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Saints, Sinners, and Capitalists: The Subversion of Moral Authority in *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

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Abstract

This article examines how George Bernard Shaw subverts conventional moral authority in *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession,* exposing the ideological contradictions within religion, capitalism, and social respectability. This study hypothesizes that Shaw redefines moral authority in *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* as a socially constructed discourse shaped by capitalist, religious, and institutional forces, thereby destabilizing fixed notions of virtue and vice. Through a comparative analysis, the study argues that Shaw dismantles the binary between virtue and vice, revealing morality as a socially constructed and institutionally sustained discourse. According to the study, while *Major Barbara* exposes the dependence of religious ethics on capitalist wealth, *Saint Joan* foregrounds the challenge of individual conscience to institutional orthodoxy and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* redefines moral judgment as a product of economic necessity rather than personal failure. Drawing on ethical criticism and a Marxist framework informed by feminist theory, the article demonstrates that Shaw reconfigures moral authority as unstable and socially constructed. It posits that Shaw's drama exposes the mechanisms through which moral legitimacy is constructed and challenged, anticipating modern debates on ethics, power, and social justice.

Keywords: Moral authority, capitalism, religion, social respectability, Conventional, morality

1. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw's plays are renowned for their incisive critique of social institutions and their capacity to unsettle entrenched moral assumptions. Writing at the intersection of late Victorian and early modern thought, Shaw persistently interrogates the foundations of what societies deem virtuous, respectable, or condemnable. Bernard F. Dukore argues that Shaw's drama is structured as ethical argumentation rather than moral instruction, where competing values are deliberately left unresolved. In plays such as *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw challenges the legitimacy of moral authority as it is traditionally constructed within the interlocking domains of religion, capitalism, and social respectability. Referring to this, Stanley Weintraub observes that Shaw consistently uses irony and paradox to expose contradictions within Victorian moral ideology.

Major Barbara, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, occupy a distinctive position in modern literature for their sustained interrogation of social institutions and their provocative reconfiguration of moral discourse. Writing during a period marked by the ideological tensions of late Victorian capitalism and the intellectual ferment of early modernity, Shaw consistently challenges the ethical assumptions underpinning religion, economic systems, and social respectability. While reflecting the moral anxieties of his age, his plays actively deconstruct late 19th century morality exposing the instability of the values that societies often present as natural, universal, and immutable.

What is clear is that Shaw's dramatic project focuses on a persistent critique of conventional moral authority. Traditional moral frameworks tend to rely on rigid binaries like virtue and vice, sanctity and sin and respectability and deviance through which individuals and institutions are judged. These binaries, however, obscure the material and ideological conditions that produce them. Shaw's plays resist moral absolutism by presenting ethics as historically and materially conditioned, exposing how institutions such as religion, capitalism, and the state manufacture and manipulate moral authority to sustain their power. In doing so, he shifts the focus from moral judgment as an abstract principle to morality as a socially constructed discourse embedded in relations of power.

This interrogation becomes particularly evident in *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, three

plays that collectively engage with the moral authority of religion, the state, and the socio-economic order. In *Major Barbara*, the apparent moral purity of the Salvation Army is complicated by its dependence on capitalist wealth derived from morally questionable industries, thereby exposing the uneasy alliance between spiritual ethics and economic power. In *Saint Joan*, Shaw dramatizes the conflict between individual conscience and institutional orthodoxy, presenting Joan not merely as a martyr but as a figure whose moral authority challenges and destabilizes the legitimacy of ecclesiastical and political institutions. Meanwhile, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* dismantles conventional notions of sexual morality by situating prostitution within the economic constraints of capitalism, reframing it not as personal moral failure but as a rational response to systemic inequality.

Put simply, these plays illuminate the ways in which moral authority is constructed, legitimized, and contested within specific socio-economic contexts. Shaw's characters frequently occupy ambiguous ethical positions, resisting easy classification as either virtuous or corrupt. This ambiguity is not incidental. Rather, it serves as a deliberate strategy through which Shaw critiques the ideological foundations of moral judgment itself. By exposing the contradictions within institutions that claim moral legitimacy, he reveals how such authority is often sustained through power, privilege, and economic necessity rather than through any inherent ethical superiority.

Although scholars have extensively discussed Shaw's critique of capitalism, religion, and gender, these concerns are often examined in isolation within individual plays. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the common mechanism through which moral authority operates across *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. This article addresses that gap by proposing the concept of a moral economy of dependence, arguing that Shaw consistently reveals ethical legitimacy to be sustained by networks of economic, institutional, and social dependence. Through this comparative perspective, the study demonstrates how moral authority in Shaw's drama is constructed not through transcendent ethical principles but through historically contingent relations of power.

This study builds on these insights by arguing that Shaw subverts conventional moral authority by redefining it as a socially constructed and ideologically mediated discourse. Drawing on Marxism, the study foregrounds the role of capitalist structures in shaping moral values, particularly in relation to labour, class, and economic survival. At the same time, it incorporates perspectives from feminist theory to examine how gendered experiences complicate and reshape these moral frameworks, especially in the context of women's agency and social positioning. This combined theoretical approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how moral authority operates at the intersection of class, gender, and institutional power.

Furthermore, the article situates Shaw's work within broader debates in ethical criticism, emphasizing how his drama anticipates modern discussions about the relationship between ethics and power. Rather than offering prescriptive moral solutions, Shaw invites critical reflection on the processes through which moral norms are produced and maintained. His plays challenge audiences to question not only what is considered moral, but also who has the authority to define morality and to what ends.

Through a comparative analysis of *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, this study demonstrates that Shaw reconfigures moral authority as inherently unstable, contested, and subject to continual renegotiation. By dismantling the binaries that underpin conventional moral thought, he exposes the ideological mechanisms through which moral legitimacy is constructed and sustained. Shaw's plays under study are therefore profoundly relevant and offer critical insights into ongoing debates about ethics, social justice, and the dynamics of power in modern society. Contemporary scholarship on this subject further suggests that neoliberal ideology reshapes ethical discourse by aligning moral values with economic rationality, reinforcing the view that morality operates within, rather than outside, capitalist structures (Lin and Wang). The present article therefore introduces the concept of a moral economy of dependence to explain how Shaw's moral authorities (religious, political, and social) derive legitimacy from the material and institutional structures on which they depend.

2. Interpretative Lens

This study adopts an eclectic interpretative framework that brings together ethical criticism, Marxism, and feminist theory to examine how moral authority is constructed, legitimized, and subverted in Shaw's *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Rather than treating morality as a stable or universal category, this approach conceptualizes it as a historically contingent discourse shaped by material conditions, institutional power, and gendered experience. Raymond Williams' notion of "structures of feeling" further explains Shaw's portrayal of morality as historically lived and socially produced rather than abstractly universal. The interpretative lens thus foregrounds the dynamic interplay between ideology, economic structures, and ethical judgment in Shaw's plays.

Ethical criticism provides the initial point of entry by focusing on how literary texts engage with questions of value, responsibility, and moral judgment. However, unlike traditional ethical approaches that may assume a coherent moral framework, this study adopts a critical stance that interrogates the very foundations of ethical authority. Rather than

focusing on a didactic moral resolution, Shaw's plays instead expose the instability of moral categories and the processes through which they are produced. In this context, ethical criticism is not concerned with determining what is morally "right" within the plays, but with examining how moral legitimacy is constructed, contested, and destabilized.

To advance this investigation, the study draws on Marxist theory, particularly its emphasis on the relationship between ideology and material conditions. According to the theory, moral systems are not neutral or transcendent but are embedded within and shaped by the economic base of society. In Marxist thinking, institutions such as religion, law, and social respectability function as part of a broader ideological superstructure that both reflects and sustains existing class relations. Shaw's plays vividly dramatize this dynamic by revealing how moral authority often serves to legitimize economic power. This is the case in *Major Barbara* where the apparent moral authority of religious institutions depends on capitalist wealth, suggesting that ethical ideals are inseparable from the economic systems that sustain them. On a similar note, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* exposes how moral condemnation of prostitution obscures the structural inequalities that produce it, thereby aligning moral discourse with the interests of dominant economic forces. Fredric Jameson's concept of ideology as cultural logic supports the view that Shaw's moral discourse functions as part of the superstructure that masks material inequalities.

However, an exclusively Marxist interpretation may obscure the distinct ways in which gender shapes moral experience. Consequently, this study incorporates insights from feminist theory to examine how moral authority is differently constructed and experienced across gendered lines. Feminist criticism highlights how traditional moral frameworks often encode patriarchal assumptions, positioning women as the primary bearers of moral virtue while simultaneously subjecting them to stricter forms of judgment and control. In Shaw's plays, female characters such as Barbara Undershaft, Joan, and Mrs. Warren challenge these expectations, exposing the contradictions inherent in gendered moral standards. Their actions suggest that what is commonly labeled moral deviance may, in fact, signify resistance to restrictive social norms or an adaptive response to material necessity. Elaine Showalter's feminist criticism is particularly significant in highlighting how women in literature are often positioned within restrictive moral systems that define and limit their agency.

The integration of Marxist and feminist perspectives allows for a more nuanced understanding of how moral authority operates at the intersection of class and gender. It reveals that moral judgments are not only shaped by economic relations but are also inflected by power structures that regulate gender roles and identities. For example, while capitalism may dictate the conditions under which individuals act, patriarchal norms influence how those actions are interpreted and judged. This dual framework is particularly useful in analyzing *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, where economic survival and gendered moral scrutiny intersect, and *Saint Joan*, where a woman's assertion of individual conscience disrupts both religious and political hierarchies.

According to this study, Shaw's plays are structured around tensions between idealism and pragmatism, conscience and authority and virtue and necessity. These contradictions are not merely thematic but are indicative of deeper ideological conflicts within society. A Marxist-feminist ethical lens allows these tensions to be read not as inconsistencies, but as critical sites where dominant moral narratives are challenged and reimagined.

Summarily, this interpretative approach positions Shaw's drama as a form of ideological critique that interrogates the conditions under which moral authority is produced and sustained. By combining ethical criticism with Marxist and feminist insights, the study moves beyond surface-level moral analysis to uncover the structural forces that shape ethical discourse. It demonstrates that in Shaw's plays, morality is neither fixed nor impartial, but is instead a contested terrain in which power, economics, and social norms intersect. This lens therefore provides the analytical foundation for understanding how Shaw subverts conventional moral authority and reimagines it as unstable, negotiable, and deeply embedded in the socio-economic realities of his time.

The contradictions within Shaw's own social thought further complicate the question of moral authority explored in this study. While his plays challenge religious, economic, and social orthodoxies, Shaw occasionally expressed support for ideas such as eugenics and social engineering that rested on their own claims to authority and social improvement. These tensions suggest that Shaw's critique emerged not from a position outside ideology but from within the competing intellectual currents of his time. Recognizing this complexity reinforces the study's argument that moral authority is always contested and historically situated.

3. Deconstructing Moral Absolutism: Shaw's Challenge to Binary Ethics

Shaw's plays consistently challenge the notion that morality can be reduced to fixed and universal rules. Rather than presenting characters as purely good or evil, Shaw exposes the limitations of rigid ethical frameworks that rely on clear-cut distinctions. His drama reveals the complexity of human motives, suggesting that moral judgment is often shaped by social context, personal interests, and competing values. By unsettling conventional ideas of right and wrong, Shaw questions the validity of moral absolutism and engages with a more nuanced, flexible understanding of ethics.

The main strategy through which Shaw subverts conventional moral authority in *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is his sustained dismantling of moral absolutism. Dominant moral ideologies of the late Victorian period rely on clear-cut oppositions such as virtue and vice, saint and sinner, and purity and corruption as criteria for evaluation. These binaries create the illusion of moral clarity and stability, presenting ethical values as universal and immutable. However, Shaw's plays expose these oppositions as artificial constructs that obscure the complex socio-economic and ideological forces shaping moral judgment. Dukore further notes that Shaw replaces moral certainty with structured ethical conflict, ensuring that no single moral position dominates the narrative. By destabilizing these binaries, Shaw not only condemns the foundations of moral authority but also reconfigures morality as a fluid and contested discourse.

In *Major Barbara*, the apparent divide between moral righteousness and corruption is immediately problematized through the relationship between the Salvation Army and Andrew Undershaft. Barbara initially embodies the ideal of moral purity, committed to saving souls and upholding Christian ethics. From a Marxist perspective, Jameson's theory clarifies how Shaw reveals capitalism's ability to absorb and restructure moral institutions for ideological stability. In contrast, Undershaft, as an arms manufacturer, appears to represent moral corruption, profiting from violence and destruction. However, Shaw systematically undermines this binary by showing that the Salvation Army's acceptance of Undershaft's financial support exposes its moral authority as materially dependent on the very system it claims to oppose.

The distinction between moral good and evil becomes untenable when the institution that claims ethical superiority relies on "tainted" wealth to sustain its operations. Undershaft's controversial assertion that poverty, rather than sin, is the greatest evil further complicates the moral landscape. He states that "The greatest of evils and the worst of crimes is poverty". This declaration reverses conventional Christian moral discourse and the use of "greatest" and "worst" elevates poverty above traditional sins, while the blunt declarative syntax gives Undershaft's argument the force of moral certainty. Shaw's language thus redefines ethical priorities in material rather than spiritual terms.

By reframing economic deprivation as a more fundamental moral issue than individual wrongdoing, Shaw shifts ethical evaluation from abstract principles to material realities. Consequently, neither Barbara nor Undershaft can be easily categorized within the binary of saint and sinner. Instead, both occupy ethically ambiguous positions that challenge the coherence of moral absolutism. Referring to this, Richard Dietrich notes that Shaw avoids moral closure, instead using dramatic contradiction to expose the instability of ethical certainty.

A similar situation occurs in *Saint Joan*, where the binary between sanctity and heresy is interrogated. Joan is traditionally perceived as a saintly figure, guided by divine voices and unwavering faith, while her judges represent institutional authority grounded in religious orthodoxy. Yet Shaw complicates this opposition by portraying the ecclesiastical and political authorities not as villains driven by malice, but as rational actors operating within the constraints of their institutional frameworks. The Church's condemnation of Joan is presented as a logical response to the threat she poses to doctrinal stability and social order. In this sense, the judges are not simply "wrong," nor is Joan unproblematically "right." Instead, Shaw reveals a conflict between competing systems of belief, each with its own internal logic. This tension can be further understood through recent analyses of institutional complexity, which show that competing moral frameworks often coexist within institutions, producing ethical decisions that reflect negotiation rather than absolute judgment (Weiss). Joan's moral authority derives from individual conscience, which challenges the legitimacy of institutionalized morality and renders her dangerous within the existing order. In the text, Joan states that "I hear voices telling me what to do". Joan's statement contrasts sharply with the elaborate language of institutional authority and makes her a threat to institutionalized religion. In this respect, Harold Bloom interprets Joan as a figure of radical individual conscience whose authority disrupts institutional systems of meaning and legitimacy. The distinction between saint and sinner breaks down as Joan is both sanctified and condemned, indicating that moral judgment depends on historical and institutional contexts rather than inherent virtue.

In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw extends this critique by dismantling the binary between respectability and immorality, particularly in relation to prostitution. Victorian society typically categorizes prostitution as a moral failing, positioning the prostitute as a figure of vice and social deviance. Mrs. Warren, however, resists this categorization when in her candid account of her life, she reframes her profession as a pragmatic response to economic necessity rather than an expression of moral deficiency. Shaw exposes the hypocrisy of a society that condemns prostitution while simultaneously benefiting from and perpetuating the economic conditions that make it necessary. Vivie Warren's early moral judgment of her mother aligns with conventional ethical standards, but it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain as she comes to recognize the structural conditions shaping her mother's decisions.

The moral binary is ridiculed as Mrs. Warren emerges not as a symbol of vice, but as a product of systemic inequality. At the same time, Shaw does not idealize her, as Mrs. Warren's continued involvement in the business despite her

financial security introduces further ethical ambiguity. This complexity resists any simplistic moral classification, reinforcing Shaw's critique of absolutist ethics. Talking about this, Christopher Innes argues that Shaw's theatre exposes morality as performative, shaped by institutional discourse rather than intrinsic ethical truth.

In the plays under study, Shaw employs ambiguity as a deliberate artistic and ideological strategy. His characters consistently evade fixed moral labels, compelling audiences to confront the inadequacy of binary thinking. Rather than offering clear moral resolutions, Shaw creates dramatic situations in which ethical positions are closely intertwined with economic conditions, institutional pressures, and individual agency. This approach aligns with the study's theoretical framework, particularly its Marxist emphasis on the material basis of ideology and its feminist attention to the gendered dimensions of moral judgment. By revealing how moral categories are shaped by class relations and social structures, Shaw demonstrates that what is often perceived as "virtue" or "vice" is in fact contingent upon power dynamics and historical context.

Shaw's dismantling of moral binaries reveals that ethical judgment is inseparable from the material and institutional forces that sustain it. This critique of moral absolutism prepares the ground for a closer examination of the economic structures that shape moral authority in the plays.

4. Capitalism and the Moral Economy of Dependence in Shaw's *Major Barbara, Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

From a Marxist–feminist ethical standpoint, Shaw's drama repeatedly shows that moral authority is not separate from economic structures but is instead deeply embedded in what can be described as a moral economy of dependence. This refers to a system in which ethical legitimacy is sustained through material support, and moral judgment is conditioned by economic necessity. In *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw dismantles the illusion that religion, law, or social respectability function as autonomous moral systems. Instead, he exposes their reliance on capitalist structures, showing that even the most apparently pure institutions are implicated in the economic systems they claim to transcend.

In *Major Barbara*, Shaw presents one of his most explicit dramatizations of moral-economic dependence through the relationship between the Salvation Army and Andrew Undershaft, the wealthy arms manufacturer. At first glance, the play appears to stage a clear ethical opposition between Barbara who embodies spiritual virtue and humanitarian care and Undershaft who represents capitalist corruption through the production of weapons. However, Shaw quickly destabilizes this binary by revealing that the Salvation Army's moral mission is materially sustained by the very capitalist wealth it condemns.

Undershaft's financial contribution to the Army is not merely philanthropic but also structurally constitutive of its survival. The institution's moral authority is therefore compromised by its economic dependence. This contradiction becomes visible when Barbara, initially committed to moral purity, is forced to confront the source of the Army's funding. The discomfort arises not merely from accepting "tainted" money, but from the recognition that moral action cannot be separated from economic compromise within a capitalist system.

Undershaft articulates a disturbing but logically consistent capitalist ethic when he rejects traditional moral classifications of his work. As highlighted above, his insistence that "the greatest of evils is poverty" reframes moral responsibility in economic terms, shifting attention from individual sin to structural deprivation. In doing so, Shaw exposes the ideological function of moral discourse by showing that it obscures the systemic violence of poverty by focusing on personal virtue. Barbara's eventual recognition of this contradiction does not resolve the ethical tension. Instead, it reveals that moral action under capitalism is inherently entangled in systems of economic dependency.

While *Saint Joan* appears less explicitly concerned with capitalism, Shaw extends the logic of economic dependence into the domains of religion and political power. The trial and execution of Joan are often interpreted in purely theological terms, but Shaw reframes the conflict as one between institutional survival and disruptive individual agency.

The Church and the state function here as moral institutions whose authority depends on maintaining ideological and social stability. Joan's "heresy" is not merely doctrinal but also existentially threatening because it bypasses institutional mediation. Her claim to direct divine inspiration undermines the Church's monopoly on spiritual legitimacy, just as her military and political effectiveness disrupts established hierarchies of power.

From a Marxist perspective, the key issue is not only theological disagreement but institutional dependence on structured authority. The judges' decision to condemn Joan emerges not from pure moral deliberation but from the necessity of preserving institutional coherence. Shaw's portrayal of the ecclesiastical tribunal reveals a system in which moral judgment is inseparable from political and social survival. Even after her death, the final scene complicates moral interpretation further. The posthumous rehabilitation of Joan suggests that moral authority is historically unstable, shifting according to changing institutional needs. Her eventual sainthood is not the recognition of timeless virtue but

the reabsorption of disruptive agency into a new ideological framework. Thus, moral legitimacy is shown to be dependent not on divine truth but on the evolving requirements of institutional power.

In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw presents the moral economy of capitalism into its most direct and unsettling form. The play dismantles bourgeois respectability by exposing prostitution not as individual moral failure but as a structurally produced economic necessity. Mrs. Warren's life story reveals a system in which limited access to education, employment, and social mobility forces women into morally stigmatized labour. Mrs. Warren's justification of her profession is grounded in economic realism rather than ethical defiance. Her repeated emphasis on the lack of viable alternatives reframes prostitution as a rational response to systemic inequality. Shaw thereby exposes the hypocrisy of a society that condemns her while benefiting from the very economic structures that produce such conditions.

Mrs. Warren's rhetorical question, "What is a woman to do?", shifts attention from individual morality to structural inequality. The simplicity of the language and the interrogative form compel the audience to confront the limited economic opportunities available to women. Rather than presenting prostitution as a moral failing, Shaw uses Mrs. Warren's direct and colloquial speech to expose the social and economic conditions that make such choices necessary. The question therefore destabilizes conventional moral authority by replacing condemnation with social critique.

Vivie Warren's moral outrage initially reflects conventional ethical binaries of virtue versus vice, respectability versus degradation. However, as she gains insight into the economic foundations of her mother's choices, these binaries collapse. Mrs. Warren is neither simply victim nor villain but a product of a capitalist system that commodifies women's bodies while denying them legitimate economic agency. Interestingly, Shaw does not fully exonerate Mrs. Warren. Her continued investment in the brothel business, even after achieving financial security, introduces a further layer of moral complexity. This ambiguity underscores the argument that under capitalism, moral survival is inseparable from economic participation in exploitative systems. Ethical purity becomes structurally impossible, not because of individual corruption, but because of systemic constraint.

It can therefore be seen that in the three plays, Shaw demonstrates that moral authority cannot be separated from material conditions. Religion, institutional power, and social respectability all depend upon economic structures that shape ethical judgment. By exposing these dependencies, Shaw dismantles the illusion of moral autonomy and reveals morality as a negotiated product of social and economic relations. From a Marxist standpoint, this shows that moral systems function as part of the superstructure that legitimizes and stabilizes the economic base. From a feminist perspective, this dependency is further complicated by gendered inequality, as women's moral identities are particularly shaped by economic vulnerability and social regulation.

5. Gender, Agency, and the Reconfiguration of Moral Authority

Apart from its entanglement with economic structures, moral authority in Shaw's plays is profoundly influenced by gendered expectations and relations of power. Shaw's plays demonstrate that morality does not function as a neutral or universally applied standard. Rather, it is filtered through patriarchal norms that regulate women's behaviour, circumscribe their agency, and influence the recognition of their moral authority. Within this framework, women are often positioned as symbolic bearers of virtue while simultaneously subjected to heightened scrutiny and restriction. Gilbert and Gubar's concept of the "angel/monster" dichotomy helps explain Shaw's rejection of fixed moral categories imposed on women. By complicating these expectations, Shaw exposes the instability of moral authority itself, revealing it to be contingent upon socially constructed hierarchies of gender as much as on economic or institutional forces.

In *Major Barbara*, Barbara Undershaft is initially presented as a moral exemplar, embodying compassion, spiritual conviction, and ethical clarity which are qualities traditionally associated with femininity. Her authority within the Salvation Army appears to derive from an alignment between personal virtue and institutional purpose, reinforcing the notion that women serve as moral guardians within society. However, this position is undermined as Shaw reveals the material conditions underpinning the Army's operations. Barbara's realization that the institution relies on financial support from figures such as Undershaft compels her to reconsider the basis of her moral authority. What emerges is not simply a crisis of faith, but a recognition that the ethical position she occupies is structurally mediated and ideologically sustained. From a gendered perspective, this moment is particularly significant because it challenges the cultural construction of women as inherently moral beings. Barbara's development illustrates that moral authority is not an intrinsic feminine quality but a role produced within institutional frameworks that are themselves compromised. Her eventual shift toward a more pragmatic understanding of morality signals not a loss of agency, but a reconfiguration of it, as she moves from passive embodiment of virtue to active engagement with the contradictions of ethical life. It's important to note that recent feminist scholarship reconceptualizes agency as relational and ethically negotiated, emphasizing that women's moral decisions are shaped within systems of care, vulnerability, and institutional constraint rather than autonomous choice (Johansson and Wickström).

The exploration of gender and moral authority presented by Shaw in *Saint Joan* through the figure of Joan is more direct

and confrontational. Unlike Barbara, whose authority is initially recognized within a religious institution, Joan's moral legitimacy is contested from the outset. Her claim to divine inspiration bypasses established channels of authority, placing her in direct opposition to both ecclesiastical and political structures. This challenge is intensified by her gender, as her assertiveness, independence, and intellectual clarity contradict prevailing expectations of female submission and obedience. Joan's moral authority is therefore perceived not only as theologically problematic but as socially disruptive. Shaw's portrayal underscores the extent to which gender shapes the reception of moral claims. In the play, Joan is not merely judged for what she believes, but for the fact that she, as a woman, asserts the right to define and act upon those beliefs independently.

The response of the Church and the state reveals the mechanisms through which patriarchal authority is maintained. Joan's trial is framed as a rational and necessary defense of institutional stability, yet it is also an implicit effort to discipline and contain female agency that exceeds socially sanctioned limits. Her execution demonstrates how moral authority can be violently denied when it threatens established hierarchies. However, the subsequent canonization of Joan complicates this narrative by illustrating the fluidity of moral judgment over time. Once her challenge no longer poses an immediate threat, Joan is reinterpreted and absorbed into the very institutional framework that condemned her. This transformation highlights the extent to which moral authority is historically contingent and ideologically adaptable. From a feminist perspective, it also reveals how women's agency can be retrospectively validated in ways that neutralize its original radicalism, thereby preserving existing power structures while appearing to acknowledge dissent. Some critics such as T. S. Eliot viewed Shaw's treatment of morality as intellectual rather than spiritual, highlighting the rational rather than doctrinal nature of his ethical drama.

In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, the intersection of gender, morality, and economic constraint is rendered with significant clarity. The play exposes how moral judgment operates as a mechanism of social control that disproportionately targets women, especially in relation to sexuality and labour. Mrs. Warren's profession is condemned within dominant moral discourse, yet Shaw situates her choices within a broader context of systemic inequality that limits women's access to legitimate means of survival. Lynda Nead's work on Victorian sexuality shows how moral discourse functions as a mechanism of regulating women's bodies under the ideology of respectability. Mrs. Warren's narrative challenges the assumption that moral deviance stems from individual failure, instead presenting it as a consequence of structural conditions shaped by both capitalism and patriarchy. The stigmatization of prostitution thus emerges as a form of ideological regulation that obscures the economic realities underpinning it. This aligns with recent feminist analyses of discursive agency, which highlight how individuals negotiate moral authority within institutional and socio-economic constraints rather than exercising unrestricted autonomy (Kostovicova and Popovski).

Vivie Warren's response to her mother further complicates this dynamic. Her initial condemnation reflects an internalization of dominant moral norms, including the expectation that women uphold standards of respectability regardless of circumstance. However, as she becomes aware of the material forces shaping her mother's life, her moral position becomes more conflicted. Vivie's decision to reject her mother's profession does not signify a return to moral absolutism, but rather illustrates the difficulty of negotiating ethical judgment within a system where agency is constrained and compromised. Importantly, Vivie seeks to construct an alternative form of independence grounded in professional and intellectual autonomy, thereby redefining the terms under which female agency can be exercised. Her stance reflects both resistance to and complicity with prevailing moral frameworks, underscoring the ambivalence that characterizes Shaw's treatment of gender and ethics. Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of gendered moral hypocrisy anticipates Shaw's exposure of unequal ethical standards imposed on women.

In the plays under study, Shaw consistently portrays female characters as active participants in the construction and contestation of moral authority. They are not merely subjects of moral judgment but agents of change who interrogate, resist, and reshape the ethical systems that seek to define them. This portrayal challenges the conventional association of women with passive virtue and instead highlights their role in revealing the contradictions within patriarchal morality. From a Marxist–feminist perspective, this dynamic shows that moral authority functions at the intersection of economic and gendered power relations, influencing both the formation of ethical norms and the allocation of moral legitimacy.

Also, Shaw's treatment of gender highlights the performative nature of morality. In his plays, ethical identity is not fixed but is performed within specific social contexts, where it is continually negotiated and reinterpreted. Judith Butler's theory of performativity reinforces Shaw's depiction of morality as enacted within social contexts rather than inherent identity. Women, in particular, are required to deal with conflicting expectations that demand both conformity to and deviation from established norms. This tension exposes the instability of moral categories and highlights the role of power in determining which forms of behaviour are recognized as legitimate. By dramatizing these contradictions, Shaw shows that moral authority is not a reflection of universal truth but rather a product of social regulation and ideological control.

Shaw's representation of female agency demonstrates that moral authority is shaped not only by economic structures but

also by gendered relations of power. Through Barbara, Joan, and Mrs. Warren, he reveals morality as a contested and historically contingent discourse rather than a fixed system of ethical truths. Current scholarship, drawing on Bernard Dukore's ethical readings, Fredric Jameson's theory of ideology, and Judith Butler's concept of performativity, increasingly converges on the view that Shaw's drama dismantles moral absolutism by exposing ethics as a product of intersecting ideological, economic, and gendered forces.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Shaw's *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* collectively enact a sustained and radical critique of conventional moral authority. Rather than treating morality as a fixed, universal standard grounded in transcendental truth, Shaw redefines it as a socially constructed and ideologically mediated discourse shaped by the intersecting forces of capitalism, institutional power, and gendered experience. Through his deliberate dismantling of binary ethics, his exposure of the moral economy of dependence, and his nuanced representation of female agency, Shaw reveals that moral legitimacy is neither inherent nor stable, but contingent upon historical, material, and institutional conditions.

The analysis has shown that Shaw's plays disrupt traditional oppositions such as virtue and vice, sanctity and sin, and respectability and deviance, replacing them with ethically ambiguous scenarios that resist definitive judgment. In *Major Barbara*, the dependence of religious morality on capitalist wealth exposes the complicity of ethical institutions within the systems they purport to critique. Also, the conflict between individual conscience and institutional authority in *Saint Joan*, foregrounds the instability of moral judgment, demonstrating how legitimacy is shaped by the imperatives of institutional survival. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, redefines prostitution as an economic necessity and this challenges dominant moral narratives, revealing the extent to which ethical condemnation obscures structural inequality. The plays reveal morality not as an abstract ideal, but as a function of power relations embedded within specific socio-economic situations.

By integrating Marxist and feminist perspectives, this study has further highlighted how moral authority operates at the intersection of class and gender. Shaw's plays expose how capitalist structures condition ethical possibilities while patriarchal norms regulate their interpretation and application, particularly in relation to women. The female characters in the play do not merely inhabit moral systems but also interrogate and destabilize them. In doing so, Shaw foregrounds morality as a contested terrain in which agency is negotiated rather than assumed.

One observes at the end that Shaw does not reject morality altogether but challenges the ideological foundations upon which it is constructed and legitimized. His drama invites a critical re-evaluation of ethical discourse by exposing the mechanisms through which moral authority is produced, maintained, and transformed. In anticipating contemporary debates on ethics, power, and social justice, Shaw's plays remain profoundly relevant, urging readers and audiences alike to question not only what is deemed moral, but also who defines morality.

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