage, containing six blatantly named parrots: Philistine, Free-Souled, Reasoning, Rationalist, Idealistic, and Theological. The play opens with a man’s voice calling from off-stage, “Pretty Polly!
Pretty Polly! Pretty Polly!” (Shaw 301). The parrots dutifully repeat the man’s phrases until he leaves. The Free-Souled Parrot starts calling to be let out of the cage. The other parrots argue with Free-Souled, trying to convince her that life inside the cage is safer than outside. The arguments used by the parrots line up with the nature of their names: Theological Parrot argues that Divine Law states they should be caged, Reasoning Parrot needs proof that life is better outside the cage, etc. Free-Souled is not to be dissuaded and refutes each argument from the other parrots. She eventually tires of their arguments and strives to literally “break the chain” binding her leg to the cage. She eventually does break the chain and flies out the window. The play ends with Free-Souled Parrot’s voice calling for the other parrots to follow her alternating with the man’s, stating that “Polly’s place is in the cage” as the lights fade (Shaw 306).

Both plays are mentioned in the books and articles that offer brief biographies of Shaw (Actresses and Suffragists: Women in the American Theater; On To Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement; Mary Shaw: Actress, Suffragist, Activist). What is lacking in these accounts, however, is any actual analysis of the plays. Most often, the plays are cited as an example of the work Shaw did for suffrage and left at that. As noted in the introduction, this sort of coverage is useful as part of the historical record. But that is as far as they go. They do not discuss their historical impact or, more to the point, engage the plays as pieces of rhetoric.

There are, however, two notable exceptions to this: Rachel France’s “Apropos of Women and the American Theatre: The Suffrage Play” (1996) and Susanne Auflitsch’s Staging Separate Spheres: Theatrical Spaces as Sites of Antagonism in
One-Act Plays by American Women, 1910-1930 (2006). Both authors engage the content of Shaw’s plays and discuss the arguments promoted by Shaw. France calls the play The Woman of It, “a fantasy designed to flatter women in the interests of winning them over to the cause” (38). The Parrot’s Cage is analyzed by Auflitsch, who discusses Shaw’s use of domestic imagery: “For Shaw, the vote meant not a widening of the domestic sphere, but an appropriation of the public sphere, a way to participate in the masculine world” (150).

While both authors discuss one of the two plays, they do not discuss either play in relation to the other and in the detail that I argue is necessary. Both plays are snapshots of an important time in history. They reflect serious attempts at activism by a woman who was well-known at the time and well-versed in American theater. By analyzing both plays themes and trends can be identified. The identification of these common arguments and tactics used by Shaw in both plays can help me to account for the issues to which Shaw was responding.

From this review of literature, it can be seen that there is ample coverage of the suffrage movement. Even within this movement, theater’s role is documented in some detail. However, suffrage theater as a rhetorical device—of which we can count Shaw’s two plays clear representations—has been overlooked. Where historical accounts tell us what happened, rhetorical analysis will help us to see why things happened and perhaps help illuminate why many of the issues faced by suffragists are still being dealt with today. That being said, let’s look now to a method suited to examining and assessing Shaw’s artifacts.
CHAPTER III: REVIEW OF METHOD

In 1968, Lloyd Bitzer published “The Rhetorical Situation” in the premier edition of Philosophy and Rhetoric. In 1981, he published “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective” in E. E. White’s Rhetoric in Transition as a response to criticisms his theory had elicited. To best understand Bitzer’s theory, I will first look to his original article which serves as the foundation for future clarifications and extensions to the method. Second, I will explore criticisms of the article to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of Bitzer’s situational approach. Third, I will examine Bitzer’s response to those criticisms in the form of his second article. Fourth, I will analyze two critical responses to Bitzer’s amended theory. Finally, I will end with my own defense of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation in light of the above observations.

First, we must delineate the parameters of the situational approach. Bitzer defines the rhetorical situation as:

. . . a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse introduced into the situation can so constrain human decision or actions as to bring about significant modification of the exigence. (“Rhetorical” 64)

This complex is further clarified by reference to three constituent parts: the exigence, the audience, and a set of constraints. Bitzer gives a nuanced explanation of how each component functions within the rhetorical situation.

Exigence

Bitzer defines an exigence as: “an imperfection marked by urgency: it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (“Rhetorical” 64). In rhetorical situations, there can be any number of exigences,
but not every exigence is rhetorical. To be a rhetorical exigence, it must be able to be positively modified by rhetoric (64). Thus, things like gravity, tornados or death are not rhetorical exigences. Engaging in discourse with a tornado will not change its path even if it might change yours.

Though there may be many exigences within a rhetorical situation, there will be one over-arching exigence (“Rhetorical” 64). This is the exigence that serves to help define the situation, informs how the situation is to be approached, what audience is to be addressed, and what change is sought. It may not be explicitly known or identified by the people in the situation. But it will be the problem they seek to ameliorate by taking rhetorical action based on the directions of the rhetor. By analogy, when waging a war there are many problems or needs that arise. It may cost too much to add another fleet of ships, perhaps a new spy satellite may need to be launched. Yet organizing all of these smaller needs is the one over-arching need: the enemy must be defeated.

**Audience**

The second component of the rhetorical situation is the audience. The rhetorical audience is composed of the people who are addressed by the rhetor who “function as mediators of change” (“Rhetorical” 65). Bitzer distinguishes between people who simply hear the message produced by the rhetor, and people who “are capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change” (65). He notes that the rhetorical situation is unique in its specific audience requirements as opposed to the audience present during discourse produced for artistic or scientific purposes. A poet has little need for an audience at all as, “the poet’s creative purpose
is accomplished when the work is composed” (“Rhetorical” 65). Similarly, “the scientist can produce a discourse expressive or generative of knowledge without engaging another mind” (65). Bitzer makes clear that a scientific audience is one that is capable of receiving knowledge and that an artistic audience is one that is capable of aesthetically engaging a work of art. A rhetorical audience, by contrast, is one that can take action to positively modify the exigence (65). This makes correct audience identification vital. If the wrong audience is motivated, they lack the power to bring about change. If the rhetorical audience is not motivated, the imperfect identified by the rhetor will remain.

**Constraints**

The third component of the rhetorical situation identified by Bitzer is a set of constraints. Constraints are “persons, events, objects, and relations … because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (“Rhetorical” 65). Bitzer gives a list of common sources of constraints: “beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests,” etc. (65). Constraints on a rhetorical situation are, essentially, those things that help and hinder a rhetor in the communication of their message to the audience. Bitzer identifies two major classes of constraints: those “created and managed by the rhetor,” such as skill, credibility, and those that exist in the situation that are not created by the rhetor, such as weather, cultural norms, etc. (65). By identifying how the rhetor attends to each class of constraint, we can conclude more accurately why a rhetor failed or succeeded in creating change. Imagine a skilled rhetor addressing a receptive audience. The rhetor may be an excellent speaker with a powerful speech, but if the audio system breaks,
the rhetoric will have no effect on the audience. If the situational constraints overpower the constraints in control of the rhetor, then despite the rhetor’s best efforts, the rhetoric will fail to produce change.

**Fitting Response**

These three components—exigence, audience and constraints—interact to create the rhetorical situation. Rhetoric is created as a response to the situation. Bitzer claims that the situation “amounts to an invitation to create and present discourse” (“Rhetorical” 65). However, the situation doesn’t invite any response possible; it invites a *fitting* response. According to Bitzer, a fitting response is one that fulfills the needs of the situation (66). He states, “One might say metaphorically that every situation prescribes its fitting response: the rhetor may or may not read the prescription accurately” (67). The responsibility is on the rhetor to discover the proper way to respond to a rhetorical situation. Failing to attend the situational components correctly will result in ineffective rhetoric.

**Critical Responses**

With this better understanding of Bitzer’s original rhetorical situation, it will now be useful to turn to some of the most important criticisms raised by critics of the day. These criticisms will in turn inform the reader as to why Bitzer stresses certain components of the rhetorical situation in his 1981 reiteration and revision of his theory. In 1970, K. E Wilkerson published one of the earliest criticisms of Bitzer. Wilkerson advances two major objections to the rhetorical situation: Bitzer creates an arbitrary definition of what is rhetorical and that Bitzer’s theory is more closely related
to historic causality, rather than rhetorical theory (Wilkerson 85; 89). Each of these objections can be answered by Bitzer’s theory.

Wilkerson gives the example of a hungry boy asking his mother for a sandwich and the mother responding to the request by providing food (85). Wilkerson argues that because Bitzer’s definition of the rhetorical situation is so vague, the scenario involving the boy and his mother could be considered rhetorical (85). While he means this as a criticism, it does technically fulfill the definitions of a rhetorical situation: the exigence—hunger, is modified by rhetoric—the boy’s request, under a set of constraints—time of day, availability of food, etc. The situation is technically rhetorical and, therefore, could be analyzed using the rhetorical situation. With no disrespect meant to Wilkerson or Bitzer, this seems to be a point of disagreement between classical and more contemporary rhetorical theorists. Siding with the latter while respecting the former, I urge that a situation does not have to have great political or social importance to be, at its most basic, rhetorical. The other examples given by Wilkerson—surgeons changing their methods after reading scientific reports, a poet reading her works in order to receive praise—are all rhetorical situations as well (86). He seems to highlight these situations in order to show what Bitzer was unable to cover in his theory, but instead highlights the flexibility and the elegant simplicity of the rhetorical situation. As long as there is an exigence, an audience who can be moved through rhetoric to modify the exigence, and a set of constraints, the situation can be viewed as rhetorical.

Wilkerson’s second criticism is that the rhetorical situation is more a theory of historical causality than it is of rhetoric (88). He argues that because Bitzer focuses so
much on the situation and how it is formed, that these constituents are more important than the rhetoric itself (89). Wilkerson is correct in noticing that Bitzer spends a good amount of energy discussing the importance of history. This is because history is the series of events, indeed, situations, that set the stage for the rhetoric produced. Without analyzing the history leading up to and surrounding a rhetorical situation, the critic lacks any understanding of context and much of the nuance involved in creating rhetoric. Because the situation that gives rise to the rhetoric is so very defining of the rhetoric produced, it makes sense to look closely at the complex of persons and events that are present.

In 1973, Richard Vatz responded to Bitzer’s original article with “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation.” Vatz essentially argues that Bitzer ignores two variables. The first issue raised is that Bitzer does not address how the rhetor chooses what to define as an exigence (Vatz 157). Bitzer’s response to Vatz would be that he does indeed deal with the issue of exigence identification. He discusses the factors that affect the controlling exigence: how clearly it is perceived, how strong or weak it is, how interested people are in it, if it is real or unreal, if it is important or trivial, etc. (Bitzer “Rhetorical” 64). Bitzer addresses this criticism in even more detail in the essay that will be discussed shortly.

Vatz’s second criticism is that if rhetoric is created by the situation, this denies the rhetor any moral responsibility for the rhetoric created and communicated (Vatz 158). This does highlight a potential ambiguity in Bitzer’s theory. Bitzer does not explicitly address the moral nature of the rhetor. He does, however, state that “rhetoric as a discipline is justified philosophically insofar as it provides principles, concepts,
and procedures by which we effect valuable changes in reality” (Bitzer “Rhetorical” 69). He contrasts this understanding of rhetoric from mere persuasion, which lacks the philosophical burden to improve the world around it (“Rhetorical” 69). This makes clear that Bitzer’s understanding of rhetoric, including the role of the rhetor, is that it should be a positive force. So, Vatz is correct that rhetors should be held accountable for the rhetoric they produce. And, ultimately, Bitzer’s philosophical grounding of his situational approach meets the criticisms that Vatz raises.

In 1979, John Patton assembled an article that sought to answer several criticisms of the rhetorical situation. I will focus largely on the question of the deterministic nature of the rhetorical situation as this is the most relevant question related to other critiques covered in this chapter. Patton’s article contains an extensive survey of the criticisms levied at Bitzer. But the most salient are the questions of how much choice, if any, a rhetor has in the creation of rhetoric. Patton clearly articulates popular misconceptions about the role of causality and creativity, asserting that the rhetorical situation has often been interpreted as overly deterministic. Because the three components of the rhetorical situation so strongly influence the rhetoric produced, the theory has been read as denying the creativity of the rhetor (42).

Patton states, “In rhetorical situations rhetors act very much as self-monitoring, deliberative, teleologically oriented agents” (42). He notes that rhetors must sort through factual conditions, selecting exigences and deciding whether addressing an issue is even worthwhile (43). In all of these matters, the rhetor is engaging in the process of choosing which variables to highlight, to downplay or to ignore. This exercise of choice checks the criticisms that would seek to characterize the rhetorical
situation as overly deterministic. It also sets the stage for Bitzer’s subsequent discussion of his theory.

**Bitzer’s Clarifications of Method**

The majority insight in “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective” (1981) deals with the understanding of exigences. Bitzer clarifies what an exigence is: more than an imperfection marked by urgency, it is a “factual condition plus a relation to some interest” (“Functional” 28). To Bitzer, a factual condition is “anything—physical or mental—whose existence is (or is thought to be) independent of one’s personal subjectivity” (28). The interest component he defines as “any appreciation, need, desire, or aspiration which when related to factual conditions, accounts for the emergence of motives and purpose” (28). This clearly demonstrates how exigences are selected, removing any claims of ambiguity raised by Vatz.

Having identified the pieces that make up an exigence, Bitzer turns his attention to how and why rhetors and audiences respond to exigences. He identifies six variables: degree of interest, modification capability, degree of risk, obligations and expectations involved, how familiar and confident a person is in responding to similar situations, and immediacy of the problem and the solution (“Functional” 32-33). For the purpose of this project, I will be focusing on two: degree of interest and risk potential. This focus is deliberate because they are the two factors that seem most relevant to the suffrage movement. In the previous chapter I discussed how getting people interested in the movement was the only way it was going to gain popularity
and move forward. I also discussed how some of the threats faced by suffragists had to be overcome.

Of course, there are many things that can affect how much interest is generated by an exigence. Bitzer focuses on six: how probable the factual component is, how personal the knowledge is of a factual condition (technical experience as opposed to lived experience), how close in space and time is the exigence, what is the magnitude of the exigence, how closely does the exigence affect the rhetor or the audience and the quality of the motivation for the interest—fear or pain being more powerful then curiosity or self-esteem (“Functional” 32). Identifying these factors of interest serves as a rebuttal to theorists who criticized Bitzer for not identifying how rhetors and audiences choose which exigences to attend to. By examining these factors of interest, it is possible to more precisely identify the tactics used by Mary Shaw to persuade her audience of the need for suffrage. For example, making suffrage an issue that was personal and timely for her audience, Shaw was able to create more interest in the exigence she identified for her audience.

Those six factors that influence interest in exigences are, according to Bitzer, not prescriptive of what kind of rhetoric they will produce, but rather descriptive. They, “indicate that rhetors sometimes are involved in complicated ways with situations, roles, motives, causal forces, genres, and other factors which make their communication behavior very predictable” (“Functional” 34). By examining these factors, general trends and predictions can be made. It makes sense that the rhetor would want to address factors, such as immediacy or modification capability, that are important to the audience because these factors inform the rhetor on how to better
move the audience. Bitzer makes clear that just because communication can be rather predictable, it doesn’t mean that creativity is lacking (“Functional” 34).

We also need to examine risk as a factor when looking at responsiveness to exigences. “[O]ther things being equal, a person who stands to lose much and gain little is less inclined to respond than one who stands to gain much and lose little” (Bitzer, “Functional” 33). In the suffrage movement many thought that they stood to gain more from their participation in the political sphere than they stood to lose: reputations, relationships and livelihoods. As a result, they were much more interested and committed to the exigence of suffrage than those who did not put much value in the power of the ballot or those who valued domesticity over democracy.

**Further Critical Responses**

Now that an understanding of Bitzer’s extension of the rhetorical situation has been established, we can again look to the important critical responses and applications it received. As was the case with the previous set of criticisms, the answers to many of the issues raised can be found within Bitzer’s article itself. These critical applications demonstrate, often in spite of themselves, the continued utility of Bitzer’s method.

In 1993, Mary Garret and Xiaosui Xiao responded to Bitzer in their essay, “‘The Rhetorical Situation’ Revisited.” They raise the issue of the theory’s supposed lack of accounting for culture. They also take issue with too much of a focus on the rhetor instead of the audience (Garret and Xiao 30). Garret and Xiao take a rather postmodern worldview and critique Bitzer for ignoring the role of the audience in shaping the rhetorical situation. The argument follows that each term of the rhetorical
situation can be related back to the audience: the exigence is the audience’s unsolved questions, the constraints are the audience’s expectations and finally that the rhetor is a member of the audience as well (Garret and Xiao 39). However, besides providing perhaps additional context with which to view a rhetorical situation, an audience-centered approach does not seem to generate rhetorical criticism that is any more substantial than Bitzer’s perspective.

The second criticism of Garret and Xiao is to critique Bitzer’s failing to include in the rhetorical situation something that deals with the culture that surrounds the situation, or the “discourse tradition” (38). They contend that the discourse tradition of a culture does three things: highlights what can be considered an exigence—something that can vary with cultures, defines what is considered to be an appropriate response to the situation and lastly, discourse traditions affect an audience’s identification of and interest in an exigence (38).

To demonstrate the importance of cultural norms, Garret and Xiao apply Bitzer’s method as they “tell the (rhetorical) tale of the Opium Wars” (Garret and Xiao 32). The important role of discourse traditions in China becomes clear in the article. When China began trading with the West in 1842, China characterized the “barbarians” as they had previous strangers: inferior, both intellectually and militarily (34). As such, they did not recognize the threat the West represented to Chinese autonomy. It was when they shifted their rhetoric away from traditional conceptions of the new events that the exigence was truly recognized for the threat it was: “the very question of whether and how an exigency would be perceived, as well as the way in which responses were constructed, depended in large part on the discourse
tradition” (37). To Garret and Xiao, cultural traditions largely affect how we perceive and respond to exigences.

I recognize the importance of culture and how it affects rhetorical situations, but it seems as though these can all be taken into account by Bitzer’s original theory. Cultural differences seem to be just what Bitzer was describing when he discussed constraints in rhetorical situations. Constraints are, “persons, events, objects, relations, rules, principles, facts, laws, images, interests, emotions, arguments, and conventions” (“Functional” 23). All of those factors, and many more, make up a culture and shapes how a culture engages in discourse. It is good to be reminded of the importance of culture; but Bitzer already includes these provisions.

In 1996, Craig R. Smith and Scott Lybarger present another decidedly postmodern criticism in “Bitzer’s Model Reconstructed.” Smith and Lybarger propose altering Bitzer’s theory to “aid in the generation of new critical assessments by taking into account postmodern multiplicities and allowing for diverse critical methods” (197). They provide what looks to be a three-prong criticism of Bitzer, calling for the allowance of multiple exigences, multiple audiences and multiple constraints to be taken into account when examining rhetoric (198).

To illustrate their extended model, they apply it to two speeches given by President George H.W. Bush concerning “the war on drugs” (203). Moving through the speech, they identify several variables for each situational component. For example, they identify seven rhetorical audiences: the American people, parents, law makers, governments of drug exporting countries, school teachers, children and those who would read about the speech in the newspaper (205-206). They feel that with the
examination of multiple audiences, the constraints that attend them and multiple exigences, with no one exigence claiming control over the others, they can remove the deterministic bent from Bitzer’s original theory. With all these perspectives to choose from, the focus shifts from the rhetor as a creator of knowledge and more towards a collective creation of reality (198).

Again, this can all be accounted for in Bitzer’s original theory. There can be multiple exigences in a rhetorical situation; in fact, there often are. But it is also the case that in any given situation, there is most often one over-arching problem that needs to be fixed. When women were fighting for suffrage, equal pay, legal rights and societal freedom were all problems that needed to be addressed. Suffrage, though, was the exigence that, if addressed, would modify all the other exigences. As for the multiple audiences with multiple constraints, there seems no need to overhaul Bitzer’s theory to deal with this. If there are multiple audiences, it seems like it would be useful to apply Bitzer’s theory multiple times. Broadening the theory is counterproductive as the theory then loses its ability to clarify and explicate rhetorical situations. Moreover, the more focused and precise a theory is able to be, the more use it can be because it allows for precise and therefore meaningful conclusions to be drawn.

Having examined both Bitzer’s first articulation of the rhetorical situation and his 1981 extension, the theoretical underpinning of my analysis should be clear. By examining the three components of the rhetorical situation—the exigence, the audience, and the constraints—we can then determine whether or not a rhetorical response was fitting. By examining successful pieces of rhetoric, rhetoric that was a
fitting response, we can refine our understanding of how to create fitting responses.

By examining unsuccessful pieces of rhetoric, non-fitting responses, we can learn how to avoid similar mistakes when crafting rhetoric in the future. Therefore, by applying Bitzer’s method to Mary Shaw’s two plays, *The Parrot Cage* and *The Woman of It*, I will determine whether or not they served as a fitting response to the rhetorical exigence of women’s suffrage in America.
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

Mary Shaw’s two plays, *The Woman of It* and *The Parrot Cage*, were responses to a very real exigence that dominated a large part of the early 1900’s political landscape. The question of women’s suffrage was reaching its zenith and required an answer. Suffrage dramatists sought to answer this question through the creation of theatrical works to be performed for the public. To better understand these artifacts, I will apply the method articulated in Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation.” The primary focus of this chapter will be an analysis of each of the three components of Bitzer’s situational method: the controlling exigence, the rhetorical audience and the constraints. After first examining these components contextually, I will apply them specifically to *The Woman of It* and then *The Parrot Cage*. Finally, I will determine if either play acted as a fitting response to the rhetorical situation.

Exigence

Bitzer points out that any rhetorical situation can be made up of a myriad of exigences, not all of which are rhetorical (“Rhetorical” 64). Weather patterns forming that discourage women from marching in picket lines are indeed a problem or imperfection. But they are not rhetorical exigences because rhetoric cannot solve the root problem; one can’t talk the clouds out of raining. Additionally, some exigences are strong, some are weak, some are easily identified while others are not (“Rhetorical” 64). It is impossible and impractical to attempt to account for every exigence involved in a rhetorical situation. The weak exigences do little to actually shape the rhetoric in any significant way. Therefore, I will deal with the primary
exigence. This exigence will be examined because it provides the most ground for analysis and most strongly shaped the rhetoric produced.

We should first look to the primary exigence identified by Shaw, as it will be the thing that “functions as the organizing principle: it specifies the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected” (Bitzer, “Rhetorical” 64). The controlling exigence is quite easily identified: women’s lack of suffrage. Without this problem, there would be no need for a suffrage movement to even exist. Women had good reason to fight for the vote: “The efforts of women to deal locally with social problems were no longer sufficient in a nation where the sources were extralocal, and created by male, self-interested political and economic behavior” (Baker 638). Suffrage would give women the capacity to enact change on a level previously unavailable to them.

In chapters prior, I discussed the historical roots of the suffrage movement. American women had been striving for autonomy since the Revolutionary War. Tracing those roots through the abolition and temperance movements, it becomes clear that the time to fight for women’s suffrage could not be put off any longer. There was nobody left to give the vote to except for women. The vote went first white male property owners, then to white men, then to all men. Women were the only block of the adult population left that lacked suffrage. This imperfection clearly shapes the rhetoric in Shaw’s plays as they deal primarily with how suffrage relates to the nature of women’s autonomy.

So, when identifying the exigences that helped to shape Shaw’s plays, we can look to the need for suffrage as the primary imperfection. This is the problem that is marked by urgency and that can be solved with a rhetorical response. In order to
achieve suffrage, government officials must be persuaded to re-write laws that govern the nation. The problem and the solution both find their origin in language. Having identified the primary exigence, we can now turn to Bitzer’s next situational component, audience.

**Audience**

We can first look to the general audiences that were present at performances of Shaw’s plays. There are three recorded performances of the plays. *The Woman of It* was performed in January 1912 at the Hotel Astor, in New York (“Miss”). *The Parrot Cage* was performed in 1913 and on 17th of March, 1915 (Friedl 34). Due to the limitations of this project, I am unable to access all of the records and archives that may hold additional information. This is a distinct qualification on my ability to comprehensively apply Bitzer’s rhetorical situation. I am therefore more reliant on alternative sources for information about potential audiences. These sources provide documentation related to events occurring at the same general time and in similarly situated venues. While these accounts are far from conclusive, they nonetheless narrow the gaps in our understanding related to those attending Shaw’s two plays.

On 17 February 1914, a birthday celebration was held for Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (“Stars”). Even though she was not able to attend because of a broken ankle, some 1,500 people showed up and $3,000 was raised (“Stars”). The celebration took over an entire floor of the Biltmore Hotel in New York City, including the large ballroom. In attendance were prominent actresses of the day, including Mary Shaw, and of the 20 patrons and patronesses listed, seven were men (“Stars”).
On the 9 May 1915, 1,400 people gathered in the large ballroom of the Astor Hotel, also in New York City, for a suffrage luncheon that served as a fundraiser. In attendance were the governor’s wife, the borough president, two commissioners and famous actor Harley Granville-Barker (“Suffrage”). This event is particularly interesting because it is the same hotel that Shaw’s play *The Woman of It* was performed. While the luncheon was held in the large ballroom and Shaw’s play was performed in the small ballroom, we can be reasonably certain that the venue catered to members of the upper class, such as famous actresses like Shaw, governors and other city officials.

With a more general idea of who was attending these suffrage events and where such events took place, we can examine the information available specific to Shaw’s production of *The Woman of It*, the more widely reported of Shaw’s two plays. It was performed for a meeting of the Equal Suffrage League in the Hotel Astor (Friedl 34). According to an article published in the *New York Herald*, *The Woman of It* was:

...presented by a cast including many prominent actresses, before a large audience, mostly women. The majority were suffragists, but it was whispered by Miss Mary Garret Hay, the president of the society, that several anti-suffragists had been invited and were actually present. (“Miss”)

From this description, two important facts stand out in regard to audience makeup: (1) the audience was mostly female, and (2) they were mostly suffragists.

Suffrage events had been taking place in New York for some time, some events smaller, like Shaw’s plays, or some quite large, like the 1,500 person birthday celebration for NAWSA president, Dr. Anna Shaw. As most members of Mary
Shaw’s audience were already suffragists, they had most likely attended a suffrage event before this play.

This information tells us who attended the show, but it does not identify for us the rhetorical audience. It pays to recall that the rhetorical audience, according to Bitzer, is the one capable of positively modifying the exigence (“Rhetorical” 65). The primary exigence, the exigence that served to shape those subordinate to it, was women’s lack of suffrage. Thus the rhetorical audience for this exigence is the one that can directly solve it: the men. They were the people who already possessed the right to vote and who were holding the vast majority of public offices at the time. If the suffragists wanted the 19th Amendment passed and ratified, then it was the male voters who would have to make it happen. Therefore the rhetorical audience for this exigence was the small number of men that were potentially sitting in Shaw’s audience. When looking at results of who was for and against suffrage, however, the field of men who were capable of being persuaded becomes even smaller.

Examining voting trends in the early 1900s reveals salient details about the demographics of men who needed to be persuaded. There seemed to be several distinct groups that were opposed to women’s suffrage: (1) “liquor and brewing interests plus retail saloon operators,” (2) German-Americans, (3) Roman and Irish Catholics, (4) urban politicians with ties to liquor, (5) Southern-European immigrant groups, (6) the under-educated, and (7) “textile and manufacturing interests, which depended on cheap supplies of women’s labor” (McDonagh and Price 419).

This is more than just a laundry list of men with grievances. Because of their common roots, women’s suffrage “automatically inherited the enemies of prohibition,
most notably, the brewing interest and those immigrant and religious groups most vehemently opposed to prohibition” (McDonagh and Price 419). This helps explain the correlation between being anti-prohibition and anti-suffrage, both movements that were active and vocal at the time. The challenges for Shaw are clear. In order for Shaw to reach the small number of men in her audiences, she had to overcome traditional definitions of femininity as well as any political and economic ties that the men might have to the groups listed above. While these additional details can be thought of as constraints, they give insight into the small size of Shaw’s rhetorical audience.

We now have an understanding of two of the components of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation. The controlling exigence is women’s lack of suffrage made urgent by the long history of the women’s rights struggle. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, women were the only large group of adults that lacked suffrage. This, in turn, means that the only audience members that could directly solve this exigence were the men in the audience that made up the rhetorical audience. With this, we can now analyze the situational constraints.

**Constraints**

Bitzer defines constraints as: “persons, events, objects, and relations which are part of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (“Rhetorical” 65). These are the situational conditions that affect both rhetor and audience (“Functional” 23). He also separates constraints into two categories: artistic and inartistic. Artistic constraints are those that the rhetor can control, while inartistic constraints are those that are inherent in the
situation ("Rhetorical" 65). Artistic constraints can be further organized into three categories: (1) managing speaker credibility, (2) use of emotional appeals, and (3) using appeals to logic.

Similar to exigences, it is impossible to account for every constraint present in a rhetorical situation and, for many constraints, unnecessary. Once again, I will look to the constraints that had the most pronounced effect in shaping the actions of the rhetor and audience: (1) how Shaw’s gender and experience as a playwright shaped her credibility, (2) her use of emotional appeals, (3) her use of logical appeals, and (4) the political culture of early twentieth-century America. The only inartistic constraint identified is the culture. This was the constraint she had no direct control over, while the other artistic constraints were ways in which she could shape her response to the situation. This serves to highlight just how overwhelming the situational components were. To better understand the complexity of the situation, we need to examine the constraints.

We can look now to the first artistic constraint: Shaw’s credibility as a woman and as a playwright. As was noted, Shaw had more credibility to debate certain gender issues because she was a woman. It would have been easier for her audiences, even the rhetorical one, to reject her message if she was a man because it could be argued that he could not know the reality of what it meant to be a woman. Because she was a part of the class she claimed was being oppressed, she was given greater latitude in the arguments she could make. However, this was a double-edged sword. Shaw’s gender most certainly gave her more freedom with her female audience members
because of her in-group status. But, her gender may have been a detriment to her with male audience members for this very reason.

I have previously discussed the prevailing notions of what women were supposed to be: pious, pure, submissive and domestic (Welter 21). Constantly traveling, acting on stage and challenging the status quo was most definitely outside the experience of the common woman. These unique activities may have made it easier to disregard her. If she were modeling behavior that the male members of the audience thought inappropriate, her message would be lost.

Tied to Shaw’s gender was her career. The professions people have shape the rhetoric we expect them to create. We expect presidents to speak with a certain gravitas and structured form, just as we expect someone who incites a riot to speak with passion and a sense of haste. The industry Mary Shaw worked in similarly served to constrain the rhetoric she produced. She was an experienced public speaker and lecturer, speaking in front of women’s clubs and at events when she would travel with shows (Auster 80). She was also a well-known actress; but what she was not known as was a playwright.

Perhaps she could have been more effective if she had had more experience actually writing plays. The plays she did write were short and simplistic when compared to other suffrage dramas being written at the time, such as Robbins’ Votes for Women. This simplistic storytelling style with little narrative arc ensured that her plays could only realistically be appealing at suffrage gatherings. They lack the depth and character development, two factors that would greatly increase their entertainment value. Because of their length, they were probably not written to be taken seriously
as art independent of the suffrage movement. Such short skits would be ideal for suffrage meetings or mid-meal entertainments at suffrage functions, but they would be too brief to justify an entire evening’s slot at a professional theater. They were written in response to a particular rhetorical situation and depended on that situation to give them context and meaning. This meant that she was limited in the audiences her plays could reach. However, making simple appeals in her plays did mean that she could connect with the audience members that already identified as suffragists.

The second and third constraints are also artistic constraints. Shaw had control over how she used emotion and logical appeals in her plays. By manipulating her audience’s emotions, she could hope to move them to further action and by using logical appeals she could show them the benefits of being a part of the suffrage movement. Later, when applying these constraints to her text, we will see more specifically how they function.

Emotional appeals are woven throughout the plots of Shaw’s plays. Both of Shaw’s plays portray the women who are fighting for suffrage in a positive light. It is the free-spirited parrot that is the victorious protagonist of *The Parrot Cage* and the eventual suffragists in *The Woman of It* who are shown as reasonable, intelligent women. Each set of suffrage characters are the models of what is good or laudable. The fact that each play ends happily, with the suffragists overcoming, demonstrates to Shaw’s audience that they too can overcome their obstacles.

The third constraint of logical appeals was also a powerful influence on how Shaw constructed her artifacts. To actually solve the main problem of women gaining the right to vote, the movement needed to be as large and far-reaching as possible.
Therefore increasing the number of people supporting suffrage was vital. The previously cited *New York Herald* article detailing the audience in attendance of Mary Shaw’s *The Woman of It*, stated: “several anti-suffragists had been invited and were actually present” (“Miss”). The more people who could be persuaded would mean the movement as a whole would be more successful, thus the importance of inviting the anti-suffragists. To demonstrate to these potential converts that suffrage was something they should support, Shaw portrayed suffragists victoriously in her plays.

Looking last to culture, it makes sense to refer back to the second chapter of this thesis where I have already established what a turning point this period in time was. Women were becoming more educated and more of them were working outside of the home. New York was a particularly important location for this evolution to be taking place. Paula Baker discussed the evolution of women’s early involvement in politics in her 1984 article, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920.” Prior to the twentieth century, suffragists had been working on gaining suffrage state by state. Mary Shaw’s generation of suffragists changed the focus of the suffrage campaign from a state-by-state effort, to gaining suffrage through a constitutional amendment (Baker 642). Instead of focusing rhetoric towards smaller communities and state-by-state appeals, Shaw had to access a much larger demographic. While arguing that women voting might have calming affects on alcoholism in Oregon and California might be productive in the western frontier states where temperance was an important issue, it would not go very far in New York or New Hampshire. The only way Shaw could hope to be persuasive was to appeal to the most fundamental commonalities shared by women and men throughout the nation.
The criticisms of the earliest anti-suffragists in the 1800’s were also losing traction at the time of Shaw’s writing. Instead of the threat of women abandoning their homes and families if given suffrage, women were able to argue that their experiences in the private sphere were now necessary for an informed voting populous. Baker discusses the transition of the role of the government from the 1800’s to the 1900’s stating, “governments, especially at the state level, spent the largest portion of their budgets on supporting institutions like schools, asylums, and prisons,” which, she points out were “formerly the province of women's voluntary work” (639-640). Now, it seemed, women were becoming uniquely qualified to voice their opinions on important political matters of the day.

A crucial test for the suffrage movement came three years after the first performance of Shaw’s play The Woman of It, which was performed in 1912. However, The Parrot Cage, performed first 1913, was also performed in 1915 which was the year New York voted on a suffrage referendum. The referendum was to act as a testament to the inevitability of women’s suffrage (Baker 643). It lost, but was eventually passed two years later. Baker’s comments on the results of the election give us a glimpse into the political culture and climate of the day:

The woman suffrage referendum ran poorly in areas where the prohibition vote was high or where high voter turnout and other manifestations of the nineteenth-century culture of politics were still visible. Here, women's suffrage was still a threat. Conversely, it ran well in cities, especially in certain immigrant wards and places where the Socialist vote was high—where nineteenth-century political patterns had never taken hold or had already disappeared. Men who had no stake in maintaining the old culture of politics seemed more likely to support woman suffrage. (643)
Shaw was writing and performing these plays in a time of political transition. New York City was a place she could produce her plays where the political and social environment had progressed beyond older, more repressive, ways of thinking.

I have now established all three major components of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation: the exigence, the audience and the constraints. The primary exigence was a need for women’s suffrage. Correlating with the primary exigence is the primary audience. The audience that was actually capable of solving the primary exigence was the men attending the shows. Lastly, I identified the four major constraints that helped shape the rhetorical situation: (1) Shaw’s gender and experience in writing drama, (2) the use of emotional appeals, (3) the use of logical appeals, and (4) the political climate of the time. We can now turn to the artifacts themselves. With an understanding of the rhetorical situation that Shaw was working in, we can better identify how each of the three situational components influenced her two attempts at a fitting response.

**Response One: *The Woman of It***

**Exigence**

Looking first to *The Woman of It*, the lack of suffrage is made quite obvious. The play is a reflection, if a slightly absurd one, of the status quo Shaw is trying to change. Shaw takes issue with women being defined solely by their utility to men through their roles of mother and wife. The play starts with three women who are undecided about their views on suffrage, attending an anti-suffrage meeting. They are greeted with open arms and are invited to join in the club’s pledge:

I pledge myself to remember each day and remind other women every hour that there are only two great moments in a woman’s life. One, when she gives
her first kiss to her lover, the other when she gives her first kiss to her own little baby. And no matter what else she may have, what else she may gain the woman who misses these two great moments is still a failure. (“Woman” 287)

Right from the outset, Shaw declares the problem, albeit through hyperbole. Because of a lack of suffrage and political equality, women are defined by their status as wives and mothers. The trinity for these anti-suffragists is “Husband—home—child” (“Woman” 288). They identify their holy words as “wives and mothers” stating, “They are all man’s ideal woman” (“Woman” 288). Clearly, the highest calling a woman can have is to get married and have babies.

Shaw identifies a very real problem with this way of thinking: what about the women who are not mothers or wives? As stated in their pledge, “no matter what else she may have, what else she may gain … [she] … is still a failure” (“Woman” 286).

Shaw is fighting for a world where no one thinks to ask the question put forth in the character of Mrs. Sweet:

I have the best husband that ever lived. He loves me to distraction, and honestly, he thinks I am the only woman in the world. My babies are the cutest, dearest babies alive. My home is simply a paradise. So, why should I want to vote? What good would it do me? (“Woman” 289)

Shaw hints at the solution to the exigence of women’s lack of suffrage in Mrs. Allright’s response: “Never give those suffragists a loophole to get in their old statistics. We find it far safer to keep to mossgrown platitudes about husband, home and children. Then they can’t corner us” (290). If women were to solve the problem of suffrage, they needed to be smarter and louder than the opposition.

**Audience**

When Shaw made the exigence explicitly clear in *The Woman of It*, she also made clear who she thought was, albeit incorrectly, her rhetorical audience: female
suffragists. They are clearly the victors of the play and the characters who are portrayed the most sympathetically. The suffragists in the audience are given clear role models who take active steps to further the suffrage movement. The anti-suffragists are made to look the fools when spouting lines like: “Real women don’t want to think. They just want to bloom beside man in the home and shed the fragrance of their womanhood over his troubled life” (290). Not only are they seen as mawkish and simplistic, they alienate the suffragist women in the audience by going almost so far as to call them deviant: “A baby girl has within her at the moment of birth the intuitive knowledge of good and evil. So any sin a woman commits is done deliberately, defiantly against the law of her nature. That is why there should be no pity for erring women” (293). It goes without saying that women who fight for suffrage are “erring women.”

Conversely, the young visitors to the meeting are quite the opposite from the anti-suffragists. They are portrayed as bright, funny and charming, acting as mild foils for the outlandish arguments made by the anti-suffragists. This seems to be in direct response to criticisms of women in the suffrage movement lacking a sense of humor (Friedl 10). Shaw even turns this stereotype around when, after a particularly maudlin speech made by Mrs. Sweet, Mrs. Alright is questioned by Miss Moore, an eventual suffragist:

MRS. SWEET. Think of it, gentlemen, — a mother not to know her own baby! That is what will happen in every home if these women get the suffrage. [Sits]
MRS. ALRIGHT. That is a terrible story, Mrs. Sweet, and only too true.
MISS MOORE. Have the men on the committee any sense of humor?
MRS. ALRIGHT. I really can’t say. I’m afraid I do not know what a sense of humor is. Does any anti know what a sense of humor is?
WOMEN. [In turn] No—no—no—no. What is it?
MRS. ALRIGHT. You see, nobody here knows what it is, Miss Moore.
MISS MOORE. Yes, I see. ("Woman” 291)

However, as I identified previously, the suffragists in the audience were not the rhetorical audience. They were not the ones who could positively modify the exigence directly. That privilege went to the men.

Ironically, the anti-suffragist characters in *The Woman of It* seem to have identified the rhetorical audience more accurately than Shaw. The anti-suffragists are holding the meeting in order to practice the speeches they will present in front of the Legislative Committee at the Hearing on the Question of Suffrage for Women (288). The anti’s have identified that the men in the legislature are the people who make the laws. If they want to ensure suffrage’s defeat, they need to direct their efforts towards that legislative body.

Shaw, however, fails to do what her characters suggest. It is very clearly aimed at female suffragists. Shaw seems to ignore the men in her audience by not crafting appeals that would reach them. In fact, she may have gone so far as to alienate the men, as she would have done with any anti-suffragists in the audience.

The only men mentioned in *The Woman of It* are either husbands, fathers, brothers or legislators. Of all of those men mentioned, none are sympathetic to the suffrage cause. In the fictional world created by Shaw, men are not allies; they are exclusively part of the problem.

**Constraints**

Earlier, I identified four constraints: (1) Shaw’s credibility, (2) appeals to emotion, (3) appeals to logic or reasoning, and (4) political climate. By looking at these constraints more closely, we can examine how Shaw’s rhetoric was shaped by
these situational components that surrounded her. One such component is the first constraint, Shaw’s credibility as a woman and a playwright. The two types of credibility are in some ways linked. Shaw is more credible as an author on the subject of women’s lives because she has first-hand experience. As such, what she argues to be true about women’s lives is easier to believe than had a man written the same material. This credibility is effective regardless of whether the audience is male or female, a definite benefit to Shaw’s cause. However, because Shaw lacked experience as a playwright, the credibility of her gender could only extend so far.

This need to be persuasive brings us to the second and third variables that constrained Shaw: the use of emotional and logical appeals. These constraints explain the endings of each play. In order to make the most of her audience, it makes sense that she would want to make them feel like suffrage would be a good thing. To strengthen these positive emotions, Shaw could interweave appeals to reasoning. If the audience desires the positive feelings to continue or to see the benefits of suffrage that Shaw depicts, they too would have to support the suffrage movement. Therefore the only realistic option Shaw had for concluding her plays were ones where the suffragists were triumphant. In the case of *The Woman of It*, this means the young visitors to the anti-suffrage meeting are converted to suffrage at the conclusion of the meeting:

MRS. ALLRIGHT. Why, haven’t you decided after what you have heard? MISS BERRY. Oh, yes; we have found out we are suffragists. WOMEN. Suffragists! MRS. GROUCH. I knew they were suffragists the minute I put my eyes on them. MISS MOORE. The other night I told a friend I was going to a suffragist meeting to find out whether I was a suffragist or not. “Don’t,” she said. “Go to an anti-suffrage meeting; they’ll make a suffragist out of you at
short notice.” Everybody says you make more converts to equal suffrage than the suffragists do. (“Woman” 296)

Not only do the suffragists win in the end, their victory comes because of the ridiculous efforts of the anti-suffragists.

Last, we can look to the political climate when these plays were performed. It’s been established that America was in the midst of several large shifts both socially and politically. Women had been fighting for suffrage for decades and slowly but surely, women were gaining additional freedoms. However, despite the gradual opening up of America, some institutions, like the family, remained as strong as ever.

Continuously throughout The Woman of It, Shaw criticizes the idea that a woman’s true place is in the home. The anti-suffragists argue vociferously for the vital role that the cultivation of family must play in woman’s life for her to be considered a woman: “A woman’s proper place is at home. No true woman would ever leave it to come here and wrangle about politics” (288). While Shaw hints for the entire length of the play that women need more than a husband and baby to be complete, she never actually states it explicitly. This tactic, the merest of nods towards traditional roles, keeps her from completely alienating the more conservative audience members.

Response Two: The Parrot Cage

Exigence

Similar arguments are made in Shaw’s second play, The Parrot Cage. Here, Shaw argues less against women’s domestic roles and more to women finding their value in being decorative objects for the men in their lives. The play begins with a group of parrots perched in a cage listening to a man’s voice call out phrases for the
women-parrots to repeat like, “Pretty Polly! Pretty Polly!” or “How d’ye do Mr. Jones?” (“Parrot” 301). Behind the repetitions of the phrases by the other parrots, Free-Souled Parrot can be heard calling, “I want to be free! I want to be free!” (301).

The purpose of the parrots is made clear in this transaction:

   PHILISTINE. Come, now! Why should master feed and pet you, unless you amuse him and his friends?
   FREE-SOULED. I was not made to amuse him! I was made to be myself! Let me out! Let me out!
   PHILISTINE. Well be yourself! Stop bothering us!
   FREE-SOULED. I can’t be myself chained up in a cage! (301)

The parrots, a thinly disguised metaphor for women, find their purpose and earn their survival by pleasing the master, or men. The metaphor of women as parrots is telling. The “parrots” are caged and taught to repeat the maxims of the master, potentially representing how the suffragists view the anti-suffragists. Free-Souled parrot, who represents women fighting for equality, finds life in the cage unbearable.

   The way Shaw identifies the exigence of women’s suffrage is slightly different in The Parrot Cage. Here, it is less obviously about being forced to find one’s value in being a wife and mother. Instead, it is more about women finding purpose and value in their lives through men. Every other parrot in the cage tries to tell Free-Soul Parrot why she should not leave the cage. Reasoning Parrot tells her that if she behaves in the cage, the master might let her explore the house (302). This relative amount of freedom is not enough for Free-Soul. She will have the forest, or nothing at all.

   Appeals are made to divine law, to economic security, to fear of the unknown, each representative to common arguments made against the changes proposed by suffragists (304, 302, 304). Despite all of these arguments, Free-Soul Parrot shouts, “I
shall never know my highest mission till I am free! No caged parrot can lead me! Only a free-souled parrot! Let me out!” (303).

Thus, the same basic exigence is woven into both plays. Suffrage is the key to women’s liberation from the cages that threaten to enclose them. To Shaw, women needed to be wary of defining themselves by external societal pressures, especially those that related her worth to her marital status or reliance on men. Instead, Shaw envisioned a future where through the vote, women would be able to define themselves. She identified one exigence, but through each play, examined it from a different angle.

**Audience**

The very same dilemma occurs in *The Parrot Cage* as in *The Woman of It*. Again, men are not framed as potential allies in the fight for women’s autonomy, but instead as something to escape. The Man’s Voice bookends the play, opening and closing the scene. Especially at the end of the play after Free-Soul Parrot has escaped, the character of Man’s Voice becomes something sinister, repeating: “Polly’s place is in the cage” (306). The only male character in this play is a wholly negative presence with no redeeming qualities and no opportunity to display any.

Shaw again creates no positive model for the men in her audience to follow. So, even if they were persuaded by Shaw’s play, the men would gather no real sense of how they should help the cause. One almost gets the sense that instead of converting men, Shaw would like to see them pushed out of the way in order to make room for the women. In some ways, this attitude was necessary. Women at that point in history were being forced to stay in the wings of the political theater. They would
need to jostle the status quo in order to make room for their voices. However, if they wanted more political power, converting men to their cause was vital because it was men who actually retained legislative roles.

**Constraints**

Looking to the first constraint of credibility, Shaw’s gender plays the same role it did when looking at *The Woman of It*. Because she was a woman, she was able to make arguments about the reality of women’s experiences that would have been less credible coming from a man. Her gender was most definitely a beneficial force for motivating change around women’s issues.

However, examining Shaw’s skills as a playwright also provides insight. Both plays, *The Woman of It* and *The Parrot Cage* are short, simplistic portrayals of women’s lives. Both contain a short, not terribly developed, narrative arc: suffrage ideals are brought up, suffrage ideals are rejected or ridiculed, suffrage ideals are proven viable or impervious to criticism. It could be argued that they were not intended as independent artistic works, that they were not created primarily for entertainment, but persuasion. This, I think, is probably the truth. These plays were not meant to be performed outside of the exigence of suffrage. Meaning that instead of longer plays, with deeper characters and situations, Shaw was constrained to what she thought her audience would find persuasive. Whether or not she correctly identified what her rhetorical audience would find persuasive is a matter that will be discussed later.

Also discussed above were the roles appeals to emotion and reasoning played in Shaw’s choice of plot. In order to attach positive associations to the suffrage
movement, suffragists had to be portrayed in a positive light. The only way to do so was to end the play with a suffrage victory:

FREE-SOUL. Come! Come, my sisters! Follow me! Your wings are clipped, I know! But perhaps they are strong enough to bear you to the forest! I will help you with my strong, young wings! But even if you fall and perish, at least you will die free parrots! With the longing for the forest in your hearts! Not caged, mutilated things! Without souls enough to realize the wrongs that have been done to you! Follow me! Follow me!

[…]

PHILISTINE. If my wings were not clipped, I believe I would follow her! IDEALIST. Because my wings are clipped, I am afraid of the Unknown! […] RATIONALIST. If only she had proved there is a forest! But she did not prove it! THEOLOGICAL. She will be as unhappy free as she was caged! There is only Duty and Resignation! She cannot escape the divine law! (305)

Again, the suffragists triumph over those who would criticize them. By virtue of the suffrage victory, those who oppose them look ineffectual and easier to defeat. Because the characters in the plays overcome, this gives hope to the suffragists in the audience that they too can be victorious. However, portraying suffragists as universal winners and the anti-suffragists as silly characters without substance may not have been the most persuasive tactic. It most certainly inspired those who already identified as suffragists, but quite likely alienated those in the audience who did not identify as such. Once again, by focusing too acutely on those already in the movement, Shaw ignores those who would help promote the cause of suffrage: new converts and as established above, men.

When it comes to the fourth constraint of culture, Shaw takes the same arguments she makes in *The Woman of It*, but makes them more dramatically. Free-Soul is always striving to escape and be free: “Why do you perch here tamely, doing
the things you are told to do! Why don’t you watch your chance and fly away?” (“Parrot” 302). While I don’t think she is arguing for women to abandon their families or to never have children, she must walk a fine line between tradition and transition. Shaw has to be especially careful when dealing with cultural constraints. If she falls to either side of the line, her play loses its ability to make much impact on people from either side of the political spectrum.

**Fitting Response(s)**

The last part of Bitzer’s method is to take the three situational components and determine, based on the analysis, whether the response was fitting or not. To Bitzer, a fitting response is “corrective” (“Functional” 37). Bitzer identifies two ways in which a response can be corrective. First, the rhetoric produced positively modifies the exigence (37). Second, the rhetoric produced is “requisite for continued and successful situational activity,” meaning that if the rhetoric were not created, the situation would deteriorate (37). Because the tactics used by Shaw in both plays were so similar, we can concurrently examine how fitting of a response each play was to the exigence.

Shaw’s plays were in response to a very large exigence: the lack of a vote for women on a national level in the United States. In order to rectify this problem, she needed to deal with the proper constraints to motivate the audience that could positively modify the exigence. In order to determine whether or not she created a fitting rhetorical response to the situation, we must decipher whether or not she correctly interpreted each situational component. I will look to the exigence, then the audience and, finally, the constraints.
Mary Shaw identified the correct exigence by which to organize her rhetoric. There were undoubtedly other issues that she was concerned with at the time—labor laws, custody rights for divorced women, women’s roles in the family—but she knew that they key to beginning to solve other issues was gaining the right to vote. With the right to vote, women would be able to influence policy makers and enact change on a scale previously unavailable to women. Thus, Shaw was tackling the correct problem for improving women’s lives.

However, where Shaw makes a drastic miscalculation is in her choice of audience. The rhetorical audience is one that can “function as mediators of change” (Bitzer “Rhetorical” 65). The audience that could directly solve the problem of suffrage was the men attending her plays. As I discussed above, Shaw did not effectively reach the male audience members. She most likely alienated them with her wholly negative portrayal of men and how they impact women’s lives. Instead of offering a positive model for men to follow in order to support the suffrage movement, she stays silent or resorts to caricature.

Similarly, Shaw’s plays were a bit heavy handed to really function as successful attempts to persuade anti-suffragists. A number of anti-suffragists may have attended the shows, but were faced with hostile depictions of themselves. Shaw made them out to be shrill, hysterical and slow-witted. It is very likely anti-suffragists in the audience would have left the performances angry and insulted instead of thoughtful and willing to reconsider their beliefs.

However, the plays may very well have been quite useful in encouraging the suffragists who attend the performances. The plays themselves are a bit campy and
melodramatic and the suffragist comes out on top. They promote the message that achieving suffrage is desirable and doable. In this way, Shaw’s plays serve to motivate a non-rhetorical audience. By encouraging these women, Shaw also probably ensured, at least on a local level, that women would continue the fight for suffrage. In this way, the plays were in some sense corrective of the exigence: they helped to continue “successful situational activity” (Bitzer “Functional” 37). They helped to sustain the movement that would then keep fighting for suffrage. However, this comes as a result of a secondary audience. The suffragists that were motivated were not the primary audience, the audience that could solve the problem directly. Without the support of men, the women could only prove the necessity of suffrage to themselves.

Ultimately, Mary Shaw’s plays failed as fitting responses because of her choice of audiences. To truly affect the status of suffrage, she needed to focus on those who could actually enact governmental change, the men, and to a much lesser degree, those who were still undecided. Though corrective in terms of reasserting the solidarity of existing suffragists, her rhetoric was not fitting in larger sense of modifying the controlling exigence. Because she ignored the men in her audience, and alienated those who could have potentially joined the movement and bolster the movement’s numbers, she did little to actually change the status quo.

Shaw’s rhetoric failed to meet the test of a situational rhetorical analysis. While this helps to explain the impact, or lack of impact, these artifacts had on the goals of the suffrage movement, the most important questions still need to be answered. In the next chapter I will discuss the utility of applying Bitzer’s rhetorical
situation to artifacts of this nature and what insights Shaw’s work offers for future activists.
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Applying Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” to Mary Shaw’s two suffrage plays yielded insight into the rhetorical efficacy of the artifacts. I concluded that Shaw’s plays failed to meet the situational requirements for a fitting response. She failed to identify the primary rhetorical audience, thereby severely limiting her ability to create change. This failure on the part of Shaw reveals and reinforces the vital importance of audience. In this chapter I will discuss difficulties encountered applying Bitzer’s method, especially those problems related to audience. I will then discuss how lessons learned from this study can be applied to future movements. Finally, I will offer suggestions for future research.

There was one distinct challenge that I encountered when applying the method. This was the lack of information on the audiences present at Shaw’s plays. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there was not a great deal of information available to me about audience makeup. This was a liability in terms of how accurate I could be with Bitzer’s method. To Bitzer, the audience is central. The point of creating rhetoric is to modify a situation for the better (“Rhetorical” 69). If the rhetor could solve the problem alone, there would be no need to engage in the creative process of rhetoric. The rhetor is therefore dependent on the audience to be a mediator of positive change. Having more information about this audience means that a critic can then draw deeper and more insightful conclusions about the rhetoric created.

While I was able to draw plausible conclusions based on information I gathered, the limitations previously noted made it more difficult to apply the method. Because the situational components are so vital to examining rhetorical artifacts,
ambiguity regarding any component is going to greatly decrease the quality of conclusions that can be drawn. So, when examining historical pieces of rhetoric that were not widely reported on, Bitzer’s method loses efficacy. This is not to say that it should not or could not be used to derive salient conclusions. But the critic who applies Bitzer’s method needs to be cognizant of the trade-off.

Limitations noted, I was able to draw some compelling, if preliminary, conclusions. My research provided enough context to answer the questions of whether or not Shaw’s plays were a fitting response to the exigence of a lack of suffrage. Having access to details such as concrete attendance numbers, male to female ratios, and guest lists would only have refined these conclusions. An example serves to illustrate this point. In Bettina Friedl’s book, *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, a significant amount of the information on Mary Shaw comes from unidentified newspaper clippings from the Harvard Theater Collection. Increased access to some of these collections may well have produced valuable information about potential audiences. Whether the men in her audience were politicians, businessmen, or society gadflies would impact how Shaw might have tailored her rhetoric to better reach them.

The scope of my thesis project was limited in the availability of research. Because of my lack of budget, I was unable to access to all the sources, especially newspaper and personal accounts, I would have preferred to have accessed. While gathering materials and writing to others who had researched similar topics, it became clear that much of the information on suffrage drama necessary to begin reception studies resides in libraries, archives and private collections on the east coast. Were I
writing a dissertation or a book, these locations would be the first places I would look to for research.

This study on Shaw demonstrates that the audience is not only important when evaluating a piece of rhetoric, it is also vital to take into account in the process of creating rhetoric. If there is one lesson to take away from this analysis of Shaw’s artifacts, it is the importance of correctly identifying the rhetorical audience. It does not matter how eloquently a piece of rhetoric is delivered or how masterfully it is written, if it is tailored to the wrong audience, it will fail as rhetoric. While this may seem to be a very basic and simple conclusion to draw, Shaw’s efforts prove it is a factor that may be easy to overlook.

When starting this project, I thought that Shaw’s plays would be examples of rhetoric that were technically well-crafted, but too radical for her audiences to accept. I thought that Shaw may have been arguing for too much, too soon, and would therefore lose the attention of her audience. What I ended up discovering, however, was quite the opposite. Shaw’s plays were created at a time that was calling out for rhetorical responses that moved beyond the creation of solidarity and towards the need for real, political, change. Generations of women had gone before Shaw in order to prepare the way. The suffrage movement was established and gaining ground. The time for rhetoric was at hand. However, Shaw failed to tailor her rhetoric to the primary rhetorical audience: men. Because the movement was organized around women’s issues, it is understandable that Shaw would think that women were the audience that needed attending. When starting this project, I agreed with Shaw and
expected her rhetorical audience to be the suffragists in the crowd. Through applying Bitzer’s method, both Shaw and I were proven wrong.

In addition to the importance of attending to the correct rhetorical audience, Bitzer makes a distinction between rhetoric and poetic or scientific discourse. Where rhetoric is for producing change, it contrasts with scientific discourse, which is meant to disseminate knowledge and poetic discourse, which is meant to create aesthetic experiences (“Rhetoric” 65). When Shaw failed to attend to the correct audience, her artifacts began to be more poetic, and less rhetorical. Thus by trying to persuade the wrong rhetorical audience, her plays lost some of their persuasive power. This is not to say that theater cannot be rhetorical, but that Shaw’s plays specifically, because of their misidentified audience, trade their rhetorical power for aesthetic power.

These tensions within the artifacts demonstrate that Shaw fell into the trap still common to rhetorical constructions. She directed her rhetoric to the people who were already convinced that suffrage was a good thing. In the process of encouraging those already in the movement, she alienated potential allies who were also in the audience. But, as we saw with Shaw, falling into this trap is ultimately self-defeating. Especially when those who are being alienated are the only group that has the capacity to positively modify the exigence. Thus, current movements, such as third wave feminists, anti-war protestors, those who are pro-life or pro-choice, should heed the example of Shaw. When participating in movements where popular support is important, correct rhetorical audience identification is paramount. Often, it seems, those who might initially be characterized as the oppressor or source of the exigence are those who most need to be persuaded in order for the movement succeed.
The one remaining consideration is what this project suggests for future research. The first observation should, by this point, be rather obvious. The process of rhetorically examining suffrage theater would benefit from additional voices. My own study served to highlight the surprising importance of rhetorical audience identification. Many of the problems faced by Shaw that were indicative of women’s lower status are still occurring today: as of 2006 women were making 77¢ for every dollar a man made, 88% of cosmetic surgeries in the United States are performed on women, and in the late 1990’s there were an estimated 700,000 women raped (Seager 63; 53; 59). Women continue to be undervalued for their labor, overvalued for their physical beauty, and the victims of violence based on their sex. If many of the problems are still the same, why aren’t we looking to the historical artifacts of those who were fighting first? If this examination of Shaw and the importance of audience is any indication, we may still be fighting the same battles because we did not learn from our mistakes the first time. A closer and more critical look at suffrage dramas may very well yield results that are still relevant today. Of particular interest would be Elizabeth Robins’ *Votes for Women*, as it was “the first large-scale, professional theatrical event for woman suffrage” (Friedl 33).

To assist in the future examination of suffrage theater, it would be useful to look at common rhetorical tactics used by suffrage dramatists. Doing a generative study of suffrage theater would provide a rich source of information about common tactics used in suffrage theater. While it is useful to look at independent occurrences of suffrage theater, engaging in a comparative analysis of multiple artifacts could provide information that extends beyond the singular parameters of situational
analysis; that is to say, in partial support of Smith and Lybarger’s observations in Chapter Three, that multiple situations might yield even more insights: “Generic criticism is rooted in the assumption that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations among audiences and thus call for a particular kind of rhetoric” (Foss 193). Identifying common themes and arguments across the genre of suffrage theater could help determine if the tactic of using drama was productive or not. Clarifying what worked then could help clarify what can work now.

One such study that could result from this foundation, from the merger of the situational and the generic, is an analysis of common metaphors or images found in suffrage theater. If generic analysis could identify common threads, then doing a metaphoric analysis could interpret the results of a generic study. This may prove interesting if metaphors or images that were particularly popular during the suffrage era continue to be popular in political women’s theater today. Shaw’s plays would provide ample fodder for such examination. Looking closer at the layers of meaning in the images of The Parrot Cage—the depiction of women as captive animals, the imagery of bars, chains and the forest—could all serve to elucidate how women viewed political power then, as opposed to how it is viewed now. Tracking these images through time would be a novel way of following women’s status from suffrage to the current day. Accessing this imagistic timeline would only deepen our understanding of the impact suffrage and the rhetorical legacy it has left us.

The results from this study demonstrate that the links between the past and the present are not tenuous. Even if the methods have changed, the motives remain sadly similar. As Bitzer noted, some imperfections have such force that they reappear,
demanding yet again that a rhetor attempt to remove them: “From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses: hence rhetorical forms are born” (“Rhetorical” 68). Feminists scholars in the 1970’s such as Betty Friedan recognized the balancing act women still had to perform: “The assumption of your own identity, equality, and even political power does not mean you stop needing to love, and be loved by a man, or that you stop caring for your own kids” (380). All major branches of feminism, liberal, Marxist, radical, post-modern, eco, etc., are still dealing with “the woman question,” just as Shaw and the suffragists were. Examining the rhetoric produced within the feminist movement means we can learn from the successes and failures of those who have gone before us. In the end, the product will be more effective rhetoric that can help change women’s worlds for the better.
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