TEATRO Y POLÍTICA: TEATRO SUFRAGISTA ESTADOUNIDENSE

THEATRE AND POLITICS: SUFFRAGIST THEATRE IN THE UNITED STATES

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Resumen: Una de las herramientas de publicidad que las sufragistas británicas, primero, y las estadounidenses, más tarde, usaron fue el teatro. El teatro sufragista se escribió con un propósito claro, que no era otro que la propaganda política y su representación dentro de la campaña que se llevaba a cabo. En muchos casos, las obras eran reflejo de la situación en la que vivían las mujeres, y funcionaban a modo de denuncia, en otros, eran obras didácticas, ya que explicaban de manera muy sencilla y clara las acciones que se estaban llevando a cabo para conseguir los derechos de las mujeres.

Abstract: One of the publicity tools used by British and then American suffragists was theatre. Suffragist theatre was written for a clear purpose, which was none other than political propaganda and performance as part of the campaign being conducted. In many cases, the plays performed reflected the situation in which women lived, denouncing their circumstances; in others, they were didactic works, explaining in a very simple and clear way the actions that were being carried out to secure women's rights.

1. Suffragist theatre and political-social movement

The suffragists and feminists of the early 20th century in the United States found in theatre the most useful weapon of political propaganda, since the visibility and immediacy of the theatrical message on stage is comparable to the political message delivered on a rostrum. Women not only conquered the public space of the stage and controlled the entire theatre process, but also managed to become visible in society and the patriarchal system, winning numerous rights and freedoms that had previously been denied to them. The right to vote, equal pay, the right to abortion, and so many other rights and freedoms that women have today might not have been possible without their plays. As proof of this

steadfast belief in the influential power of political theatre, issue number 12 of the suffragist newspaper *The Vote*, published in December 1913, reported that British playwright Cicely Hamilton spoke in an interview of the difficulty members of the general public have in understanding new ideas presented to them, asserting her firm belief that those who felt little sympathy for women's demands would enter the theatre to see one of their plays and leave fully convinced, supporting the suffragist struggles by the end.

Members of the public would attend these plays, which were seemingly harmless on the surface, since they were not themselves subversive, nor were they aggressive propaganda, so at first glance they did not drive away any members of the public not sympathetic to the suffragist cause. But through the use of irony and humour, they constituted a very powerful subversive discourse. In this respect, Sheila Stowell claims that suffragist theatre was undoubtedly written as part of a consciously organised system to propagate political ideas (1992: 439). As Aston (2000:4) points out, the style and content of these plays was largely determined by the political reality of the moment. The message should be clear, accessible, educational, and entertaining, in a style that Aston calls *agritpop comic-realism* (2000: 5)

These plays offered women playwrights an opportunity to develop their ideas and plays, safe from the severely limited structures imposed by the patriarchal hegemony of the time in the commercial theatre (Sotwell, 1992: 66, 67). Thus, theatre gave activists the opportunity to appear in public in a safe environment while taking advantage of this to rehearse their public speaking for other kinds of activities (Cockin, 2007, Volume I, iv). However, and despite this freedom to write, suffragist literature in general was not innovative in terms of experimenting with new forms, but instead focused on describing events that had taken place in the movement's activities such as its meetings, arrests, demonstrations, and strikes. This is the consequence, naturally, of the ultimate purpose of these plays: propaganda. In fact, many of the plays represent conversions of both men and women to the suffragist cause, always maintaining the same social structure, so that women were not seen as a threat and neither were their demands. As Cockin adds (2007, Volume III: ix), the setting for many plays is the inside of a house, which highlights the challenge of moving the domestic sphere, its realism and naturalism, to the public and political landscape. Moreover, as Joanou points out, writing or acting was an attempt to "challenge anti-suffrage arguments, such as those that supported men and women occupying separate spheres" (1998: 132).

At the beginning of the 20th century, American suffragists found that theatre was a very useful tool from a political and pedagogical point of view for the dissemination of ideas. The puritanical society of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries considered actresses to be public women and theatre to be a frivolous, pointless, and immoral activity. This starting situation made it hard for suffragist playwrights to exist, but not impossible. The aim of this paper is to shine a spotlight on the valuable activity and struggles of these women, who changed public opinion through their texts.

2. The suffragist movement in the US

The XXXX anti-slavery convention in London marked the beginning of the suffragist movement in the US. This was where Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton met, and from that moment on, these two activists decided that the struggle for rights and equality should also be claimed for women, organising the first suffragist meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, from 18 to 20 July 1848. The founding document of the movement, based on the US Declaration of Independence, which they called the *Declaration of Sentiments*, was drafted at this event, attended by three hundred people. This suffragist Declaration uses the text proclaiming the independence of the colonies and denouncing the United Kingdom's oppression of settlers and rewrites it to highlight the oppression suffered by American women at the hands of men. In this way, by rewriting the founding document of the United States, the suffragists denounced the restrictions, especially political ones, to which women were subjected: not being able to vote, stand for election, hold public office, join political organisations, attend political meetings, or own private property, among others. From that moment on, Elizabeth C. Stanton and the woman who went on to become her partner in this struggle lasting more than 50 years, Susan B. Anthony, worked together to secure for women the same rights as men.

In 1869, Stanton and Anthony decided to create an association that would defend solely the rights of women, *The National Woman Suffrage Association* (NWSA). Their struggle focused on getting an amendment to the American constitution and, along with the right to vote, they added many other proposals for reforms such as the divorce law, property law, and the labour rights law, among others (DuBois, 1978: 15). Lucy Stone, meanwhile, in the same year founded another association in the struggle for women's rights, the *America Woman Suffrage Association* (AWSA). In 1890, these two American suffragist groups joined forces, as the group led by Lucy Stone (*America Woman Suffrage Association*, AWSA) merged with the *National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA)*, in which Stanton remained as President, Anthony as Vice President, and Stone as Executive Committee Coordinator. In this new era, as the baton was handed down from one generation to the next within the association, younger figures became more prominent, including: Anna Howard Shaw, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Harriot Stanton.

The beginning of the 20th century was a very important time in the development of the suffragist movement since it was gaining greater visibility and support from society. In the United Kingdom, the first street parades and the first takeovers of public spaces were held. The newspaper *The Englishwoman's Review* condemned the violence used by their British compatriots, and some American suffragists distanced themselves from such 'unladylike' tactics, while others supported them from afar. Although at the end of the 19th century British suffragists were eager to listen to their American counterparts, by 1907 this situation had changed, and the Americans became much more interested in learning all about the new tactics employed by the British suffragist movement (Greenwood, 2000: 62). In fact, many Americans travelled to Britain to participate in the various

demonstrations and actions organised, including Alice Paul and Lucy Burns.

The new tactics deployed by these younger suffragists included hunger strikes, which led to indescribable human suffering as they were force fed, as Pankhurst recounts (1914: 128). Paul and Burns met at one of the hunger strikes in London, and over time, these two figures would become the most prominent American suffrage leaders of the early 20th century: Lucy Burns was the descendant of an Irish family, graduated from Vassar and Yale, and Alice Paul, was the descendant of a wealthy Quaker family, and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. In around the first decade of the 20th century, American suffragists Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and Inez Milholland returned to the United States, heavily influenced by what they had learned and experienced with their British fellow suffragists, one example being the organisation of parades mirroring those held in London (Greenwood, 2000: 129). Thus, in March 1913, Ann Howard Shaw, Alice Paul, and Lucy Burns, inspired by their experiences with British suffragists, organised the largest parade ever seen in Washington D.C., coinciding with President Wilson's inaugural speech. Both Paul and Burns wanted to use the event to publicise their petition to include an amendment to the US Constitution that would guarantee women the right to vote (Greenwood, 2000: 181).

The outbreak of World War I led to a great schism in the suffragist movement between older and younger leaders. While the former decided to curb their aspirations about the vote and focus their efforts on supporting the country in battle, the latter founded the *National Woman's Party* (NWP) in June 1916. Alice Paul and Lucy Burns wanted to promote a much more active struggle than the NAWSA had been conducting, so that, if the worst came to the worst, they would fight back with acts of civil disobedience, protests, and hunger strikes. Being a political party and not an association placed them on a more egalitarian and visible footing in that fundamentally male world. In 1918, after several months demonstrating at the doors of the White House, and with many altercations, the end of the World War, ironically a men's struggle against men, empowered women even more. By January 1918, fifteen states had already approved women's voting rights, and both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party along with President Wilson supported the amendment. The House of Representatives passed the amendment with a two-thirds majority, but it was blocked by the Senate. This prompted the *National Woman's Party* to organise a campaign to convince all senators who had voted against it, and finally, on 18 August 1920, the state of Tennessee ratified the amendment. A few days later, on 26 August of that year, the nineteenth amendment was included in the United States Constitution.

3. Suffragist theatre in the US

In the case at hand, American suffragists faced great difficulties, as they had to contend with two elements that made their plays a largely unaccepted form of social and cultural expression: on the one hand, the country's puritanical society, and, on the other, the theatre production system. With regard to the first element, the theatre sparked a degree of social reticence since the prevailing belief in 19th century America was that the

novel was the ideal means to influence public opinion along with the press and pamphlets, as explained by Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Cossett (1990: 4). These authors add that in 1844 the *North American Review* commented "The novel has become an essay on morals, on political economy, on the condition of women, on the vices and defects of social life" (Bardes, 1990: 7). In fact, in the mid-19th century, the novel was the best regarded genre as an agent of social control.

The fact that the suffragist movement in the United States was closely linked to the anti-slavery movement caused American women to leave that domestic space to fight slavery, circulating and signing petitions, and speaking in public. For Bardes & Cossett (1990:11) women, excluded from political life and the right to vote, used other means to be heard, such as persuasion through their voice and discourse in the public space. Ironically, this same restriction meant that women had to speak in public, expose their bodies, and thus become the object of the male gaze. This rejection of exposed women was widespread in America's puritanical society as Laura Mulvey notes (1988: 63). As one might expect, the female body on a public rostrum, together with her voice, meant that she was too liberated according to the social standards of the time, not only in ideological terms but also in sexual terms.

With regard to theatre production, in the 19th Century, the performance of plays in general in the US was largely a private concern. As Moody explains (1969: 615), theatre performances in drawing rooms were the most widespread entertainment of middle-class families. This situation has been studied in recent times as a cultural characteristic of the 19th century in the United States rather than as something strictly literary or theatrical. Halttunen (1982: 175) discusses in detail in a chapter of her book how these theatres became a very common form of entertainment from 1850 onwards, in which the American middle classes would socialise. The fact that theatrical performances were usually given in domestic drawing rooms means that very little written material remains of the plays performed: no programmes or literary criticism, and often we have no access even to the texts represented. In some cases, if too many people gathered, hotel rooms were rented and, over time, clubs and theatrical associations were created that agreed to the use of theatre venues and charged a token admission for charitable purposes. Friedl (1987:3) points out that this system of private performances or to raise money for social or charitable purposes favoured the social acceptance of theatre that *a priori* was considered a frivolous activity.

Suffragist plays were not only intended as propaganda; they also had a pedagogical aim, as they sought to educate American society about women's rights. Thus, theatre and performance offer the possibility of participating in a "reading" of the social and political world in such a way that all the elements involved are inevitably united in the exploration of the text, in this case in the roles and identities of women. Jill Dolan explains that these "temporary communities" built around theatrical performance are places of production and exploration and offer a space to reflect on bodies and their meaning, the visual and materiality of the corporeal, and, moreover, in the case of the suffragists, it gave them a voice and presence (Dolan, 1993: 460). The suffragist movement was

always convinced that they were part of society and therefore invested a great deal of time and effort; both professional and amateur suffragist playwrights felt the civic responsibility to contribute to a project that would improve their country, and through theatre they found a way to do so. Social pedagogy is inherently linked to feminism, and, as noted by Claire Tylee, theatrical performances reinforce the ideology and potential of change since theatre is one of the main vehicles for transmitting social values (Tylee, 1998: 140).

In this process of social and political pedagogy of suffragist theatre, many of the plays represent conversions of both men and women to the suffragist cause, whilst always maintaining the same social structure, so that women did not represent a threat and neither did their demands. In the US, not only is the setting in many plays the interior of a house, which highlights the challenge of moving the domestic sphere, its realism and naturalism, into the public and political landscape, but the plays were also often performed in a house, with the consequences this entails in terms of staging and format. We must therefore analyse the content and purpose of American suffragist theatre according to these performative aspects and without forgetting other formal aspects such as the fact that they were usually one-act plays. Obviously, the production system, the place where they were performed, and the purpose of these performances are reason enough to explain why the plays were short. Selden analyses the format of these one-act plays and chalks it up to the amateur nature of their production, and to the scant preparation and budget available for staging and costumes (Selden 1947: 46).

4. Political Messages within Suffragist Theatre in the US

In general, suffragist plays pursued two fundamental purposes within the social pedagogy they employed: to denounce the conditions in which women lived, and to persuade those who were undecided over to the suffragist cause. In many cases humour, situational comedy, and irony are key to entertaining on the one hand, and persuading on the other. One clear example of this type of play was written by Alice E. Yves in 1896 and entitled "A Very New Woman". This entire play takes place in the drawing room of Ms. Curtis Twillington, who at that time is with her son, Arthur, awaiting the arrival of his fiancée Edith. Arthur constantly praises his fiancée for being a very ladylike woman, dedicated to her family and home. Arthur's mother immediately decries her son's outdated idea, and the situational comedy ensues as the audience has information Edith does not possess:

> ARTHUR: Then, too. I can't say I admire the "New Woman" for a wife.
>
> MRS. TWILLINGTON: Having had before you such a dreadful example in your mother.
>
> ARTHUR: Mother, don't say that.
>
> MRS. TWILLINGTON: Oh, well, there's no use dodging the point. You know very well I am an advanced woman. I believe in a woman earning her own living, if she wants to, in any legitimate way under the sun. I believe in her privilege to improve herself physically and mentally up to the highest point of which any human being is capable. I believe in her right to the ballot, and to any office on the face of the earth to which a human being is eligible and which she is fitted to fill. (Friedl, 138-139).

At one point in the conversation between the three in the pleasant drawing room, Edith admits she was late because she was coming from a suffragist meeting, much to the surprise of Arthur and the joy and relief of her future mother-in-law. In this supportive environment that Edith receives from Mrs Twillington, she continues with her confession and says that she is studying law and has only a few exams left. At that point we see Arthur's astonishment, since at the beginning of the play he was happy with the fact that his future wife was a housewife without ambitions. After Edith's revelations, Arthur is even more pleased that the reality is not so. He declares to her:

> ARTHUR: Never, sweetheart! Forgive me for not knowing what a new woman really was. The fact is, I fell in with those ideas to please you, as I supposed. I'm not shocked; I'm only very much surprised. You must help mother to teach me. (Friedl, 141).

The play concludes with the male character being won over in favour of women's votes and independence, leaving it up to the two women to teach Arthur and men in general what it means to be a woman. All the political and social endeavours of the play are carried out, as mentioned previously, without leaving the drawing room of a middle-class house and without changing the social structure based on the family.

Another play that uses the resource of humour and irony was written by Mary Shaw in 1914, entitled "The Woman of it or Our Friends the Anti-suffragists". This play portrays a group of women practising their anti-suffragist speeches, joined by three other ladies as spectators. The speeches heard on the stage proclaim against women's vote and other rights as citizens and in favour of what was referred to as the womanly woman whose only desire in life is to have a family and to love and be loved:

> MRS. ALLRIGHT: Ladies, ladies, ladies, please. We don't want statues nor praise. We only want to be loved. To lavish love on something, even if the object is unworthy. To waste love if need be. For only when we love are we truly womanly. (Friedl, 287).

At several moments during this one-act play, women anti-suffragists repeat phrases and ideas in the manner of a catechism, to generate union in the group, but at the same time these ideas show how ridiculous their anti-suffragist position is. One of the commandments they repeat is "Have as little brains as possible and don't use all you have" (Friedl, 289). One of the women present takes the floor to tell a story about a suffragist who spent so much time away from home that she no longer recognised her own daughter, taking up the idea that suffragists abandon their families. However, at one point in the play, one of the anti-suffragists asks the same about her, noting that she also spends a lot of time away from home in that association against votes for women.

At the end of the play, the three guests stand up and announce that they have to leave but that they certainly enjoyed being there very much because they are more convinced than ever about the need for women's suffrage; in fact, they believe that everything they have heard and seen is a way for suffragists to convince undecided people like them:

> MRS. ALLRIGHT: Haven't you decided after what you have heard?
>
> MISS BERRY: Oh, yes, we have found out we are suffragists.
>
> WOMEN: Suffragists!!!

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 of you at short notice." Everybody says you make more converts to equal suffrage than the suffragists do.

(…)

MISS BERRY: It's a splendid game. To guy the "utterly womanly" so successfully that the most indifferent woman flies to suffrage as a haven of dignity and self-respect.

MISS FOSTER: You and the suffragists are both working together, in different ways, to convert all women to suffrage, aren't you? (Friedl, 296).

As you can imagine, the president of this anti-suffragist club faints after hearing this. This play is a clear example of the use of theatre as political text through the representation of political discourse. The audience cannot fail to hear the satire of arguments against suffrage, and although it might appear that nothing happens in the play, humour, irony, and the conversion of the characters close the circle.

One of the most recurring themes of suffragist theatre is the denunciation of social problems affecting women and society in general, and the need, therefore, for women to have the right to vote in order to avoid such problems. An example of this is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work "Something to Vote for", written in 1911. This one-act play is set in the drawing room of a very influential woman in the city, Mrs. Mary Carroll, president of a women's club. She has organised a talk with James Billing, the president of the Milk Trust, to discuss the quality of the formula milk that children drink. At the same time, she has also invited Dr Strong, who with the help of Henry Arnold, a milk inspector, will uncover problems with milk quality.

Again, the setting is a drawing room in an upper-class home, with the chairs facing a podium that has been prepared for the informative talk. Before starting the talk, Dr Strong prepares a ruse with a marked banknote that will expose Mr. Billing as he tries to somehow bribe the inspector. At the same time, Dr Strong changes the formula milk that Mr. Billing is carrying, and which will be tested, for adulterated milk actually bought in a store.

The talk begins uneventfully, and Mr. Billing has the opportunity to praise the quality of the milk he sells and distributes. When Dr Strong takes to the floor to ask for votes for women almost all of them are upset and asked her to be quiet.

DR STRONG: Madam President, ladies, gentlemen. I did not expect to be sprung on you until after the reading of the minutes at least. But I am very glad to meet you and to feel that you have honoured me with membership in what I understand is the most influential woman's club in this community. I have heard that this is a very conservative club, but I find that you are interesting yourselves in one of the most vital moments of our time, a question of practical politics. Pure Milk. (*The ladies cool and stiffen at the word "politics"*). It is a great question, a most important question, one that appeals to the mother heart and housekeeping sense of every woman. It is matter of saving money and saving life, the lives of little children. I do not know of any single issue now before us which is so sure to make every woman want to vote. The ballot is our best protection. (*Cries of "no!" Much confusion and talk among members*) (Friedl, 151).

After a few minutes of recess, to calm the atmosphere, the talk continues with figures from Dr Strong about the high mortality levels among nursing babies who suffer from stomach problems and die as a

result of the formula. Then comes the test carried out on the bottle of milk, previously swapped by Dr Strong. The results show that the milk is not pure but has been adulterated with starch and also contains all kinds of bacteria such as diphtheria that cause death among children and babies. In fact, the audience members at the talk include mothers whose children have died from contaminated milk. We might assume that in the audience of the play there would also be mothers and fathers who had gone through the same painful experience. The play ends, naturally, with women present at the talk converting in favour of votes for women whilst staunchly defending the importance of family:

> MRS. CARROLL: (…) You said this club could carry the town; that we women could do whatever we wanted to here, with our "influence"! Now we see what our "influence" amounts to! Rich or poor, we are all helpless together unless we wake up to the danger and protect ourselves. That's what the ballot is for, ladies, to protect our homes! To protect our children! To protect the children of the poor! I'm willing to vote now! I'm glad to vote now! I've got something to vote for! Friends, sisters, all who are in favour of woman suffrage and pure milk say Aye! (Clubwomen all rise and wave their handkerchiefs, with cries of "Aye"). (Friedl, 161).

We must not forget the pedagogical purpose of suffragist plays, which in this case is reflected in the play by Kate Mills Fargo of 1912, "A Voting Demonstration", the title of which is a faithful reflection of what happens in the play itself. The setting depicts a polling station where several women enter accompanied by a teacher, police officers, clerks, inspector, and a judge. The teacher then explains about the voting process, and some of the women will try out how to do it. They all get something wrong: not having the documentation in order, not being registered, or not checking the option on the ballot slip. The teacher indicates in each case what they did wrong and explains how they should have completed the voting process:

> TEACHER: The knowledge that the stamp must be used may seem a small thing in itself, but any irregularity in marking will render the ballot void for the question voted upon. It is the attention that is given to all these little details before voting that is going to make the casting of votes by women an easy and pleasant service. (*Teacher shows class how to fold ballot*) (Friedl, 213).

After the women attending the class have several made attempts, the teacher concludes by summarising the most important points to take into account, and the play concludes by stressing the importance of women's votes to ensure the best government in the country. The most interesting thing about these final words can be found in two key elements: the first is the comparison it makes with the church, which is very apposite given the puritanism and the importance of religion in American society at the beginning of the 20th century; and the second is the fact that they are spoken by a man, considered superior in intelligence and morals and thus with a much more plausible message than that of a woman:

> TEACHER: (…) Another thought for women to carry and spread is this: that the polls as legitimate a place for women to appear in as the church. The polls are as sacred a place as a church. We go to the church to learn the principles that work for righteous government. We go to the polls to put these principles into practice. (Friedl, 216).

Emily Sargent Lewis' 1912 play entitled *Election Day* puts into practice the casting of votes by two of the women in the play. It takes place in the drawing room of an upper-class home, where Mrs. Gardner is having breakfast with her daughter, with different characters passing through at different points. Mrs Gardner's comments on suffrage at the beginning of the play, as expected, are not positive, and she claims that she is happy for her husband to carry the weight of politics. The first character to pass through the drawing room is a black servant, Augustus, whom Mrs. Gardner asks about the subject, and he answers:

> AUGUSTUS: (…) I remember how it felt when President Lincoln, he told us black people we might vote just the same as other folks. It do make you feel fine somehow to be treated like folks. You feel sort of 'spectable, you do so. I'se sure you ladies would like to feel that way, ma'am. (Friedl, 235).

The next character to appear is Katie, the girl who launders the clothes, and she tells Mrs. Gardner and her daughter that her husband abandoned her and her children, and Mrs. Gardner praises her for her hard work and determination. Once she moves off stage, mother and daughter continue to speak, and we can already see that the mother is increasingly moving towards her daughter's suffragist ideas. At that point in comes Tom Randolph, the daughter Dorothy's fiancé, who speaks very highly about women's voting rights in what appears to be a conversion, as Mrs. Gardner reminds him that he was against suffrage:

> MRS. GARDNER: But you have always talked against Woman's suffrage Tom.
>
> RANDOLPH: Just sentiment, Mrs. Gardner. I'm so jolly sentimental I never reasoned about it. I just thought I wouldn't want my wife to talk politics to me, because I've always been rather stupid about them, and I wouldn't want my wife to know just what an ass I am, but (cheerfully) she'd probably find it out, anyway. (Friedl, 241).

The work ends with the conviction and conversion of Mrs. Gardner and the plan to go to vote anyway even though women are not permitted, almost certainly a nod to the attempt made by Susan B. Anthony in 1872, which cost her a trial, a fine, and earned her a great deal of attention from the press and American society regarding the battle she and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were waging at the beginning of the American suffragist movement.

5. Conclusions

I have left for this section on conclusions the play by Mary Shaw entitled *The Parrot Cage* (1914), which portrays several female archetypes shown as parrots in a cage. The different characters are Philistine, Free-souled, Idealist, Rationalist, and Theological parrots. In addition, the play includes the voice of a man who comes around from time to time to tell them that they are very pretty little parrots. The play takes place over a single scene in which the parrots argue with the free-souled parrot, who wants to be free, while they are satisfied with their life inside the cage and fearful of leaving it. They all repeat the same phrases that the anti-suffrage campaign had incorporated into its discourse. For example, the idealistic parrot claims: "The highest mission of a parrot is to minister to the happiness of a private family" (Friedl, 303). Finally, Free-souled parrot manages to break free from the cage while encouraging others to follow it, but the other parrots, symbolising

anti-suffrage women or those who have not yet decided, do not follow because they are afraid of the unknown. The play clearly shows how the author, Mary Shaw, criticises and ridicules women who are as yet undecided because, implicitly, with their passivity they are supporting the patriarchal system that shackles them. Even the theologian, in her last sentences, repeats the words of the man who says "Pretty Polly," "Scratch Polly's head," satirising woman's subjection to male dominance. This play, along with all the others written by and for the American suffragist movement, contains messages that penetrated society and eventually enabled women to secure their civil and political rights on an equal footing with men, from the stage.

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