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### Women's Rights in *Man and Superman*

The early nineteenth hundreds was a time for change all over the world – hence its name “the Progressive Era”. While most people focus on the works of American presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson, British playwright George Bernard Shaw was spreading his revolutionary ideas just as well. His play *Man and Superman* was published in 1903 right in the middle of the Progressive Era, and sparked deep thought and discussion on issues such as women's rights and class distinction. Yet instead of calling out societal problems outright, Shaw used his sardonic style of paradox and wit to make subtle jokes about them that left his audience thinking about them long after the show ended. Through making women seem more or less dishonest and untrustworthy, Shaw demands that females get their equal rights.

The first point on why Shaw likely sought equal rights for both genders is because of his love for Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen, a fellow realist playwright, is best known for his work *A Doll's House*, in which a woman named Nora leaves her husband after he refused to defend her honor. Many similarities between lead females (and in some ways, the heroines) Nora and *Man and Superman's* Ann are seen when comparing these two plays. For example, both Nora and Ann act very young and foolish, but by the end of both plays they have demonstrated that they are both much smarter and mature than the men ever thought. Additionally, both *Man and Superman* and *A Doll's House* end with the male upset and the female getting her way – an idea unheard of before their time period.

Again and again in *Man and Superman*, Violet and Ann manipulate the situation in order to get their way. The men – aside from Tanner – are oblivious to all of it, seeing them as naïve and helpless minors. For example, in Act I while Ramsden and Tanner are discussing Ann’s guardianship, they ask Ann for her input. She responds, “It is not for me to approve or disapprove. I accept it. My father loved me and knew what was best for me” (286). When they continue to question her, she again talks about how important her father’s word is to her: “I feel that I am too young, too inexperienced, to decide. My father’s wishes are sacred to me” (287). By continuing to reference her recently deceased father, Ann more or less uses guilt and mourning to orchestrate the entire situation in her favor. Shaw, using his classic style of humor and sarcasm, uses scenes like this to point out to the audience that women should be granted equal rights because they already run the lives of the men without males even knowing it. At first glance it may sound like Shaw is against women’s rights, but since he believed that there is no difference between man and woman, it seems more likely that he was once again using paradox to show the importance of equality.

As a whole, George Bernard Shaw wrote a play where the women are dishonest, habitual liars to prove that women deserve the same rights as men. He used his plays to speak to the masses about important social issues such as women’s equality, hoping to both enlighten the poor masses and – as he says in his letter to his friend and coworker Arthur Bingham Walkley – “épater le bourgeois” (a French phrase meaning “shock the elite”). Instead of clearly stating his thoughts on the matter, he uses a style of wit, humor, and paradox to force society as a villain and leave his audience thinking about the issue long after the play ends. In *Man and Superman*, the men believe they are in charge, yet behind their backs Ann and Violet manipulate the entire situation to their advantage – which gives Shaw an argument on why gender equality is

important. He implies that until women have their rights, they will continue to work behind the backs of men and get their way whether they legally have rights or not.

Works Cited

Shaw, George Bernard. "Man and Superman". *Plays by George Bernard Shaw*, Penguin Group, 1960, 241-431.