

**George Bernard
Shaw
his plays**

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PREFACE

THIS is a little handbook for the reading tables of Americans interested enough in the drama of the day to have some curiosity regarding the plays of George Bernard Shaw, but too busy to give them careful personal study or to read the vast mass of reviews, magazine articles, letters to the editor, newspaper paragraphs and reports of debates that deal with them. Every habitual writer now before the public, from William Archer and James Huneker to "Vox Populi" and "An Old Subscriber" has had his say about Shaw. In the pages following there is no attempt to formulate a new theory of his purposes or a novel interpretation of his philosophies. Instead, the object of this modest book is to bring all of the Shaw commentators together upon the common ground of admitted fact, to exhibit the Shaw plays as dramas rather than as transcendental treatises, and to describe their plots, characters, and general plans simply and calmly, and without reading into them anything invisible to the naked eye.

The order in which the plays are considered is not the chronological one, and some readers may think that it is not the logical one. Inasmuch as an exposition of the reasons that urged its adoption would waste a great deal of space, the point will not be argued. The brief biography of the dramatist is based upon the most accurate available eulogies, denunciations, reminiscences, and manuscripts. So, too, the historical data regarding the plays and other publications.

The reputation of Mr. Shaw as a playwright has so far exceeded his renown as a novelist, a socialist, a cart-tail orator, a journeyman

reformer, a vegetarian, and a critic of literature and the arts, that his novels and other minor works have been noticed but briefly. But this is not to be taken as evidence that they do not merit acquaintance. Even the worst of Shaw is well worth study.

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

What else is talent but a name for experience, practice, appropriation, incorporation, from the times of our forefathers?

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE.

A CENTURY is a mere clock-tick in eternity, but measured by human events it is a hundred long years. Napoleon Bonaparte, born in 1768, became an officer of artillery and gravedigger for an epoch. Born in 1868, he might have become a journeyman genius of the boulevards, a Franco-Yankee trust magnate, or the democratic boss of Kansas City. And so, contrariwise, George Bernard Shaw, born in 1756 instead of 1856, might have become a gold-stick-in-waiting at the Court of St. James or Archbishop of Canterbury. The accident that made him what he is was one of time. He saw the light after, instead of before Charles Darwin.

Darwin is dead now, and the public that reads the newspapers remembers him only as the person who first publicly noted the fact that men look a great deal like monkeys. But his soul goes marching on. Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer, like a new Ham and a new Shem, spent their lives seeing to that. From him, through Huxley, we have appendicitis, the seedless orange, and our affable indifference to hell. Through Spencer, in like manner, we have Nietzsche, Sudermann, Hauptmann, Ibsen, our annual carnivals of catechetical revision, the stampede for church union, and the aforesaid George Bernard Shaw. Each and all of these men and things, it is true, might have appeared if Darwin were yet unborn. Ibsen might have written "A Doll's House," and a rash

synod or two might have turned impertinent search-lights upon the doctrine of infant damnation. It is possible, certainly, but it is supremely, colossally, and overwhelmingly improbable.

Why? Simply because before Darwin gave the world “The Origin of Species” the fight against orthodoxy, custom, and authority was perennially and necessarily a losing one. On the side of the defense were ignorance, antiquity, piety, organization, and respectability—twelve-inch, wire-wound, rapid-fire guns, all of them. In the hands of the scattered, half-hearted, unorganized attacking parties there were but two weapons—the blowpipe of impious doubt and the bludgeon of sacrilege. Neither, unsupported, was very effective. Voltaire, who tried both, scared the defenders a bit and for a while there was a great pother and scurrying about, but when the smoke cleared away the walls were just as strong as before and the drawbridge was still up. One had to believe or be damned. There was no compromise and no middle ground.

And so, when Darwin bobbed up, armed with a new-fangled dynamite gun that hurled shells charged with a new shrapnel—facts—the defenders laughed at the novel weapon and looked forward to slaying its bearer. Spencer, because he ventured to question Genesis, lost his best friend. Huxley, for an incautious utterance, was barred from the University of Oxford. And then of a sudden, there was a deafening roar and a blinding flash—and down went the walls. Ramparts of authority that had resisted doubts fell like hedge-rows before facts, and there began an intellectual reign of terror that swept like a whirlwind through Europe, America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. For six thousand years it had been necessary, in defending a doctrine, to show only that it was respectable or sacred. Since 1859, it has been needful to prove its truth.

It will take the perspective of centuries to reveal to us the exact metes and bounds of Darwin's influence. He himself probably gave little thought to it. His own business in life was the investigation of biological phenomena and he was too busy at that to take an interest in politics or ethics. But his new method of assailing tradition appealed to men laboring in far distant vineyards, and soon there was in progress a grand assault-at-arms that left orthodoxy and custom dying on the field. Huxley led the physicians and Spencer the metaphysicians. Every time the former overturned an old theory of matter, the latter pricked an old maxim of ethics. And so the search for the ultimate verities, which had been a pariah hiding in cellars, like anarchism or polygamy, became the spirit of the times. Whenever custom or tradition reared one of its hydra-heads, there was a champion ready to strike it down.

The practical result of this was that seekers after the truth, growing bold with success, began attacking virtues as well as vices. And herein you will find the fundamental difference between the philosophers before Darwin and those after him. The *Spectator*, in the 'teens of the eighteenth century, inveighed against marital infidelity—an amusement counted among the scarlet sins since the days of Moses. Ibsen, a century and a half later, asked if there might not be evil, too, in unreasoning fidelity. If you pursue this little inquiry to its close, you will observe that George Bernard Shaw, in nearly all of his plays and novels, follows Ibsen rather than Addison. Sometimes he lends his ear to one of the two classes of pioneers he mentions in "The Quintessence of Ibsen," and sometimes to the other, but it is always to the pioneers. Either he is exhibiting a virtue as a vice in disguise, or exhibiting a vice as a virtue in vice's clothing. In this fact lies the excuse for considering

him a world-figure. He stands in a sense as an embodiment of the *welt-geist*, which is a word invented by the Germans to designate world-spirit or tendency of the times.

II

Popular opinion and himself to the contrary notwithstanding, Shaw is not a mere preacher. The function of the dramatist is not that of the village pastor. He has no need to exhort, nor to call upon his hearers to come to the mourners' bench. All the world expects him to do is to picture human life as he sees it, as accurately and effectively as he can. Like the artist in color, form, or tone, his business is with impressions. A man painting an Alpine scene endeavors to produce, not a mere record of each rock and tree, but an impression upon the observer like that he would experience were he to stand in the artist's place and look upon the snow-capped crags. In music it is the same. Beethoven set out, with melody and harmony, to arouse the emotions that stir us upon pondering the triumphs of a great conqueror. Hence the Eroica Symphony. Likewise, with curves and color, Millet tried to awaken the soft content that falls upon us when we gaze across the fields at eventide and hear the distant vesper-bell—and we have "The Angelus."

The purpose of the dramatist is identical. If he shows us a drunken man on the stage it is because he wants us to experience the disgust or amusement or envy that wells up in us on contemplating such a person in real life. He concerns himself, in brief, with things as he sees them. The preacher deals with things as he thinks they ought to be. Sometimes the line of demarcation between the two purposes may be but dimly seen, but it is there all the same. If a play has what is known as a moral, it is the audience and not the

playwright that formulates and voices it. A sermon without an obvious moral, well rubbed in, would be no sermon at all.

And so, if we divest ourselves of the idea that Shaw is trying to preach some rock-ribbed doctrine in each of his plays, instead of merely setting forth human events as he sees them, we may find his dramas much easier of comprehension. True enough, in his prefaces and stage directions, he delivers himself of many wise saws and elaborate theories. But upon the stage, fortunately, prefaces and stage directions are no longer read to audiences, as they were in Shakespeare's time, and so, if they are ever to discharge their natural functions, the Shaw dramas must stand as simple plays. Some of them, alackaday! bear this test rather badly. Others, such as "Mrs. Warren's Profession" and "Candida," bear it supremely well.

It is the dramatist's business, then, to record the facts of life as he sees them, that philosophers and moralists (by which is meant the public in meditative mood) may deduce therefrom new rules of human conduct, or observe and analyze old rules as they are exhibited in the light of practice. That the average playwright does not always do so with absolute accuracy is due to the fact that he is merely a human being. No two men see the same thing in exactly the same way, and there are no fixed standards whereby we may decide whether one or the other or neither is right.

Herein we find the element of individual color, which makes one man's play differ from another man's, just as one artist's picture of a stretch of beach would differ from another's. A romancist, essaying to draw a soldier, gave the world Don Cesar de Bazan. George Bernard Shaw, at the same task, produced Captain Bluntschli. Don Cesar is an idealist and a hero; Bluntschli is a sort

of refined day laborer, bent upon earning his pay at the least possible expenditure of blood and perspiration. Inasmuch as no mere man—not even the soldier under analysis himself—could ever hope to pry into a fighting man’s mind and define and label his innermost shadows of thought and motive with absolute accuracy, there is no reason why we should hold Don Cesar to be a more natural figure than Captain Bluntschli. All that we can demand of a dramatist is that he make his creation consistent and logical and, as far as he can see to it, true. If we examine Bluntschli we will find that he answers these requirements. There may be a good deal of Shaw in him, but there is also some of Kitchener and more of Tommy Atkins.

This is one of the chief things to remember in studying the characters in the Shaw plays. Some of them are not obvious types, but a little inspection will show that most of them are old friends, simply viewed from a new angle. This personal angle is the possession that makes one dramatist differ from all others.

III

Sarcey, the great French critic, has shown us that the essence of dramatic action is conflict. Every principal character in a play must have a complement, or as it is commonly expressed, a foil. In the most primitive type of melodrama, there is a villain to battle with the hero and a comic servant to stand in contrast with the tearful heroine. As we go up the scale, the types are less strongly marked, but in every play that, in the true sense, is dramatic, there is this same balancing of characters and action. Comic scenes are contrasted with serious ones and for every Hamlet you will find a gravedigger.

In the dramas of George Bernard Shaw, which deal almost wholly with the current conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, it is but natural that the characters should fall broadly into two general classes—the ordinary folks who represent the great majority, and the iconoclasts, or idol-smashers. Darwin made this war between the faithful and the scoffers the chief concern of the time, and the sham-smashing that is now going on, in all the fields of human inquiry, might be compared to the crusades that engrossed the world in the middle ages. Everyone, consciously or unconsciously, is more or less directly engaged in it, and so, when Shaw chooses conspicuous fighters in this war as the chief characters of his plays, he is but demonstrating his comprehension of human nature as it is manifested to-day. In “Man and Superman,” for instance, he makes John Tanner, the chief personage of the drama, a rabid adherent of certain very advanced theories in social philosophy, and to accentuate these theories and contrast them strongly with the more old-fashioned ideas of the majority of persons, he places Tanner among men and women who belong to this majority. The effect of this is that the old notions and the new—orthodoxy and heterodoxy—are brought sharply face to face, and there is much opportunity for what theatergoers call “scenes”—*i. e.* clashes of purpose and will.

In all of the Shaw plays—including even the farces, though here to a less degree—this conflict between the worshipers of old idols and the iconoclasts, or idol-smashers, is the author’s chief concern. In “The Devil’s Disciple” he puts the scene back a century and a half because he wants to exhibit his hero’s doings against a background of particularly rigid and uncompromising orthodoxy, and the world has moved so fast since Darwin’s time that such orthodoxy scarcely exists to-day. Were it pictured as actually so

existing the public would think the picture false and the playwright would fail in the first business of a maker of plays, which is to give an air of reality to his creations. So Dick Dudgeon, in "The Devil's Disciple" is made a contemporary of George Washington, and the tradition against which he struggles seems fairly real.

In each of the Shaw plays you will find a sham-smasher like Dick. In "Mrs. Warren's Profession," there are three of them—Mrs. Warren herself, her daughter Vivie and Frank Gardner. In "You Never Can Tell" there are the Clandons; in "Arms and the Man" there is Bluntschli, and in "Man and Superman" there are John Tanner and Mendoza, the brigand chief, who appears in the Hell scene as the Devil. In "Candida" and certain other of the plays it is somewhat difficult to label each character distinctly, because there is less definition in the outlines and the people of the play are first on one side and then on the other, much after the fashion of people in real life. But in all of the Shaw plays the necessary conflict is essentially one between old notions of conduct and new ones.

Dramatists of other days, before the world became engaged in its crusade against error and sham, depicted battles of other sorts. In "Hamlet" Shakespeare showed the prince in conflict with himself, and in "The Merchant of Venice" he showed Shylock combatting Antonio, or, in other words, the ideals of the Jew at strife with Christian ideals of charity and mercy. Of late, the most important plays have much resembled those of Shaw. Ibsen, except in his early poetical dramas, deals chiefly with the war between new schemes of human happiness and old rules of conduct. Nora Helmer fights the ancient idea that a married woman should love, honor and obey her husband, no matter what the provocation to do otherwise, just as Mrs. Warren defies the mandate that a woman should preserve her virtue, no matter how much she may suffer

thereby. Sudermann, in "Magda," shows his heroine in revolt against the patriarchal German doctrine that a father's authority over his children is without limit, and Hauptmann, another German of rare talents, depicts his chief characters in similar situations. Shaw is frankly a disciple of Ibsen, but he is far more than a mere imitator. In some things, indeed—such, for instance, as in fertility of wit and invention—he very greatly exceeds the Norwegian.

IV

As long as a dramatist is faithful to his task of depicting human life as he sees it, it is of small consequence whether the victory, in the dramatic conflict, goes to the one side or the other. In Pinero's play, "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," the heroine loses her battle with convention and her life pays the forfeit. In Ibsen's "Ghosts," the contest ends with the destruction of all concerned; in Hauptmann's "Friedensfest" there is no conclusion at all, and in Sudermann's "Johnnisfeuer," orthodox virtue triumphs. The dramatist, properly speaking, is not concerned about the outcome of the struggle. All he is required to do is to draw the two sides accurately and understandingly and to show the conflict naturally. In other words, it is not his business to decide the matter for his audience, but to make those who see his play think it out for themselves.

"Here," he says, as it were, "I have set down certain human transactions and depicted certain human beings brought face to face with definite conditions, and I have tried to show them meeting these conditions as persons of their sort would meet them in real life. I have endeavored, in brief, to exhibit a scene from life as real people live it. Doubtless, there are lessons to be learned from this scene—lessons that may benefit real men and women if they are ever confronted with the conditions I have described. It is

for you, my friends, to work out these lessons for yourselves, each according to his ideas of right and wrong.”

That Shaw makes such an invitation in each of his plays is very plain. The proof lies in the fact that they have, as a matter of common knowledge, caused the public to do more thinking than the dramas of any other contemporary dramatist, with the sole exception of Ibsen. Pick up any of the literary monthlies and you will find a disquisition upon his technique, glance through the dramatic column of your favorite newspaper and you will find some reference to his plays. Go to your woman’s club, O gentle reader! and you will hear your neighbor, Mrs. McGinnis, deliver her views upon “Candida.” Pass among any collection of human beings accustomed to even rudimentary mental activity—and you will hear some mention, direct or indirect, and some opinion, original or cribbed, of or about the wild Irishman. All of this presupposes thinking, somewhere and by somebody. Mrs. McGinnis’ analysis of Candida’s soul may be plagiarized and in error, but it takes thinking to make errors, and the existence of a plagiarist always proves the existence of a plagiaree. Even the writers of reviews in the literary monthlies, and the press agents who provide discourses upon “You Never Can Tell” for the provincial dailies are thinkers, strange as the idea, at first sight, may seem. And so we may take it for granted that Shaw tries to make us think and that he succeeds.

V

“My task,” said Joseph Conrad the other day, in discussing the aims of the novelist, “is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more....”

“All that I have composed,” said Hendrik Ibsen, in an address to the Ladies’ Club of Christiania, “has not proceeded from a conscious tendency. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than has been believed.... Not alone those who write, but also those who read, compose, and very often they are more full of poetry than the poet himself....”

“The poet,” said Schopenhauer, “brings pictures of life and human character and situations before the imagination, sets everything in motion and leaves it to everyone to think into these pictures as much as his intellectual power will find for him therein.”

Let us suppose, for instance, that “Mrs. Warren’s Profession” is given a performance and that 2000 average citizens pay to see it. Of the 2000 it is probable that 1900 will be persons who accept unquestioningly and without even a passing doubt the legal and ecclesiastical maxim that the Magdalen was a sinner, whom mercy might save from her punishment but not from her sin. A thousand, perhaps, will sit through the play without progressing any further; it will appeal to them merely as an entertainment and those who are not vastly delighted by its salaciousness, will condemn its immorality. But the 900, let us say, will slowly awaken to the strange fact that there is something to be said against as well as for the ancient maxim. Eight hundred of them, perhaps, after debating the matter in their minds, will decide that the arguments for it overwhelm those against it, and one hundred will leave the playhouse convinced to the contrary or in more or less doubt. But the eight hundred, though they have left harboring the same opinion that was theirs before they came, will have made an infinite step forward. Instead of being unthinking endorsers of a doctrine they have never even examined, they will have become, in the true sense, original thinkers. Thereafter, when they condemn

the Magdalen, it will be, not because a hundred popes did so before them, but because on hearing her defense, they found it unconvincing.

In this will be seen the truth of the statement purposely reiterated: that Shaw is in no sense a preacher. His private opinions, very naturally, greatly color his plays, but his true purpose, like that of every dramatist worth while, is to give a more or less accurate and unbiased picture of some phase of human life, that persons observing it may be led to speculate and meditate upon it. In "Widowers' Houses" he attempts, by setting forth a series of transactions between a given group of familiar Englishmen, to show that capitalism, as a social force, is responsible for the oppression that slum landlords heap upon their tenants, and that, in consequence, every other man of the capitalistic class, no matter what his own particular investments and activities may be, shares, to a greater or less extent, in the landlords' offense. A capitalist reading this play may conclude with some justice that the merit of husbanding money—or, as Adam Smith calls it, the virtue of abstinence—outweighs his portion of the burden of this sin, or that it is, in a sense, inevitable and so not properly a sin at all; but whatever his conclusion, if he has honestly come to it after a consideration of the facts, he is a far better man than when he accepted the maxims of the majority unquestioningly and without analysis.

A preacher necessarily endeavors to make all his hearers think exactly as he does. A dramatist merely tries to make them think. The nature of their conclusions is of minor consequence.

VI

That Shaw will ever become a popular dramatist, in the sense that Sardou and Pinero are popular, seems to be beyond all probability. The vogue that his plays have had of late in the United States is to be ascribed, in the main, to the yearning to appear “advanced” and “intellectual” which afflicts Americans of a certain class. The very fact that they do not understand him makes him seem worthy of admiration to these virtuously ambitious folks. Were his aims and methods obvious, they would probably vote him tiresome. As it is, a performance of “Candida” delights them as much as an entertainment by Henry Kellar, the magician, and for the same reason.

But even among those who approach Shaw more honestly, there is little likelihood that he will ever grow more popular, in the current sense, than he is at present. In the first place, some of his plays are wellnigh impossible of performance in a paying manner without elaborate revision and expurgation. “Man and Superman,” for instance, would require five hours if presented as it was written. And “Mrs. Warren’s Profession,” because of its subject-matter, will be unsuitable for a good many years to come. In the second place, Shaw’s extraordinary dexterity as a wit, which got him his first hearing and keeps him before the public almost constantly today, is a handicap of crushing weight. As long as he exercises it, the great majority will continue to think of him as a sort of glorified and magnificent buffoon. As soon as he abandons it, he will cease to be Shaw.

The reason of this lies in the fact that the average man clings fondly to two ancient delusions: (*a*) that wisdom is always solemn, and (*b*) that he himself is never ridiculous. Shaw outrages both of these ideas, the first by placing his most searching and illuminating observations in the mouths of such persons as Frank Gardner and

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