

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEME AND FORM
IN
THE PLAYS OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

by
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The purpose of this study is to establish the thesis that Shaw, the noted iconoclast, was actually much influenced by nineteenth-century theatrical conventions, and that his use of hackneyed forms as bases for satire and subjects for revitalization was often not wholly successful, especially in his earlier plays, because formal conventions tended to confine and constrict the fresh themes he was attempting to develop in the old stage material.

The Introduction summarizes and argues against lingering critical attitudes toward Shaw which imply that he was not a playwright but an author of stage debates, and that he should therefore be held exempt from the type of criticism accorded dramatists in the 'tradition'. Chapter One is a brief critical survey of plays current in London in the Nineties and the English and continental forebears of these plays, and includes some discussion of Shaw's campaign against the 'old' drama, his opinion of the pseudo-realist 'new' dramatists, and the differences between his aims and techniques and those of the post-Ibsen, post-Shavian playwrights.

Chapter Two deals with Shaw's first play, Widowers' Houses, and two other sociological plays -- the relatively early Mrs. Warren's Profession and a play of Shaw's maturity, Major Barbara. These three plays demonstrate Shaw's progress from mere inversion of stock sentimental romance to more positive treatments of initially orthodox situations. Chapter Three is concerned with Shavian transformation of conventional melodrama and men of action and discusses the conflict between orthodox techniques and devices and Shavian ideas in the 'hero' plays. Chapter Four deals with two exceedingly popular plays -- Candida and Man and Superman -- in which Shaw developed his views on the Life Force and the relationships between the sexes. Like Chapter Two, this chapter seeks to prove that Shaw exhibited growing skill in adapting popular stage subjects to his own purposes while sustaining interest and comedy in the eternal conflict he perceived between vitality and system.

In Chapter Five, two semi-tragic plays, Heartbreak House and Saint Joan, are discussed as the final steps in Shaw's movement toward achieving harmony of story and theme. Heartbreak House, a disquisitory, symbolic drama, is an improvement upon earlier, less unified discussion plays, and Saint Joan combines the elements of philosophical discussion and powerful story in a play that undoubtedly benefits from the poignancy and melodrama of the legend on which it is based, but is also a triumphant blend of the traditional elements of drama and qualities uniquely Shavian. The chapter and the thesis close with a short comment on Shaw's contribution to modern drama.

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SHAW'S ORTHODOXY AS A DRAMATIST

... would anyone but a baffleheaded idiot of a university professor, half crazy with correcting examination papers, infer that all my plays were written as economic essays, and not as plays of life, character, and human destiny like those of Shakespeare or Euripides?¹

Histories of dramatic art, prefaces to modern drama anthologies, and treatises on playwriting methods of the last seventy years arrive early and linger long on George Bernard Shaw, the acknowledged father of modern English drama. His dramatic criticisms published in the London Saturday Review from January 5, 1895 to May 21, 1898 and his expanded pamphlet The Quintessence of Ibsenism prepared the way for the revolutionary plays in which he made satirical use of established theatrical conventions and formulas to establish his own brands of realism and naturalism on the stage and to advance problems of social, economic, political, and personal morality as the proper subject matter for drama. Shaw's enthusiasm in this cause led him to hail and extol the plays of his Norwegian contemporary, Henrik Ibsen, with whom he shares the honours for founding a new school of drama in England.

But although Shaw undoubtedly owed a large measure of his inspiration to Ibsen, his plays are obviously different from the older playwright's in almost every respect except their indictments of society's easy idealism and their painstaking dissections of prevalent hypocrisies. Ibsen's interest was often in particular characters and specific personal prob-

1. G. B. Shaw, Sixteen Self Sketches, London, Constable and Company Limited, 1949, p. 89.

lems as much as, or more than, in society's problems, and his use of mood and symbol differentiates his plays from those of the more argumentative, prescriptive Shaw. Shaw's genius was for witty, progressive debate in which a clear-sighted minority, finding themselves in approximations of theatre's stock dilemmas, articulately deride and reject the interpretations and solutions offered by the romantic majority and either talkatively conquer, like Shaw's Caesar, or talkatively surrender, like John Tanner. Ibsen frequently demonstrated the perils of a conventionally romantic approach to life, whereas Shaw satirized such an approach, and many of Ibsen's naturalistic plays are dominated by a sense of impending crisis or catastrophe. Shaw's plays are all permeated by comedy, though a few are near-tragedies and all are based on a didactic moralist's view of life. And whereas most of Ibsen's plays are single of focus and governed by a single prevailing mood and are therefore unimpeachably 'unified', Shaw's works, comic and discursive, seemed in his day to offer vulnerable expanses for the shafts of critics faithful to the 'organic' view of art.

Shaw among the critics

Being a wit with a serious purpose and a skilled debater in and out of his plays, Shaw naturally engaged early in argumentative exchanges with his critics, and from one point of view his plays and prefaces may be regarded as a series of bolts launched at the heads of reactionary critics.

For their part, the critics began by attacking his themes and went on to abuse his 'actionless' plays, his 'formless debates'. And although Shaw's achievements have, through the years, consolidated his fame as a playwright of genius, and most of his dramatized polemics have won respect, if not total acquiescence, something of these charges of 'actionlessness' and 'formlessness' survived into the 1920's and 1930's to modify essays otherwise devoted to his praise. Ibsen, it was said, poured his new material into the admirably watertight compartments of the 'well-made' play structure he inherited from the French playwrights Scribe and Sardou; Shaw, on the other hand, retained some of the old, pat techniques as farcical devices but largely abandoned 'construction' after Widowers' Houses.

More recent critics, true to criticism's pendulum swing of assertion-contradiction, insist that Shaw was a masterly manipulator of pre-tested patterns, and a shrewd, far-sighted stage strategist, no matter what he himself said on the subject. Eric Bentley is eloquent on this theme.² Jacques Barzun invites the skeptic to consider "... the possibility of grouping Shaw's plays, not according to ideal form, but according to easily recognizable design -- length, plot, climax, distribution of parts, balance of interest and so on," and confidently predicts the conclusion:

2. Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of the Theatre in Modern Times, New York, Meridian Press, 1955, pp. 107-140, and Bernard Shaw (Amended Edition), New York, New Directions, 1957.

This done, who can doubt that Shaw has again and again proved his ability to work within accepted late nineteenth century formulas, that he has, indeed, repeatedly worked them for all they were worth? I need only mention You Never Can Tell, Pygmalion, The Philanderer, Widowers' Houses, Arms and the Man, Village Wooing, Fanny's First Play, Passion, Poison and Petrifaction, Over-ruled, Augustus Does His Bit and a half-dozen other titles. Empty out the Shavian vocabulary and attitudes and you will have receptacles in 1, 2, 3, or 4 acts fit for any kind of romantic comedy or thesis drama you may like.³

Yet, despite Shaw's mellowed reputation as the stage spokesman of ideas no longer startling expressed in a realistic mode no longer uncommon, and despite the skillful undermining of the old accusations accomplished by modern critics, some still find it difficult to 'empty' the Shavian matter out of its receptacles, to divorce content from form. Though embarrassed by the plays' durability on stages as well as in print, these people subscribe in their hearts to the turn-of-the-century view that Shaw's works are not plays at all -- that at most they are provocative and often scintillating discussions. One solution to this dilemma is to set Shaw aside as a special case to whom the ordinary 'rules' are not applicable. J. B. Priestley in The Art of the Dramatist (1957) remarks:

... Shaw of course is a man apart, a unique case in the theatre. Out of his own passion for ideas, his intellectual delight in discussion, the masterly debating style he forged for himself, a brisk good-humour that came

3. Jacques Barzun, "Bernard Shaw in Twilight", reprinted from The Kenyon Review, Summer, 1943, in George Bernard Shaw: A Critical Survey (ed. Louis Kronenberger), p. 166.

naturally to him (partly because he was less emotionally committed than most writers) and that is invaluable in high comedy, and a tough knockabout sense of the Theatre, he created a new type of drama. In this he is glorious at his best, tolerable even at his worst. Call him, if it pleases you, a "dramatist of ideas", but keep the term for him, do not throw it around⁴

And to the budding playwright Priestley counsels:

Think in terms of action, for though plays are mostly dialogue, the talk should be moving towards an action Assume that the drama of debate is Shaw's copyright, so don't have people sitting around discussing the atom bomb, unless one of them has an atom bomb and proposes to use it.⁵

This peculiar tendency to set Shaw off as a freak among dramatists -- a pleasing one, but nonetheless a freak -- ignores the fact that Shaw did conform to the 'rules' of plotted action-plays, and acquits him, on special grounds, of errors in dramaturgy which he did not commit.

The persistence of stereotyped patterns in Shaw's plays

The argument this paper attempts to establish is the thesis that Shaw did not move from tightly organized, realistic drama on small social issues into witty and paradoxical but untidily formless debates on philosophical problems; that he did not make a clean departure from the 'constructed' drama of exposition-complication-resolution into the exposition-complication-discussion pattern he advocated,

⁴. Priestley, J. B., The Art of the Dramatist, London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1957, pp. 49-50.

⁵. Ibid., p. 29.

but often retained the old formulas -- retained them even when they constricted and distorted the themes which were his principal concerns. It is an examination and an attempt to estimate the artistic success of eight plays as they exemplify the steps forward and the relapses in Shaw's progress toward the erection of structures satisfyingly 'whole' yet supple enough to communicate the themes which formed the building blocks of his philosophy.

The eight plays here dealt with are Widowers' Houses, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Major Barbara, The Devil's Disciple, Candida, Man and Superman, Heartbreak House, and Saint Joan. The list is necessarily very limited. Back to Methuselah is excluded because its five acts in themselves afford sufficient material for a voluminous study of structural features, and omission seems preferable to giving it cursory treatment. With the possible exception of the first, the eight plays cited were chosen partially because they are stage successes, on the theory that plays written for the stage stand or fall according to their ability to hold an audience, and that these are the high points, during thirty years, of Shaw's development toward the form best suited to convey his points while engrossing and delighting his spectators. Chapter One traces the history of nineteenth-century play forms and attempts to place Shaw in the tradition. Chapter Two deals with Widowers' Houses, Mrs. Warren's Profession, and Major Barbara, three plays featuring similar character groups and, in the order written, giving an exhibition in miniature of Shaw's progress from neat, contrived treatment of a small

social problem to more ambitious attacks essayed on larger themes. Chapter Three concerns The Devil's Disciple, a play which exhibits Shaw's conception of the 'hero' type and his use of melodrama's characteristic pattern. In Chapter Four the 'well-made' play Candida is examined and compared with the later and more successful Man and Superman. Chapter Five is devoted to the relationship between events and themes in Shaw's 'Chekhovian' play, Heartbreak House, and Saint Joan, the most popular of Shaw's works and, from the point of view of this paper, the most successful combination of drama and Shavian philosophy in Shaw's canon. Discussion of these plays necessarily entails reference to other Shaw plays and to a few of the plays of his predecessors and contemporaries where comparisons are enlightening. But in the main the paper concentrates on the aforementioned eight, ending on a climax and not attempting to study later plays, which were, with very few exceptions, anti-climaxes in the wake of Saint Joan.

Shavian action

Since the allegation that Shaw's plays lack action constitutes the strongest support to the contention that his plays are slightly motivated and wide-ranging conversations rather than plays and that they are therefore alien to theatrical tradition, the question of 'action' demands immediate attention in a study of Shaw's structural development. Clearly, many of Shaw's works are comparable to Greek and Racinian drama and to plays by Chekhov and Ibsen in concerning action which occurs offstage, and thus follow a well-established tradition.

But Shaw's lengthy speeches which digress freely from the immediate situation to its vast implications tended to distract the critics from his orthodoxy in this respect.

Augustin Hamon assists here with a useful distinction between 'intellectual action', or the intense inter-action of ideas, and 'material action', or the plot's incidents and the characters' physical movements.⁶ As Hamon points out, significant action in Shaw's plays is chiefly of the 'intellectual' type, and is, at its best, directed, coherent, and as gripping as the overt, or 'material', action of melodrama. John Gassner is pursuing the same tack when he defends Shaw's use of discussion:

...the factor of "discussion" is anything but an anti-dramatic device to his way of thinking and writing. It is anti-dramatic only when a hack dramatist stops the physical action of his play to deliver an argument or preachment. Discussion, as a general intelligence permeating a work and determining its course, moves with the impetus of the play instead of moving against it or standing in its way.⁷

From this point of view, Shaw's plays are decidedly active -- presenting as they do not bloodless ideas for their own sakes, but ideas rooted in human situations, ideas potentially at least as exciting and even dangerous in their interplay as inter-acting events, and ideas arising from and able to give birth to action. In fact, Shaw moved from the patently

6. Augustin Hamon, The Twentieth Century Moliere: Bernard Shaw, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915, p. 134.

7. John Gassner, "Shaw as Drama Critic", Theatre Arts, Vol. XXXV (May, 1951), p. 28.

plotted and eventful mode employed in his early work to the more discursive plays in which a past, a present, or an imminent event engender the ideas with which the characters lunge and parry -- without ever once quitting the field of action. Sometimes he courted the critics' epithets with such titles as Getting Married: a Conversation and Misalliance: a Debate in One Sitting, and in these plays the actual stage action is slight. But always there is action -- 'intellectual', 'material', or both -- at the base of Shavian debate, be it Don Juan's promiscuous career and fatal duel with Don Gonzalo in the 'past', Cleopatra's murder-by-proxy of Pothinus which occurs off-stage in the 'present', or Joan's present sufferings in body and spirit, her 'present' political significance, and her martyrdom to which most of the play looks forward. Captain Shotover of Heartbreak House does not have an atom bomb, but he is attempting to invent a lethal 'mind-ray' and would evidently be quite capable of using it, were it not for the looming threat of war which suggests there will be little need for it.

It is true that Shaw frequently relied upon past events to lend tension and significance to his plays' discussions. But there was nothing new in the 1890's about commencing in medias res; Racine had done so, as had the Greek playwrights in dramatizing parts of their legends. Shaw differed only in opening some of his plays a little later in the course of events than did other playwrights and in carrying the story forward a little further -- sometimes pursuing his characters into the hereafter to record a posthumous conversation devoutly to be wished. His desire to cap events with an

organized study of their effects and implications was in part due to a consuming interest in mind and matured response rather than in the disruptive events, the crude violence, which did the damage or promoted the good to be estimated. It was also due to a reaction against 'romantic' drama which dwells upon titillating events and ignores, in the rush and tumult of incidents, the universal truths involved and the ideas suggested. Of The Divided Way by H. V. Esmond (1895) Shaw wrote revealingly:

Like all romantic plays which create a strong illusion, this one irresistibly raises the question how its final situation would do for the starting-point of a realistic play.... we should have a remarkably interesting realistic play on top of the romantic one.⁸

It is also true that Shaw avoided the type of action usual in Victorian drama, even when his plays dealt with situations comparable to those introduced by the current romantic pieces. His plays often do focus on such situations, for satire of run-of-the-mill sentimentalities demanded it; and superficially these plays of his go through the conventional movements -- frequently too far, as will be seen. But the intelligent, articulate Shavian protagonist is far too human, too discreetly 'unheroic', too sensible to entertain his romantic counterpart's melodramatic notions or to commit his irrevocable deeds. The Shavian 'hero' enters a fray armed with common sense and humour, and the characters who attack him with the weapons of romantic passion and conventional

8. G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, New York, Brentano's, 1928, p. 253.

idealism are swiftly disarmed. The central character occasionally learns from his experience of the battle; more often he is wholly unscathed but has taught his opponents a variety of lessons and sent them back with new insights to their old positions. Thus, in his treatments of common stage material Shaw avoided extravagant action that changes or concludes. His characters may explore in dialogue the consequences of a melodramatic step, but they seldom take that step. And Shaw is able to make the most of two possible stage worlds. His characters do not commit the deeds of romance and melodrama, but, influenced by the romance-inspired conception of life which Shaw considered a dangerous disease, they talk about them, posit their consequences, and sometimes lean so far toward them that they seem to be saved only by a coincidence, as Lady Cicely and her tamed pirate are awakened from their trance at the conclusion of Captain Brassbound's Conversion by the sound of a gunshot. Shaw's sole complaint against Ibsen's Hedda Gabler is an echo of Judge Brack's exclamation at Hedda's suicide: "People don't do such things!"⁹ Of course they do, occasionally, as Shaw admitted, and in Hedda Gabler the dramatic action was due to Hedda's case of thwarted romanticism, whereby Ibsen illustrated Shaw's disease theory. But to Shaw the real tragedy was that romantic misfits do not 'do such things' but live on, infected and infectious, whereas their stage counterparts of

9. G. B. Shaw, Preface to Three Plays by Brieux, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, London, Constable and Company Ltd., 1934, p. 199.

the nineteenth century took drastic action, making audiences gasp in horror or sigh with pity when, in Shaw's view, the spectators should be incited to reform their attitudes and their institutions.¹⁰ Shaw's anti-romanticism was different from that of Flaubert and Ibsen not only in being comic but also in proving that romanticism collapses to reveal practical self-interest when it is subjected to pressure of circumstance or an onslaught of reason. The romantic fallacy has dire consequences in Ibsen but merely causes a pratfall followed by a swift recovery in Shaw.

On the whole, Shaw eschewed elopements, murders, and suicides. And when his characters do take drastic action outwardly similar to the dramatic doings of nineteenth-century drama, they take it for entirely different reasons. Conversely, they unearth the practical and moral (in the Shavian sense) reasons for conforming to the behaviour accepted by society, which prompts Maurice Valency to comment rather unfairly:

Like Andrew Undershaft, Shaw has the most unconventional reasons for doing the most conventional things. His characters all play the game like respectable denizens of mythology, and therefore are able to say the most preposterous things without arousing either fear or animosity, for basically we know they don't mean them and have hearts of gold under their bullet-proof vests.¹¹

The assumption here seems to be that Shaw enlivens a realistically mundane movement with 'preposterous' conversation which he does not seriously endorse but uses to create

10. Ibid.

11. Maurice Valency, "Shaw, the Durable Dramatist", Theatre Arts, Vol. XL (July, 1956), p. 87.

specious suspense. In fact, the conversation usually reveals Shaw the optimist, conceiving of humanity as potentially capable of objective self-analysis; the characters' behaviour frequently reveals their subordination or selfish conformity to the 'preposterous' myths and conventions which society accepts. Thus both the exchanges of ideas and the behaviour constitute action.

Shaw's eclecticism

As the critics have been slow to drop their charges that Shaw's plays lack action, they have also been reluctant to admit the extent of his debts to artists of the past and have ignored or dismissed with casual mention his many conformities to tested theatrical devices, preferring to dwell upon the spontaneity and freedom with which he claimed to have let his plays grow. And although Shaw occasionally credited his sources, he also frequently encouraged the legend of his iconoclasm in themes and presentations. Some of the techniques he resurrected or adapted appear consistently in his works and require some attention here as general characteristics of the Shavian world and its people, the raw material out of which he fashioned his plays, and as proof that Shaw was thoroughly grounded in stage practices and considerably influenced by the work of previous dramatists.

In Shakespear's Hamlet Shaw discovered a human being in an unreal world, and The Quintessence of Ibsenism celebrates the birth of drama concerning real people in the actual world of the nineteenth century. But the Shavian world and its people are as implausible in their way as most characters and kingdoms

of fiction. The characters who participate in Shaw's remodellings of the old plots are double inversions of stock characters, for whereas the stock figure of drama is a person of conventional views and superhuman virtues involved in a complex situation, Shaw's character is a person of daringly unorthodox opinions and human failings caught in an ordinary life situation which the romantics around him would shape into a plot. Sympathetic Shaw protagonists are wondrously self-conscious, eloquent people, able to probe and discuss their own motives and foibles. Being drawn from life, they are apt to conform to some of the conventions their counterparts in the audience have supported or tolerated. They differ most from their spectators in being extremely articulate, introspective, and candid, and in occupying situations wherein they must reveal, assert, explain, and defend themselves and their philosophies with precision, brevity, and force. That Shaw recognized this deviation from ordinary naturalism is made clear in a private letter about Too True to be Good in which he comments on the "great length" to which the play carries his practice of making his characters say "not what in real life they could never bring themselves to say, even if they understood themselves clearly enough, but the naked soul truth, quite objectively and scientifically presented, thus combining the extreme of unnaturalness with the deepest attainable naturalness...."¹² His characters therefore have

12. Quoted by Allardyce Nicoll in A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900, Vol. I, Cambridge, At the University Press, 1946, pp. 201-202.

delightfully implausible conversations and then do anti-climactically probable things. And they are just as unreal as the characters of romance. Shaw's Mrs. Warren is not really any more likely a character than Pinero's Mrs. Ebbsmith, though she wears her fictional garb with a difference.

Moreover, although Shaw's situations are usually recognizably common ones, his backgrounds are located in Neverneverland. In a Shavian world, although the problems are the genuine ones of humanity and Shaw's day, the incidental happenings can be as bizarre as the events of any melodrama. A garden in Surrey, when peopled by a set of Shavian characters, is no more convincing, despite its rhododendrons, than Shakespear's Forest of Arden.

Unreal as they are, Shavian people, places, and events have a special kind of authenticity in their freshness and the new emphases Shaw applied in delineating them, for fifty years and many emulators have not dulled the effect of many an early Shaw stroke. Avoidance of the middle ground of popular and, to Shaw, spurious issues for dramatization led Shaw to illuminate the minute and the immense in a kind of world view detailed enough to consider Professor Higgins' table manners and large enough to suggest the major goals and pitfalls in humanity's pilgrimage. But his world, like those of other dramatists, is still a 'created' one, not the given one.

As a writer of comedies, Shaw supported the theory of Henri Bergson, expressed in the essay Laughter (1900), and owed much to the practice of Molière. The comedy peculiarly Shaw's is rooted in the incongruities between vitality and system, between the chaotic genuine and the patterns of convention and institution which society attempts to impose upon life. It is thus the kind of comedy Bergson defines: social, and founded upon humanity's recognition of the ridiculous as automatism invading the realm of the vital. When a human being consciously imitates a machine or absent-mindedly perpetuates a pattern when such action is no longer necessary or practical, the result is comedy, says Bergson. Molière's central characters are such eccentric figures of fun defined by the 'normal' people around them. Jourdain of Le Bourgeois gentilhomme is an obvious example as he approximates the motions which he believes make the gentleman, although they are foreign to his own nature. Shaw too presents a central character of unusual views and behaviour. But here he reverses Molière's technique and gives it an extra dimension. The characters who come closest to being heroes in Shaw's heroless plays are the unorthodox principals whose vitality and unclouded vision expose the self-deceptions and automatism of the 'normal' -- because convention-bound -- and semi-blind people within their orbits. Molière's spectator can enjoy the exposure of the 'type' upon whom the play is focused without misgivings about himself. Shaw's spectator has no such immunity, for if he recognizes the minor characters as representations of himself,

he must realize that he is the object of Shaw's humane satire and that he is not merely a spectator, but also 'a guilty creature sitting at a play'. Frequently the Shaw principal falls into the traps and errors he has uncovered, and so becomes a comic figure in the Bergson and Molière sense, and an erring mortal or hapless tool of the Life Force in Shaw's judgment, but the audience is never allowed to make him a scapegoat. The differences between Molière's technique and Shaw's are clear. So is Shaw's neat reversal of the Molière mode.

A particularized list of Shaw's conscious and unconscious borrowings would be endless. His themes, though new to the stage in many cases, were drawn from or similar to those of Samuel Butler, Henry George, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Ibsen, to name but a few. His satire is in the tradition of Aristophanes, Dryden, Voltaire, and Sheridan. His long didactic speeches have their precedents in Aristophanic parabasis, the tirades of Racine, and the soliloquies of Shakespeare. His concluding monologues and epilogues are reminiscent of the classical choruses. His orchestrations of voices owe much to his study of Wagner and Mozart, while his boldly drawn minor characters with their identifying speech habits reveal his affinity for Dickens. The 'stagey' coincidences and surprises with which Shaw mocked his melodramatist contemporaries may also be counted borrowings; they serve his comic purposes and afford effective punctuation to his scenes, for they have been useful theatrical devices for many centuries.

In these and other specific ways Shaw was an eclectic playwright, who, at his best, had a genius for selecting and combining the materials and techniques of others into plays uniquely Shavian. And borrowing is an artist's prerogative, so long as his creations justify it, as any admirer of Shakespeare will concede. But sparkling though Shaw's mixtures are, sometimes his materials refuse to combine harmoniously. And when theme and pattern are at odds in his plays, conventions of unity, symmetry, and last-act finality are apt to triumph over the best interests of the principal thesis. Frequently Shaw was deliberately using a trite formula to satirize it -- sabotaging his model's climaxes and substituting his own. But if a play revealing the underside of formula subordinates the interests of its principal theme to the completeness of its exposure of fatuity, thoroughness and neatness do not compensate for the crippling of communication.

Churlish though it may seem to assert Shaw's loyalty to theatrical traditions and conventions only to charge him with excessive fidelity to those conventions, it is surely more just to consider him as a playwright and estimate his successes and failures as a practitioner of the ancient craft of writing plays than to dub him 'author of debates for the stage' and to praise him while denying him the kind of appreciation and criticism accorded all other members of his profession. And Shaw, whose delight in Shakespeare spurred him to energetic sorties against bardolatry and the unappreciative worship it entails, would certainly not have desired such immunity.

TYPES OF DRAMA ON THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH STAGE:
SHAW'S RELATIVE POSITION

Shaw's critical reviews

"Why was I born into such a generation of duffers!"¹ snapped George Bernard Shaw in an 1896 Saturday Review article on the inexplicable tastes of London theatre-goers and actor-managers -- one of the many articles in which he attempted to wean his readers from the worn-out theatrical modes still dominating West End stages.

The period between 1780 and 1880 was a strangely barren one in the English theatre. Scholars and literary historians find little to praise and much to lament and deride in it. John Gassner speaks for the majority when he summarizes:

Sentimental comedy, strongly favored by the growing middle classes, who frowned upon levity and demanded moral uplift, supplanted the wit of Jonson, Congreve, Gay, and Sheridan. At best, the comic muse was served by farces devoid of any sort of distinction except facility in pandering to complacent minds. And tragedy, the high art in which England had once excelled, was displaced by romantic thrillers accompanied by background music, giving currency to the term "melodrama".²

The theatrical offerings Shaw condemned were the dregs of the wash of sentiment initiated in the eighteenth

1. G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, p. 266.

2. John Gassner, "Modern Drama in England and Ireland", A Treasury of the Theatre, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1950, p. 498.

century, the translations and adaptations of the 'well-made' plays of Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou, and the pseudo-realistic 'problem plays' of Emile Augier and Alexandre Dumas films, the crass melodramas staged at the Adelphi and less skillfully elsewhere, and the bowdlerized versions of Shakespeare's plays presented by Sir Henry Irving at the Lyceum.

Concerning the popular Shakespeare productions, Shaw was chiefly annoyed by the violence done the bard by the injudicious cuts, by the over-emphasis upon spectacle, and by the ranting, bombastic style of the acting. His criticisms of melodrama were fairly mild and affable so long as the piece in question made no pretence of possessing dignity or probability or serious moral theme. But for blatant attacks upon the spectators' credulity and emotions and for contrived and dishonest plays illustrating the validity of specious morality, Shaw had no patience.

The conception of theatrical art as the exploitation of popular superstition and ignorance, as the thrilling of poor bumpkins with ghosts and blood, exciting them with blows and stabs, duping them with tawdry affectations of rank and rhetoric, thriving parasitically on their moral diseases instead of purging their souls and refining their senses: this is the tradition that the theatre finds it so hard to get away from.³

Much as he scorned the cheaply sensational plays he reviewed, Shaw reserved his greatest wrath and most savage ridicule for plays purporting to treat topical social problems but actually proving that God underwrites the expedient doctrines of the self-satisfied middle class, though His ways are

3. G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, pp. 126-127.

incredibly tortuous and require three to five acts to diagram. These plays were the emigrant offspring of such moralizing French playwrights as Sardou and Augier, and inherited their complexity from an even older French source, Sardou's model and the artist of the pièce bien faite, Eugène Scribe. In 1882 J. Brander Mathews commented with some admiration:

To M. Sardou, as to Scribe, a play is a complex structure, whose varied incidents fit into each other as exactly as the parts of a machine-made rifle, lacking any one of which, the gun will miss fire.⁴

It was precisely this insistence and dependence upon intricate plot rather than upon the development of fresh ideas and intelligent characters that drove Shaw to his diatribes against 'construction'. And Sardou, with his complicated arrangements, his verbose explanations, his eavesdroppings and document-stealings, was an easy target for Shaw. Of a London production of Sardou's Fedora Shaw fumed:

The postal arrangements, the names and addresses, the hours and seasons, the tables of consanguinity, the railway and shipping time-tables, the arrivals and departures, the whole welter of Bradshaw and Baedeker, Court Guide and Post Office Directory, whirling round one incredible little stage murder and finally vanishing in a gulp of impossible stage poison, made up an entertainment too Bedlamite for any man with settled wits to pre-conceive.⁵

Fedora had at least the excuse of age; Shaw's pen was ruthless to an 1897 play, Never Again, by Maurice Desvallieres and Antony Mars, bearing the earmarks of the Sardou method and

4. J. Brander Mathews, French Dramatists of the 19th Century, London, Remington & Co., 1882, p. 103.

5. G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, p. 116.

indicating its persistence. Said Shaw:

I can hardly estimate offhand how many visits to "Never Again" at the Vaudeville would enable an acute acrostician to unravel its plot. Probably not less than seventeen. It may be that there is really no plot, and that the whole bewildering tangle of names and relationships is a sham. If so, it shows how superfluous a real plot is. In this play every one who opens a door and sees somebody outside it utters a yell of dismay and slams the door as if the fiend in person had knocked at it. When anybody enters a room, he or she is received with a roar of confusion and terror, and frantically ejected by bodily violence. The audience does not know why; but as each member of it thinks he ought to, he echoes the yell of the actor with a shout of laughter; and so the piece "goes" immensely. It is, to my taste, a vulgar, stupid, noisy, headachy, tedious business.⁶

The terms "form", "structure", and "construction" as they are applied to plays are not to be defined unambiguously. Seemingly they mean different things to different generations of playwrights and playgoers, and even vary as used by contemporaries. To Shaw, "construction" obviously suggested the intricate and tediously explained plots of Sardou, and such latter-day mazes as Never Again. Hence such declarations as the following passage concerning the writing of Widowers' Houses:

...I had then, have now, and have always had, an utter contempt for "constructed" works of art.... As a fictionist, my natural way is to imagine characters and spin out a story about them, whether I am writing a novel or a play; and I please myself by reflecting that this has been the way of all great masters of fiction. At the same time I am quite aware that a writer with the necessary constructive ingenuity and an itch for exercising it for its own sake, can entertain audiences or readers

6. G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. II, p. 334.

very agreeably by carefully constructing and unravelling mysteries and misunderstandings; and that this ingenuity may be associated with sufficient creative imagination to give considerable show of humanity and some interest of character to the puppets contrived for the purpose of furthering the plot. The line between the authors who place their imagination at the service of their ingenuity and those who place their ingenuity at the service of their imagination may be hard to draw with precise justice (to Edgar Allen Poe, for instance!); but it is clear that if we draw it as an equator, Scribe and the plot constructors will be at the south pole, and Aeschylus and the dramatic poets at the north.⁷

It would be wrong to assume from these statements of principle that Shaw's naturalism involved a complete repudiation of "structure", or the careful creation of whole, balanced, and integrated forms. The 'slice of life' plays did not achieve full, prosaic, photographic realism until well past the turn of the century, and there are none in Shaw's canon. And although Shaw is a transitional figure between the nineteenth-century authors of highly plotted drama and the John van Drutens of the twentieth century, and is sometimes cited as the unwitting progenitor of modern stage seminars,⁸ his plays are manifestly not the models for these later mutations. Shaw's works, with their strong central themes and their relatively uncluttered plots, are a return from empty spectacle and plots substituting complexity for inner tension to the precepts of Aristotle, rather than a leap into shapeless, anarchic realism.

7. G. B. Shaw, "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 668.

8. Shaw's responsibility for the serious, unpopular modern drama is discussed by Walter Kerr in How Not To Write a Play, London, Max Reinhardt, 1956, pp. 27-35.

In truth, some of the characteristics of the Sardovian 'well-made' play belied the type's name. For instance, many Sardou plays did not become 'complicated' until they were half over. The first half of a typical piece relied upon amusing exchanges and the charts, tables, and schedules that enraged Shaw to keep the audience entertained before the play proper began. Matthews, a critic on the whole friendly to the French realists, describes the Sardou technique:

The first act of any one of his plays rarely does more than introduce the characters, and develop the satirical motive of the play. Often there is absolutely no action whatever....In the second act, the satire and the wit and the comedy continue to be developed; and possibly there is an indication of a coming cloud, but it is not larger than a man's hand.⁹

The reasons for this delay of action were not mysterious 'architectural' ones; Scribe had initiated the use of lengthy exposition and Sardou developed the practice, largely to suit the convenience of the fashionable Parisian playgoers of his period who habitually arrived more than an hour after performances had begun. The alternative would have been to precede the play with a short entertainment, but Sardou would not then have received remuneration for a full evening's programme. A five-act play long enough to fill a whole evening, diversified enough to keep the audience from growing restive, and slow enough in developing to accommodate latecomers was the obvious solution to the mundane problems of a practical playwright.

A number of English playwrights adopted the long-introduction technique from the French dramatists without,

⁹. J. Brander Matthews, French Dramatists of the 19th Century, p. 199.

apparently, knowing its history or realizing that it was neither artistically justified nor necessary in their theatre. Shaw detested the habit, and in a review of a production of Macbeth expressed the "fervent wish" --

...that Mr. Pinero, Mr. Grundy, and Monsieur Sardou could be persuaded to learn from it [Macbeth] how to write a play without wasting the first hour of the performance in tediously explaining its "construction". They really are mistaken in supposing that Scribe was cleverer than Shakespeare.¹⁰

Theatrical Transition in the Nineteenth Century

Although Scribe was perhaps no cleverer than Shakespeare, he was more productive, happily for London theatre managers, whose supply of European plays was curtailed when the orthodox continental playwright-moralists were supplanted by the uncompromising realists (as opposed to 'realists' Augier and Dumas files) and naturalists. The new critical, disillusioned drama was accepted on Europe's stages some years before the London stage dared break its unwritten agreement to divert but not to shock or disturb its middle-class patrons. The de Goncourt brothers were forerunners of the movement in France with Henriette Maréchal of 1865. Defending his new approach Edmond de Goncourt said:

I do not know a single dénoûement which is not brought about by the sudden overhearing of a conversation behind a curtain, or by the interception of a letter, or by some forced trick of that kind.¹¹

10. G.B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, p. 115.

11. Quoted by Ludwig Lewisohn in The Modern Drama, New York, B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923, p. 35.

Henriette Maréchal was not free from contrived events and perceptible 'machinery', but a part of the new principle was embodied. Gradually a change toward versimilitude in portrayals of conditions and people and toward objective, inquiring approaches to areas of life formerly excluded from drama began to gain momentum. The writers of naturalist prose, notably Zola, Daudet, and de Maupassant, came to the aid of the new movement, writing plays often unremarkable for their artistic merit and over-concentrated upon the sordid, but progressive in their avoidance of sentimentality and implausible plot. Zola became the spokesman and champion of the naturalist playwrights, thus colouring the reputation of the new drama with his own brand of determinism and his emphasis upon moral disease. In 1882 Brander Matthews revealed a common reaction to Zola naturalism when he commented:

M. Zola seems to delight in describing the unspeakable. In his eye every thing is unclean, sordid, and despicable. He has a gloomy dissatisfaction with life, and is, indeed, as disgusted with it as most readers are with the degradation laid bare in his novels: Schopenhauer himself could scarcely be more pessimistic.... To him there are no good men, though some men are not so bad as others. Health is as scarce as virtue: so he studies the diseases of his characters and details their sufferings. It is hard for him to meet the accusation that the Naturalists are artists who refuse to paint your portrait unless you are pitted by the small-pox.¹²

In 1887 André Antoine founded the Théâtre Libre as a home for the new drama, and a way was cleared for the long-

12. Brander Matthews, French Dramatists of the 19th Century, pp. 274-275.

neglected plays of Henri Becque and the work of Curel, Brieux, and Hervieu. By 1885 the new, objective drama was established in France, and also in Germany, though the official and commercial theatres ignored it. In 1889 Berlin's Free Stage Society was formed and Otto Brahm, stage manager and defender of naturalism, introduced the 'fourth-wall' stage and the realistic set and provided an outlet for the plays of Gerhart Hauptmann. England could no longer count upon the cultural centres of the continent for new but traditionally orthodox plays.

As early as 1880, British theatre managers were feeling the pinch; they were forced to fall back upon revivals of well-made play adaptations by T. W. Robertson, Tom Taylor, Charles Reade, and a host of less skillful arrangers, upon extravagantly mounted Shakespeare, and upon melodrama. In the company with which it shared the boards in the 1870s and '80s, T. W. Robertson's Caste (1867), a heavily sweetened treatment of love across class barriers, now notable chiefly for its frank discussions of money problems and for the real doorknobs Robertson insisted upon in its realistic sets, was regarded as a startling deviation from the norm and was held up by 'advanced' stage critics as a work marking the return of English drama to the truth and to the present.

Unlike their French counterparts, English men of letters did not attempt to establish a serious drama focussing upon issues of the day and reflecting contemporary manners and mores. Instead, Browning, Tennyson, and Swinburne reverted to the modes successful in earlier eras with such dramas as A Blot in the

'Scutcheon (1843), Becket (1884), and Mary Stuart (1881). It was left to a foreign playwright to challenge the isolationism of the English theatre and introduce London theatregoers of 1889-91 to the socially-conscious modern drama then thriving across the channel. In 1889 Janet Achurch produced Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House, translated by William Archer with painstaking faithfulness to the original.¹³ In 1891 J. T. Grein opened the Independent Theatre with a presentation of Ibsen's Ghosts, and in 1892 he produced Shaw's Widowers' Houses.

This development in continental Europe and in England was not as clearly defined or as steady as a summary of its major victories might suggest. Ibsen and Shaw staggered a few audiences and scandalized many critics in the 1890s, but they did not distract the hordes who flocked nightly to the Lyric Theatre to weep and applaud at the 1896 revival of The Sign of the Cross, a religious melodrama by Marie Corelli and Hall Caine. Nor did they dim the admiration of playgoers for the moderate daring of Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, with their unconventionally sympathetic but conventionally moral treatments of Magdalens, reformed rakes, and rebellious spouses in The Second Mrs. Tanqueray (1893), The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith (1895), The Masqueraders (1894), The Liars (1897), and The Gay Lord Quex (1899). Tom Taylor's Ticket-of-Leave Man (1863) continued to make popular reappearances, despite its blatant histrionics and its numerous 'asides', which offended

13. An earlier (1884) adaptation by H. A. Jones and Henry Hermann, Breaking a Butterfly, was a completely 'demodernized' and unrecognizable version of Ibsen's play.

against the now-established convention of the 'fourth-wall' stage. G. R. Sims' The Lights O'London (1881) continued to promulgate the romance of pathetic poverty, while Sister Mary (1886) by Wilson Barrett and Clement Scott went on proving that the gods will dispose of extraneous mistresses in the interests of true lovers, and that the more unlikely the last-act coincidence, the more effective the finale. Yet retrospectively it can be seen that the strong major current of drama was changing course during this period, and that to designate new aims and emphases a new set of terms -- some new, some old but refurbished -- was gaining currency, first among the serious dramatists and their defenders, and soon afterward among reviewers and critics.

"Realism" and "naturalism"

Principal among the prominent catchwords of the new drama were "realism" and "naturalism". These became the slogans of 'modernist' dramatists, while "romanticism" and "construction" fell into disrepute. "Romanticism", which to Victor Hugo's admirers and followers had meant the liberation of imagination and fancy from the strait rules of neo-classicism, now came to connote blind idealism, sentimentality, and effete, truth-shirking adulation of glamour. "Construction", which had implied to Scribe's school a shift of interest from the exotic and the passionate to involved plots delighting the spectator's brain more than his heart or aesthetic faculty, came to indicate -- to Shaw and many others -- implausibly involved and over-ingeniously

resolved plot. Conversely, "realism", which had meant to Augier and Dumas files merely the depiction of nineteenth-century bourgeois habits and morals within the Scribe framework and in a stage world presided over by poetic justice, gradually took on much greater and more complex meaning.

From the middle of the century on, agreement that 'realism' on the stage was desirable became increasingly general in England as well as abroad. Thus, as Allardyce Nicoll points out,¹⁴ the realism of English drama in the 1890's received part of its impetus from the native plays of previous decades. But at first 'realism' indicated only modernity in settings and type characters and versimilitude in stage details, and did nothing direct to advance the cause of a new dramatic form that would reflect an honest, intelligent observer's views of real people and real issues. In both the rustic drama and the urban and domestic plays which owed much to Dickens, stock characters abounded and popular morality was unquestioned. Moreover, romantic intrigue, pathos, and violence retained their popularity. Dion Boucicault, one of the foremost popular playwrights of the day, made good use of his Irish country settings to combine an effect of authenticity and contemporaneity with his romantic melodrama, while Tom Taylor mixed 'modern' character types (such as Hawkshaw the detective) and such new inventions as the camera with the old, hero-versus-villain plots.

14. Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900, Vol. I, p. 3.

Stage verisimilitude

In an era of low theatre prestige, more earnestness was apparently impractical, and realism made its most obvious advances in stage sets and properties, which grew steadily more elaborately true-to-life. Nicoll quotes a remark made in 1827 to the effect that the modern stage affected reality to excess, causing the audience to forget that it was observing not reality but a dramatic representation of it.¹⁵ Edmund Kean lent support to the passion for accurate detail, dressing his Shakespeare productions with such a care that the modest and petticoated Mrs. Kean was almost the only anachronism in his Antony and Cleopatra. Meanwhile, in less imposing dramas, stage locomotives chugged on stage toward disaster at a sedate four miles per hour, livestock gained popularity as effective contributors to realism, Professor Pepper's Ghost, a formidable apparition, chilled audiences, and critics bewailed the obsession with stage machinery which must, they said, inevitably entail growing carelessness in dramatic construction. This it did not do, since in most of these plays plot was the single interesting factor, virtue was always rewarded, and there was seldom any significant thematic structure to be impaired by time-consuming, audience-distracting stage toys. But clearly this kind of realism did not contribute to an improvement in the dramatic content of plays of the period. Recalling one of these carefully-staged plays, Zilla, or the Scar on the Wrist, Sir Johnson Forbes Robertson reminisces:

How intricate and disjointed the plot was, may be gathered from the fact that one of the actors, J. H. Barnes, then known as "Handsome Jack", asked

15. Ibid., p. 35.

me at the third or fourth rehearsal what the play was about. I told him I did not know; this information appeared to give him much relief! The whole company was terribly in earnest, but, on the first night, whatever we said or did was received by pit, gallery, boxes and stalls with shouts of laughter. One of the characters, played by Frank Tyars, was supposed to be slain in the middle of the second act, and there the body lay a long time while other matters were toward. At last the dead man had the scene to himself, upon which, to the amazement of the audience, he rose and uttered a fatal line. "Ha! a light strikes in upon me, I see it all!" "Do you, b'God?" said a voice from the gallery!....¹⁶

An offshoot of the interest in spectacular stage properties was the movement initiated by T. W. Robertson and the Bancrofts, among others, to simulate correct drawing-room atmosphere by attention to minute details. Eschewing the crudely sensational, these director-producers founded what came to be dubbed 'cup and saucer' drama. The vogue evolved into the fashionable but insipid drawing-room drama patronized and participated in by society's 'artistic' dilettantes, whose acting evoked Shaw's mirth and ire.

Unsatisfactory though physical verisimilitude was as a substitute for honesty and high seriousness, it did combine with the picture-frame stage to encourage a style of acting less flamboyant than the old, melodramatic mode. And T. W. Robertson's habit of setting, directing, and co-ordinating an entire production himself helped ignite interest in the value of appropriate stage atmospheres. Concern for atmosphere led naturally to increased emphasis upon logical development of

¹⁶. Quoted by J. W. Cunliffe in Modern English Playwrights: A Short History of the Drama From 1825, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1927, p. 14.

mood and therefore upon coherence of incidents -- two elements that had been largely lacking from the popular, sensational dramas, in which, said Shaw, "there is hardly any more connection between the incidents than the fact that the same people take part in them...."¹⁷

Realism of theme and content

But the more important kinds of realism, realism of play content and theme, which dictated the mood and shape of a piece, were chiefly owing to the modern continental playwrights whose works, infiltrating first as literature, were translated and read in England and eventually survived adaptations to appear on London stages in their original forms. Suggestions of three-dimensional characterization and a tendency toward truth-telling, even when it threatened plot transparency, had appeared in English drama with increasing frequency after the middle of the century. Tom Taylor, Charles Reade, and Boucicault had occasionally exhibited impulses toward such honesty, penchants which manifested themselves most obviously in their villains' self-justifications. Robertson's plays marked a further advance in this direction. Yet the harsh integrity of Zola, Becque, and Ibsen was nonetheless a shock to English readers, and Ibsen's Ghosts was a thunderclap to London theatre critics, who reacted with righteous wrath and passionate vilification. Zola and Ibsen, in their disparate

¹⁷ G. B. Shaw, Appendix to The Quintessence of Ibsenism (first edition, 1891), reprinted by E. J. West in Shaw on Theatre, New York, Hill and Wang, 1958, p. 7.

ways, had convinced the diehards, represented in the press by the influential Clement Scott, that realism and its particular sub-species, naturalism, were repellently ugly and subversive modes encouraging chaotic, scabrous plays capitalizing on the shock value of the unspeakable. To its supporters, realism was merely an attempt to replace the stage frills and trappings and the unlikely situations of romance with reflections of the real, commonplace world. Naturalism was an intensification of the tendency; the dramatist attempted to represent men as the imperfect creatures of reality and to study their natural behaviour in plausible circumstances. 'Naturalism' connoted only an objective, scientific approach and renunciation of contrived plots and stylized acting. But, to English reactionaries, realism and naturalism were anathema.

In such an emotional climate, little sane attention was paid by the outraged reactionaries to questions of structure and form. When these matters did arise, many were misled by the seemingly logical inference that 'slice of life' drama must, by its very nature, lack order and pattern just as life does. The naturalists themselves supported this assumption by declaring that an objective, scientific representation of life must reveal that determining factors are various and often unrelated, that selection of details inevitably falsifies, that lives do not naturally fit into independent chapters, and that real situations are inconclusive. They frequently neglected to say that art is inevitably artificial, and they perhaps were not conscious that for patterned plot-complexity they were, if they were artists at all, substituting other means of attaining unity in their plays.

Zola's dissection of Thérèse Raquin is a coherent, single-focused history, a terrible chapter of unrelieved grimness commencing with passion and murder and ending in suicide. Henri Becque's The Prodigal Son is a play-builder's tour de force. And Ibsen's social dramas are patently planned and precisely-detailed illustrations of their author's insights into human relationships and the relative influences of personality and social institutions in shaping them.

World views and kinds of truth

Since an artist's world view and the operative principles he believes in determine his choice of situation and incidents and shape his characters, his most honest works will be reflections of his vision, molded according to the demands of that vision, and unified so long as he is a steadfast philosopher, reporter, and critic. To Zola men were, in the main, victims of the selves bequeathed them by nature and acted upon by circumstance, the contemptible but largely innocent authors of their own misfortunes, and his serious plays aim at being scientific studies of self-deception, self-betrayal, self-torture, and self-destruction. Such was Zola's usual view of reality. And although his characters sometimes break from pattern -- the guilty lovers in Thérèse Raquin develop consciences -- Zola's theory, set forth in Le Naturalisme au Théâtre, and the general trend of his plays promulgated this view.

To the classical dramatist the world was, theoretically at least, a much brighter place. Men were responsible creatures

in a governed universe. The proper matter for serious drama was the fall of a noble transgressor who, in his frailty or pride, had sinned against an immutable law and proceeded to his inevitable punishment. This drama was ordered by the changeless series of misdeed or error, recognition, and expiation. The nature of the transgression was either evident or expounded by the chorus and by the tragic hero in his moment of enlightenment, and the play was primarily a moving and edifying vindication of the law external to man yet immanent in his life. The natural multiplicity and complexity of life was severely edited, and relevant facts and events were arranged to develop a single action and stress a single truth.

Shakespear's tragedies may also be interpreted as justifications of an external law; an infraction against the cosmic order results in disaster. In Shakespear's plays, however, the stern moral is not always made explicit, nor is the variety of life forgotten. Comedy scenes alternate with the tense and tragic ones. And although the effect of the alternation is of artificial order and compartmentalization, the plays are less implausibly clean-cut and concentrated than the Greek drama. Reality is represented more fully and variously. Yet, unstressed though it often is in Shakespear's works, the background of natural law and Christian standards persists in the plays of the Elizabethan age.

A complete survey of the variations in dramatists' world views through the centuries, or even from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, would fill several volumes. But it

is reasonably safe to generalize that pre-nineteenth-century tragedy assumed universal acceptance of axiomatic moral laws, and claimed a measure of high truth in that it illustrated their validity.

In the nineteenth century, when scientific discoveries gave rise to grave doubts about the presence of an ordering moral principle operative in the universe, the more daring spirits began to study man as a creature largely determined by heredity and circumstance, beleaguered in a hostile or indifferent cosmos, and harnessed and often cruelly coerced by his own imperfect and outmoded institutions. Anton Chekhov studied his frequently frustrated and hapless characters, caught in an era of change, with gentle humour and a pervasive spirit of wistfulness. Tacitly he judged them; some would work to realize their vision of a happier future beyond the coming storm, while others, like Madame Ranevsky of The Cherry Orchard, could only dream of the pleasant past. But Chekhov presented his characters sympathetically, allowed them breadth and depth, and did not castigate them for their insufficiencies and failures as Augier, for instance, condemned and pronounced judgment upon Olympe Taverny for succumbing to her nostalgie de la boue. Similarly August Strindberg, although he sometimes exhibited hope, as in Easter, a drama of reconciliation and redemption, dramatized the inevitable clashes of the sexes and the terrible power of inner compulsion in The Father and Miss Julia. John Gassner comments: "More than in the work of any earlier dramatist, man is destroyed in The Father (as in other Strindberg dramas...)

by his neuroses."¹⁸ Ibsen, too, discovered seeds of destruction within his characters as well as outside them in a changing world and static conventions. True, years before the English theatre was prepared to view English life objectively or to abandon the simple vice-virtue conflicts in which plot machinations were all-important, the continental dramatists were probing into the nature of man and discovering that he was not totally responsible for his own 'sins' and his own sufferings, that he could not be done artistic justice on the imprecise scales of romantic melodrama, which found him either virtuous or vicious, and that the power of will should not be overestimated at the expense of myriad other forces in man's nature.

The first 'moderns' among English dramatists approved the new continental principles while they could not emulate the practice. A theatre just beginning to emerge from a welter of farce, melodrama, and sentimental romance was not prepared for an onslaught of disillusioned realism, psychological complexity, and stern challenge to frail humanity. And the dramatists had neither native examples nor the temerity to defy the pampered public completely. They sought to criticize a few existing wrongs and simultaneously to discover simple remedies or easy panaceas. They were prone to defend institutions on the grounds of their usefulness, despite their occasional cruelties, and to say to their tormented characters what Father Hilary of Michael and His Lost Angel says to the unhappy priest: "You've wandered

18. John Gassner (ed.), A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 77.

away from the road, and now you complain that the maps are wrong."¹⁹

The first popular English 'realists'

In an article in The Observer of September 29, 1946, Shaw complained of a passage concerning him in Allardyce Nicoll's A History of the Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900:

Because my vogue in the fashionable London theatre came after that of Pinero, Jones, Carton, Grundy, and Wilde, and supplanted it, it is assumed that I developed in their school and learned my art from them. As a matter of fact I was furiously opposed to their methods and principles, and had my bag full of unacted plays before the limelight shifted from them to me.²⁰

The phrase "furiously opposed" is revealing. Shaw's vigorous campaign against the themes propounded by Pinero, Jones, and company showed that he had indeed 'learned his art' from them, in a negative sense at least. And his plot outlines and theatrical devices betray the bent of a theatregoer who had been exposed to much of the current drama and had collected some effective tricks from it as well as some active dislikes.

Among the playwrights Shaw mentioned as his predecessors, Oscar Wilde held a unique place. His sophisticated satire was a dazzling contrast to the somewhat uninspired and conventional comedy of R. C. Carton and Sydney Grundy and the earnest,

19. "Michael and His Lost Angel", Act V, Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, Clayton Hamilton, ed., Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1925, p. 82.

20. G. B. Shaw, "My Way With a Play", Shaw on Theatre, p. 268.

pseudo-realistic dramas of Pinero and Jones, and in a number of ways his plays anticipated those of Shaw.

Like Shaw, Wilde seized upon conventional play forms for his own satirical purposes. And the social shams and vices he derided in his elegantly candid dialogue were often symptoms of the contemporary problems Shaw grappled with in comedies more serious. One instance of such correspondence is Wilde's brief illumination in A Woman of No Importance (1893) of one of Major Barbara's principal themes. Lord Illingworth, Lady Hunstanton, and Kelvil, an unctuous member of Parliament, are discussing charity:

KELVIL: Still, our East End is a very important problem.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Quite so. It is the problem of slavery. And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves.

LADY HUNSTANTON: Certainly, a great deal may be done by means of cheap entertainments, as you say, Lord Illingworth. Dear Dr. Daubeny, our rector here, provides, with the assistance of his curates, really admirable recreations for the poor during the winter. And much good may be done by means of a magic lantern, or a missionary, or some popular amusement of that kind. 21

But, unlike Shaw, who drove his theses through the stock patterns, re-motivating their events and exposing their fatuities with a glee that was often almost ferocious, Wilde blandly presented the absurd plots with most of their sentimentalities intact, while providing a constant counterstream of wordly witticisms. In his way, Wilde was as much a disillusioned critic of his

21. "A Woman of No Importance", Act I, Plays by Oscar Wilde, London, Penguin Books, 1954, p. 86.

time as Shaw, and both expressed their criticisms in epigrammatic satire. Yet Shaw's appreciative comments on Wilde are almost always tinged with impatience. To Shaw, the Wildean pose of elegant dilettantism was an acknowledgement of lamentable irresponsibility. Reviewing a production of An Ideal Husband (1895) Shaw wrote: "In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre."²² Shaw was thoroughly amused by the comedy, but, "It is useless to describe a play which has no thesis: which is, in the purest integrity, a play and nothing less."²³ However, though they did not wholly suit moralist Shaw, Wilde's polished comedies left no openings for the kind of ridicule Shaw turned upon Arthur Wing Pinero.

Pinero was already a popular playwright when J. T. Grein produced Ghosts and inaugurated the 'new' drama in England, and Henry Arthur Jones was gaining fame. Both playwrights made conservative attempts to emulate the realism of Ibsen. Jones was apparently the more sincere of the two, although his dedication to the 'renaissance of the English drama' shows more clearly in his essays and prefaces than in his plays. In the preface to Saints and Sinners (1891) Jones declared his belief that playwriting should be not merely "the art of sensational and spectacular illusion" but "mainly and chiefly the art of repre-

22. G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, p. 12.

23. Ibid., p. 13.

senting English life."²⁴ But in The Liars (1897) and Mrs. Dane's Defence (1900), his 'realism' goes no further than sympathetic portrayals of frail women. The sweet reason and authority of social mores are ably supported in these plays by Sir Christopher Deering and Sir Daniel Carteret, and more than ably supported by Jones, who implies that coincidence is manipulated by Nemesis in the service of Mrs. Grundy. More probably coincidence is manipulated by the author, but the implication of the plays themselves is that popular morality rules actively and rightfully. This fundamental dishonesty, accepted as edifying by Jones's admirers, made possible neatly-constructed plays. Conventional morality is a useful stage manager in them, taking a hand in events to trap Lady Jessica and expose Mrs. Dane and to mete out to both their appropriate deserts.

To a point Jones may be called a realist, just as Augier and Dumas films may be called realists. His situations embody some of the questions then current, and he establishes cases for his rebellious wives and Magdalens. His settings are contemporary, his plots are uncluttered, and his dialogue is natural. But the theses he develops were threadbare and unconvincing in the 1890's. More explanatory of his plays than his ambitious prefatory claims is a politic statement he made in the New Review of July, 1891: "The wise statesman does not attempt to make laws too far in advance of the moral and

²⁴. Quoted by J. W. Cunliffe in Modern English Playwrights, p. 30.

intellectual condition of the people...the playwright must not disdain to be popular."²⁵

Pinero was similarly attuned to the ideals and prejudices of his audiences, and refrained from throwing their practices at their heads. But unlike Jones, he was quite willing to concoct sensations. Paula Tanqueray falls victim to stage justice as Mrs. Dane does; both are pursued by their pasts. More stage-conscious than Mrs. Dane, however, Mrs. Tanqueray commits suicide. The notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith astounded Shaw by inexplicably venting her rebellious passion upon the Bible, and disgusted him by retrieving God's Word from the fire in a hair-raising third-act finale of heroine burned and virtue triumphant. And Pinero's "Mind the Paint" Girl is an unpretentious sop to pleasure-loving audiences.

Galsworthy, Hankin, and Granville-Barker

Among the later, more earnest and courageous English disciples of naturalism were John Galsworthy, St. John Hankin, and Harley Granville-Barker. The works of all three obviously reflect attention to the precepts of Shaw, although their modes of representing life were distinctly different from his. All three were imbued with the new critical spirit which challenged institutions, and were, to varying degrees, reformers.

Of the trio, John Galsworthy has weathered best in the commercial theatre. In a spirit of solemn kindness and

25. Quoted by Marjorie Northend in "Henry Arthur Jones and the Development of the Modern English Drama", RES, Vol. XVIII (Oct., 1942), p. 452.

tempered indignation he studies society and society's victims -- victims of the law, of economic system, or class and caste prejudices. His world, like the Greek world and the worlds of Jones and Pinero, is governed, though not by supernatural forces nor by Victorian morality sweetened and deified. The deities Galsworthy finds in power are those created by men and allowed to assume the terrible omnipotence of the old cosmic law of the Ancients. And like some of Ibsen's, his plays are constructed to reveal the cruel sufferings resulting from the unrestrained operation of semi-blind social institutions. Galsworthy's aim, then, was to create characters at once plausible and representative. His dialogue is a usually skilful progression of natural and theme-directed conversation. He wrote:

The art of writing true dramatic dialogue is an austere art, denying itself all license, grudging every sentence devoted to the mere machinery of the play, suppressing all jokes and epigrams severed from character, relying for fun and pathos on the fun and tears of life.²⁶

And he was as good as his word. Of The Silver Box (1906)

Herman Ould comments justly:

Although apparently naturalistic, its dialogue is very conscious and selective; consecrated to the revelation of the theme of the play, it never deviates from this purpose in order to throw side-lights on a class or breaks into irrelevancies in order to amuse or to impress by fine words.²⁷

26. John Galsworthy, "Some Platitudes Concerning Drama", The Inn of Tranquillity, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919, p. 195.

27. Herman Ould, John Galsworthy, London, Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1934, pp. 123-124.

As Galsworthy's dialogue is concentrated upon the -- plays' single themes, so his incidents and props are carefully selected to complement or ironically contrast the central idea. Thus in The Eldest Son, while Bill Cheshire reveals his intention of marrying his mother's maid, his sisters and guests are rehearsing Robertson's Caste. In this unswerving concentration, as in his gravity and sentimentality, Galsworthy differed markedly from the unpredictable Shaw, who never suppressed a joke and found his fun in a more rarefied atmosphere than that of day-to-day human life.

But with Galsworthy's definition of realism Shaw must surely have agreed. In "Vague Thoughts on Art" Galsworthy declared:

To me...the words realism, realistic, have no longer reference to technique, for which the words naturalism, naturalistic serve far better. Nor have they to do with the question of imaginative power -- as much demanded by realism as by romanticism. For me, a realist is by no means tied to naturalistic technique -- he may be poetic, idealistic, fantastic, impressionistic, anything but - romantic; that, in so far as he is a realist, he cannot be. The word, in fact, characterises that artist whose temperamental preoccupation is with the revelation of the actual inter-relating spirit of life, character, and thought, with a view to enlighten himself and others; as distinguished from that artist -- whom I call romantic -- whose temperamental purpose is invention of tale or design with a view to delight himself and others. It is a question of temperamental antecedent motive in the artist, and nothing more.²⁸

Like Galsworthy, St. John Hankin was a social critic and reformer, friendly to naturalism but devoted to complete

28. John Galsworthy, "Vague Thoughts on Art", The Inn of Tranquillity, pp. 272-273.

concentration on theme. His plots are slight, and his interest is, like Shaw's, more in clarification through debate than in events or illustration of an idea. The objects of his dramatic sorties are the familiar Victorian targets: the sanctity of wedlock, parental authority, joyless 'virtue'. And his mode of attack is restrained, unclimactic (whereas Shaw's was anti-climactic). This technique of understatement, essentially undramatic, was one of the expensive tributes Hankin paid to naturalism. "It is the dramatist's business to represent life, not to argue about it,"²⁹ he said. And although he did 'argue about it' tacitly in his plays, he did so without the emotional force of Galsworthy or the intellectual depth, vigour and wit of Shaw.

Hankin and, more obviously, Granville-Barker with The Madras House (1910), were playwrights moving into the blind alley of naturalistic drama without clear plot structure and lacking compensatory elements to provide unity and impact. A more philosophic playwright than Hankin, Granville-Barker was nevertheless a comparably misguided disciple of Shaw. He was philosophic in his skepticism about contemporary theories and practices, but differed from Shaw in his lack of a comprehensive philosophy, a world-view to make his situations meaningful and coherent. Thus The Last of the De Mullins (1908) by Hankin is a revealing but undramatic dramatization of already well-aired Victorian arguments about parents and children, the 'new woman', the unmarried mother, and stultifying filial duty. And

29. St. John Hankin, "A Note on Happy Endings", The Dramatic Works of St. John Hankin, Vol. III, London, Martin Secker, 1912, p. 121.

Granville-Barker's The Madras House alternates all-too-convincing illustrations of middle-class boredom, prudery, and futility with inconclusive and unimpassioned conversation, and strings illustrations and conversation upon a very fragile wisp of a plot. "Yes....," says Jessica as the play ends, but, "She doesn't finish, for really there is no end to the subject."³⁰ This finale is wholly in accord with the theory of naturalism and is a change from the contrived conclusions of less 'advanced' plays, but it is a singularly dissatisfying stage ending. So did devotees of the naturalistic 'problem play' seize upon naturalism's least playable features and neglect the lessons of drama's history.

Where post-Shavians stumbled and foundered, Shaw sailed over the pitfalls of naturalism and thesis-drama. Years of playgoing had given him a shrewd sense of what would 'go' on the stage and what would fail, but more important was his gift for incarnating ideas and impartially urging and aiding them in conflict. And affording these ideas an organized framework was his 'metabiological' philosophy of the Life Force. His plays hark back to the pre-Zola, pre-Darwin drama in relying upon a beneficent universal force backed by philosophic argument. Unlike the law of the Ancients, immutable and triumphant, Shaw's vital impulse is a struggling force, experimenting in generation after generation of live matter, suffering setbacks, discarding failures, and always working toward complete consciousness. Yet it is similar to the Ancients' law and to the Renaissance

30. "The Madras House", Act IV, Representative British Dramas, Victorian and Modern, Montrose J. Moses, ed., Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1937, p. 650.

Chain of Being in giving a sense of order and purpose to the world and men. It affords an explanation for events and deeds and a reason for ambition and optimism.

Of his first play Shaw wrote:

I offer it as my own criticism of the author of Widowers' Houses that the disillusion which makes all great dramatic poets tragic has here made him only derisive; and derision is by common consent a baser atmosphere than that of tragedy. I had better have written a beautiful play, like Twelfth Night, or a grand play, like the tragic masterpieces; but frankly, I was not able to: modern commercialism is a bad art school, and cannot, with all its robberies, murders and prostitutions, move us in the grand manner to pity and terror: it is squalid, futile, blundering, mean, ridiculous, for ever uneasily pretending to be the wide-minded, humane, enterprising thing it is not. It is not my fault, reader, that my art is the expression of my sense of moral and intellectual perversity rather than of my sense of beauty.³¹

It is true that there is little meliorism in Widowers' Houses, but in the rest of his plays it would seem that Shaw's fundamental optimism, rather than his 'disillusion' or modernity's meanness, moved him to write comedies and tragi-comedies. Of course there were other factors motivating his choice of mode: Shaw's eye for the ridiculous and incongruous, his gift for witty debate, and his conviction that 'he who laughs learns' also decided his approach. But these alone do not explain the persistent note of gaiety after Widowers' Houses; the plays that followed this dark comedy were not bitterly mocking nor cynically destructive, nor even grimly objective. The gaiety is undoubtedly due to his sanguine belief that vitality will always win its major battles and that its ultimate goal is good.

31. G. B. Shaw, "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 671.

It is perhaps this mood of gay optimism more than any other single Shavian characteristic that sets Shaw's plays apart from all the other realistic plays of the 1890s and early 1900s. Unlike the pseudo-realists, he had a philosophy, if a debatable one, as basis for his élan, rather than the old, debunked stage morality built upon convenient ethics. And unlike austere, disillusioned stage realists, he affirmed the essential goodness of man, the existence of purpose in man's universe, and the constant surge of a life pulse willing and creating to fulfill that purpose. It is true that his assertions of faith seem rooted in desire and utilitarianism rather than in proofs of the goodness and purpose he postulates. "Every reasonable man (and woman) is a potential scoundrel and a potential good citizen," he says in the preface of Major Barbara, and, "It is quite useless to declare that all men are born free if you deny that they are born good." As for purpose:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.³²

Shaw seems to have achieved an act of faith consistent with his fundamentally religious temperament, rather than a reasoned philosophy validated by empirical evidence or supported by scientific theory. His assumptions about acquired characteristics,

32. G. B. Shaw, "Epistle Dedicatory" prefacing Man and Superman, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 163.

expressed in the lengthy preface to Back to Methuselah are difficult to swallow whole, despite very recent scientific speculation about such characteristics. Yet his faith was sincere. In his plays it appears as full-fledged conviction, held intellectually as well as emotionally, and informs almost every drama with a bright, challenging spirit that modifies what would otherwise be withering blasts of criticism, ridicule, and argument and makes comedy out of situations infused by other playwrights with pathos. Isolated by the critics from his fellow 'modern' dramatists, Shaw was unique in this respect, but was a more legitimate heir to the tradition of serious pre-Ibsen English drama than Ibsen's converts and his own.

Furthermore, his belief in the Life Force allowed him to make use of orderly play patterns and 'theatrical' devices as other playwrights could not. English dramatists from Shakespeare to Sheridan had pre-supposed a stage world in which the truth would out and justice would eventually be done. To them chance was not the monstrous, roving carrier of catastrophes that Thomas Hardy envisioned it, but the occasionally capricious yet ultimately faithful servitor of moral order. Hence complications could be resolved, Iago punished and Charles Surface acquitted in their respective last acts, without violence to plausibility. But in a disillusioned era the playwright who would tell the truth yet present a complete, suspenseful, satisfying story seemed confronted by an unobliging world. He could confine his realism to externals and weave a story of blatantly coincidental intricacy, as did the followers of Scribe

and Sardou; he could elevate popular conventions to the status of universal laws -- at some sacrifice of his integrity -- and insist that they will be served by chance, by minor characters, and by the consciences of his principals, as did Pinero and Jones; he could give up the weaving of stories and concentrate upon episodic character revelations and social criticisms, as did Galsworthy to a degree and Granville-Barker too much. Shaw found another alternative. Like the older playwrights, he was aware of a unifying force in the universe, and he used it as a background and a standard with which he could analyse and evaluate. He told the truth as he saw it about real contemporary problems and situations -- slum landlordism, prostitution, poverty and delinquency -- by arranging illustrations and cogent debates, not as these illustrations and debates occur in a complex world of hypocritical and self-deceiving men, but ideally, as they can be contrived in a more honest stage world. He was thus a realist in the Galsworthian sense, as one preoccupied with "the revelation of the actual inter-relating spirit of life, character and thought, with a view to enlighten himself and others," and a naturalist in his semi-scientific probing for first causes, but certainly not a naturalist in technique, for his spectators are under no illusion that they are observing ordinary people in the unsorted world they know. Shaw himself categorized his realism when he said:

This play of mine, Major Barbara, is, I hope, both true and inspired; but whoever says that it all happened, and that faith in it and understanding of it consist in believing that it is a record of an actual occurrence, is, to speak according to Scripture, a fool and a

liar, and is hereby solemnly denounced and cursed as such by me, the author, to all posterity.³³

Since Shaw's ultimate reality is the Life Force, essential vitality, it is a reality of changing faces, creating new forms to satisfy its current needs and breaking free from those it has outgrown. Some conventions, Shaw suggests, serve the Life Force; marriage, for instance, provides for the forefathers of the Superman. But other conventions and conventional concepts, such as charity, hinder the advance of the Force; charity is a panacea preserving an inequitable economy and postponing a necessary revolution. Therefore the Life Force can be observed kicking against the traces of some static 'rules' while it aids in the imposition of others. Briefly defined, Shaw's drama is the conflict between vitality and system (complicated by vitality's use of particular parts of system), and is seen most easily in embarrassments of and outright rebellions against pattern. And ready to Shaw's hand were the pat patterns of conventional 'constructed' plays. Bergsonian comedy was therefore his natural choice. By turning stale play-formulas heels over head he could debunk stage people and 'probabilities', illustrate the power of vitality as it explodes through system, and evoke the laughter for which Bergson accounts.

Shaw began to implement this technique with a thoroughness that earned him, in some quarters, a reputation for sheer perversity. The climaxes of the conventional plays he re-wrote became anti-climaxes in his versions, still effective

³³. G. B. Shaw, Preface to Major Barbara, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 137.

because of their shock value, but robbed of their original seriousness. Anti-climax did not originate with Shaw, however, and if his plays had been merely deflations of stock theatre they would have had a short life expectancy. But while he denied the validity of formerly accepted stage 'realities', Shaw was proffering a kind of reality new to the stage. The themes of his formula-reversal plays are double: running parallel to the lines of satirical development are positive themes. Men are not sexual aggressors; women are. Prostitutes are not naturally vicious enemies of respectable society; society creates and exploits prostitution. Poverty is not a pitiable condition contracted by people of weak character and God's Job-like servants; poverty is a crime abetted by the wealthy.

The difficulties of keeping satire and positive theme in harness accumulate as a play progresses. Once a situation or event has been shown to have a totally different significance from that attributed to it in the formula play, how is the playwright to bring about the next stage of the formula play he is using as his basis and simultaneously advance his positive theme? Shaw often met this problem with considerable ingenuity. In some plays he used the pattern as a starting-point and then broke away from it: his *Pygmalion* does not marry *Galatea*. In some he managed to unite satirical debunking and positive thesis harmoniously. But in others these elements are incompatible, and the plays suffer from the resultant stresses and strains.

Shaw's development with respect to this problem was not a steady ascension but a series of forward movements interspersed with 'relapses'. It is interesting to note that the

relapses invariably involve victories of satire over positive didacticism, and hence triumphs of traditional form over theme. In the plays in which the stock patterns upstage theme, Shaw appears most arbitrarily perverse; the patterns are thoroughly used and thoroughly satirized, and Shaw, the prophet of Protean vitality, ironically reveals a tendency toward automatic contradiction of popular romantic notions. It was perhaps this consistency of attack mingled with Shaw's insistence upon prosaic common sense that caused W. B. Yeats to dream, after seeing Arms and the Man, of a perpetually-smiling sewing machine.

It is not always easy to assess Shaw's motives for treating and mistreating his themes as he did, for Shaw was a curious combination of moralist, satirist, humourist, and practical man of affairs. Conceivably he sometimes supplied a popular stock ending to please romance-nurtured audiences. And it is quite possible that he sometimes clung to a format because it amused him; the melodramatic elements in The Devil's Disciple obviously tickled him.³⁴ But in other plays the theses propounded in the prefaces and set into dramatic movement in the first acts are eventually so thoroughly obscured and lost that one is moved to conclude that traditional play forms had a more tenacious hold on Shaw than even he realized.

Shaw's combinations of new and old drama constituents make him a particularly interesting transitional figure in the history of modern drama. How much of his work was reactionary can best be estimated in an examination of some of his most notable plays.

³⁴. See Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence, Christopher St. John, ed., New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932, p. 97.

WIDOWERS' HOUSES, MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION, AND MAJOR BARBARA

Shaw's first play, Widowers' Houses, and two later ones, Mrs. Warren's Profession and Major Barbara, are superficially similar in that each involves a parent whose activities are apparently anti-social and whose self-analyses and self-justifications educate the young. All three are symmetrical in form and avoid the contrived and the miraculous. All three exhibit comparable patterns of conflict, crisis, and climax. All three differ from the pseudo-realistic plays of Pinero and Jones and their school in accusing their respectable patrons of responsibility for social ills -- and differ from Galsworthy's school in making their accusations without resorting to pathos or what Shaw called "stage socialism". And all three make use of stereotyped situations as frameworks and as objects of satire.

In the order in which they were written, Widowers' Houses, Mrs. Warren's Profession, and Major Barbara illustrate Shaw's growing skill and flexibility as he tackled themes of increasing broadness and complexity and consequently faced more and more intricate structural problems.

Widowers' Houses

When Shaw read his half-finished Widowers' Houses to William Archer, who had suggested a story for it, Archer dozed off. When he awoke he declared, in effect, that Shaw's play had nothing to do with the original tale, that the Archer plot had been an "organic whole" to which nothing could be added, and that he would have nothing further to do with this malconstructed

distortion of it. Henry Arthur Jones stayed awake during a later reading of the fragment, but enquired, "Where's your murder?"¹ Undeterred by these reactions, however, Shaw kept the manuscript and resumed writing it seven years later for production in 1892 at J. T. Grein's newly formed Independent Theatre. The play had two performances, all the Independent Theatre could afford. But the controversies it provoked lasted for weeks.

The ire of the critics was aroused principally by the content of the play. They slated the implausibility and nastiness of its characters, the ugliness of its subject, the inartistic 'blue-book' hue of its didacticism, and the general unfairness of what appeared to them a scurrilous attack on the middle class. Their resentment of Shaw's theme led them to brand the play as a 'tract' rather than a drama, and to ignore the neatly-contrived yet plausible scenes building to a whole of economy and completeness. To such criticisms Shaw replied defiantly in his 1893 "Author's Preface": "I am no novice in the current critical theories of dramatic art; and what I have done I have done on purpose."²

What he had done was to adapt Archer's plot, delete some of its characters and thus some of its 'machinery', and completely reverse Archer's crisis and resolution.

According to Archer,³ the scheme of the suggested plot was "vaguely suggested" by Ceinture Dorée (1885), a well-made play

1. These reactions are reported by G.B. Shaw in "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, pp. 667-668, and Archibald Henderson in George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1956, p. 535.

2. G.B. Shaw, "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 671.

3. Ibid., p. 667.

by Emile Augier. Act One of that play introduces Caliste, soulful daughter of a self-made millionaire. Caliste yearns for a sincerely devoted suitor with no eyes for her dowery. Accordingly, Roussel, her doting father, proffers her hand to Trélan, a young man renowned for high principles, who has already pleased Caliste but has recently avoided her. Trélan's refusal is enigmatic. Enraged, Roussel fixes upon Balardier, a frankly ambitious business man, as a prospective son-in-law. In Act Two Caliste discovers that Trélan is going abroad to overcome a hopeless love, and she charms him into a revealing declaration of more than fraternal affection. Roussel also makes a discovery: his agents and lawyers have been systematically making his fortune by unscrupulous exploitation and ruthless law suits. Among the victims was Trélan's father -- hence Trélan's renunciation of Caliste. In Act Three Trélan's moral judgment upon Roussel is not softened by Roussel's offer to make him amends, but the young man betrays his real feelings by fighting a duel with Balardier over Caliste and later confesses his love to her. Just as he is on the point of explaining his reasons for leaving her, he is silenced by Roussel's pleas. When all seems lost, and Caliste, left sobbing on Roussel's bosom, is awakening to suspicion of her father, fortuitously war is declared, and Roussel is ruined. Trélan returns to claim Caliste, who is now disembarrassed of the stained fortune. Roussel, his impure reputation still secret from Caliste, retires into happy poverty.

Archer's plot hinged upon the same money-versus-love problem. As he recalled it in The World of December 14, 1892 --

...it was to be called Rhinegold, was to open, as Widowers' Houses actually does, in a hotel-garden

on the Rhine, and was to have two heroines, a sentimental one and a comic one, according to the accepted Robertson-Byron-Carton formula. I fancy the hero was to propose to the sentimental heroine, believing her to be the poor niece instead of the rich daughter of the sweater, or slum-landlord, or whatever he may have been; and I know he was to carry on in the most heroic fashion, and was ultimately to succeed in throwing the tainted treasure of his father-in-law, metaphorically speaking, into the Rhine.⁴

In both Augier's plot and Archer's, the love story is of primary importance, and in both the dramatic 'curve' begins with the establishment of the lovers' situation, rises to the impasse presented by the heroine's polluted inheritance and the hero's heroic 'carryings-on', and drops to a happy resolution with the lovers' unburdened union. The major incidents of Shaw's plot are substantially the same. In Act One the mutual love of Blanche and Trench is declared, and marriage plans are begun, though there are hints that Sartorius's background may prove a difficulty. In Act Two Trench's conversation with Lickcheese precipitates his confrontation of Sartorius and the Lovers' quarrel which leaves Blanche clinging to Sartorius. In Act Three Blanche and Trench are reconciled. Although Shaw's plot lacks the troupe of minor characters and subsidiary situations of Augier's plot and the complicating factor of the comic heroine in Archer's plot outline, it is nonetheless a recognizable well-made play.

But in theme and in the significance of its events, Shaw's play is original. And since, so far as mechanics are concerned, it is a thorough and successful inversion of stock drama, it enables one to form a clear diagram of the techniques Shaw was

⁴. Quoted by G. B. Shaw in "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 667.

to use more ambitiously and flexibly in later plays as he continued pouring new content into traditionally-fashioned receptacles.

Touches of Shaw's iconoclasm appear early in Widowers' Houses. Trench appears in Act One as a slightly caricatured version of the usual hero of sentimental drama; he is boisterous, slangy, and snobbishly provincial. Cokane, described by Shaw as "an ill-nourished, scanty-haired gentleman, with affected manners: fidgety, touchy, and constitutionally ridiculous in uncompassionate eyes",⁵ is a far cry from the suave, loyal, and genial companion-to-the-hero familiarized by Pinero. In contrast, Sartorius, despite his frequent references to things financial and his fierce insistence upon his daughter's impeccable breeding, is a proper and imposing gentleman traveller. However, heroes could be boyish, their companions comically foolish, and opportunists deceptive without unduly startling Victorian audiences accustomed to romantic comedy. Blanche was Act One's major surprise to such audiences as she coaxed, bullied, and manoeuvred Trench into an early proposal of marriage.

There are thus foreshadowings in Act One of unheroic behaviour from the characters, although the generally comic tone and the triviality of the small crises in this act are seeming assurance that the misdeeds will be comic ones. The first crucial Shavian stroke falls in Act Two. Here Trench discovers the source of Sartorius's fortune, repudiates the ill-gotten gains, and, when Blanche refuses to marry without her father's pecuniary blessing,

5. "Widowers' Houses," Act I, The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw, London, Odhams Press Limited, 1937, p. 1. All subsequent quotations from Shaw's plays are from this edition.

stalks out of the house. Narrated without causal links, this behaviour seems eminently proper stage conduct. But Shaw's emphasis is upon the difference between human motives and idealistic ones. The climax of the act is not Trench's denunciation of Sartorius, but Sartorius's counter-attack upon Trench which proves that both are guilty of parasitism and that the middle-class spectators are guilty too. Moreover, Trench, the representative of idealistic and ignorant young gentility, is not moved to shame and noble sacrifice by his discovery, but is almost immediately reconciled with Sartorius. The real use of conventional 'idealism' and 'nobility', Shaw suggests, is to cover expediency with a veneer of tolerant rationality.

TRENCH. [still stupefied, slowly unlaces his fingers; puts his hands on his knees, and lifts himself upright; pulls his waistcoat straight with a tug; and tries to take his disenchantment philosophically as he says, turning to Sartorius] Well, people who live in glass houses have no right to throw stones. But on my honour, I never knew that my house was a glass one until you pointed it out. I beg your pardon. [He offers his hand.]

SARTORIUS. Say no more, Harry; your feelings do you credit: I assure you I feel exactly as you do, myself. Every man who has a heart must wish that a better state of things was practicable. But unhappily it is not.

TRENCH. [A little consoled] I suppose not.

COKANE. Not a doubt of it, my dear sir: not a doubt of it. The increase of the population is at the bottom of it all.

SARTORIUS. [to Trench] I trust I have convinced you that you need no more object to Blanche sharing my fortune, than I need object to her sharing yours.

TRENCH. [with dull wistfulness] It seems so. We're all in the same swim, it appears. I hope you'll excuse my making such a fuss.

(Act II, p. 18.)

The technical problem posed by this inversion of the stock plot's crisis is that of motivating the breach between Blanche and Trench required by Shaw's pattern. Since the practical young 'hero' has accepted his disillusionment with a good grace, there seems no strong reason for an estrangement. But Shaw, who evidently wanted to multiply his charges against gentlemanly holders of mortgages on slum properties and to complete his parody of a conventional play type, contrived to part the lovers. By portraying Blanche as a termagant, by placing her quarrel with Trench before his climactic clash with Sartorius when the young doctor is still fired with moral indignation, by exploiting the disparity between the stage-lovers' devotion which Blanche and Trench try to emulate and imperfect human relations, and by interrupting the controversy at its height, Shaw effected a rupture between Blanche and Trench which persists even after Trench's surrender to Sartorius. Blanche is left at the close of Act Two, like Augier's Caliste on her lover's departure, sobbing in the arms of a fond parent.

The motivating circumstance behind the reconciliation in Act Three is only slightly less adventitious than the war and providential bankruptcy of Roussel which were used by Augier. Lickcheese's explanation of his new prosperity would not, as St. John Ervine remarks, "Impose upon a child of twelve."⁶ But his sartorial splendour and patronizing airs are a comically dramatic change from his obsequiousness of Act Two -- changes of fortune are always effective theatre -- and the gleeful avariciousness he now

6. St. John Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends, New York, William Morrow & Company, 1956, p. 249.

shows, while illustrating Shaw's point that every man is potentially a scoundrel and will follow vicious examples, underlines Shaw's indictment of property owners and managers. Lickcheese is a buoyant piece of the filth underlying the smooth surface of "respectability".⁷

Lickcheese's new plan for profit-making re-assembles the characters, and the rest of Act Three is a grim parody of the conventional romance's ending. No detail of the orthodox pattern play escapes Shavian revision. Blanche discovers the reason for Trench's sudden scruples concerning money, but reacts only with outrage and dismay at her proximity to slum-dwellers. Trench is offered a second opportunity to be noble but rejects it, and yields to the schemers and to Blanche, who approaches him not with professions of romantic love but with ferocious eroticism. So far as Blanche and Trench are concerned, a single situation initiated in Act One and complicated and developed to a crisis in Act Two has been resolved in Act Three. Action has proceeded logically, and this dark travesty of a Victorian stage romance has met with the external demands of its prototype. But whereas principle triumphs in Augier's play and Archer's plot, it is overwhelmed in Shaw's version of the story.

To a high degree, then, Shaw succeeded in debunking stage morality thoroughly while dramatizing a conventional plot. But in three respects the play is not an artistic success: it does lack action, though not of the variety Archer suggested; it lacks consistency of mood; and it lacks consistency in its characters. All

7. G. B. Shaw, "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 670.

of these lacks can be blamed, at least in part, on Shaw's technique of complete pattern inversion.

Ceinture Dorée contains conflicts between Trélan's scruples and his love for Caliste, between Trélan and Roussel, and between Roussel and his conscience. The first and second of these are eventually resolved by circumstances but sustain tension through most of the play; the third ends in a victory of conscience. Roussel does not make tangible amends, but he recognizes his guilt: "C'est évident; j'ai spolié mes actionnaires, il faut dire le mot. Comment ai-je pu, pour cette misérable somme?.... Quand je pense au'alors je me suis cru dans mon droit!"⁸ And he accepts poverty joyfully: "...je n'ai jamais été aussi riche...."⁹ But Widowers' Houses embodies only one conflict and no conversions. The conflict is in the clash between reality and the idealistic notions and comfortable illusions about it entertained by the characters and the audience. And as soon as Trench is undeceived about his own rôle in society, realizes that he is a profiteer and resigns himself to being one, the plot ceases to be informed by a generating conflict. From the close of Act Two the 'happy' ending is a foregone conclusion. Shaw did not attempt to include the voice of the just, the constructive proposal, in this orchestration of guilty voices. There is no plea for the downtrodden. Instead, society's scapegoat, the slum landlord, has his say, and chiming in are the voices of his accomplices -- the voices, familiar to the middle class, of practicality, individual necessity, opportunism, unthinking

⁸ Emile Augier, "Ceinture Dorée," Théâtre Complet de Emile Augier, Vol. III, Paris, Calmann - Levy, Editeurs, 1903, p. 390.

⁹ Ibid., p. 425.

'gentility', hypocritical sympathy, and eager self-justification. Each of these voices, in stating its claims and excuses, impinges upon the claims of others in the group and elicits other statements, and the game of claim and counter-claim in which responsibility is swiftly passed from one participant to another is the only significant surface movement. Ultimately the topic is dropped; the characters link arms and turn their backs on responsibility, and the cause of the oppressed is lost by default. There is no forefather of the Superman in this play to come to grips with the defenders of the unhealthy status quo. It is as if, in overturning a stock plot and placing his quarrel between audience and play rather than within the play itself, Shaw had broken the mainspring of the stock action and failed to provide a substitute.

The change of mood in Act Three can be explained, at least partially, by the seven-year interval between the writing of Act One and part of Act Two and the work's completion. It can also be related to the lack of vital action in the final act: principle has already been abandoned, and this part of the play is devoted to Trench's total damnation. Certainly there is little in Act One to prepare the audience for this dark conclusion. The spectators are led to expect a sentimental comedy with overtones of goodhumoured satire. Act Two introduces the play's significant issue and grows more serious, but the author retains his objectivity and does not allow his own anger to touch his characters, except, perhaps, Blanche, who is revealed as not merely spoiled but a potential virago given to maid-mauling. By Act Three the tone of the play has become decidedly grim and the characters are harshly outlined. Trench radiates sullen anger from his entrance

till the moment when he surrenders to pressure and self-interest and becomes a conscious and active exploiter. Sartorius is frankly and deliberately committed to his 'business'. Lickcheese is no longer an excuse-making tool, but the delighted discoverer of a new swindle to replace the system used in "the good old times". Cokane is no longer harmlessly ridiculous, but a spiteful and greedy conspirator. The reconciliation of Blanche and Trench is coloured with a similar harshness -- in keeping with the tone of Act Three, but far removed from the light-hearted treatment of their relations in Act One.

That the audience should be gulled into accepting the young Trench of Act One as a stock hero, exuberantly young and rather foolish, but still a recognizable young member-in-good-standing of the middle class, was necessary to Shaw's purpose; that the young man should prove himself an ineffective, unthinking idealist and should ultimately abandon neutral disapproval for participation in the activities he condemned is the logical conclusion to this lesson in morality. But that the temper of the author should change late in Act Two is an unfortunate breach of artistic unity. An assertion in The Quintessence of Ibsenism explains part of Shaw's theory about education through deliberate confounding of audiences. Said Shaw:

Never mislead an audience, was an old rule. But the new school will trick the spectator into forming a meanly false judgment and then convict him of it in the next act, often to his grievous mortification. When you despise something you ought to take off your hat to, or admire and imitate something you ought to loathe, you cannot resist the dramatist who knows how to touch these morbid spots in you

and make you see that they are morbid. The dramatist knows that as long as he is teaching and saving his audience, he is as sure of their strained attention as a dentist is, or the Angel of the Annunciation.¹⁰

Later Shaw plays sustained this method without any decrease in the wit and humour which disguised the medicine's flavour. But audiences and critics found Widowers' Houses a bitter dose, and reviewers went back to their offices to write polemics about it. Despite Shaw's disclaimers in his 1893 "Author's Preface", critics were still finding the influence of Ibsen -- whose works were tinted by the same brush as Zola's -- in the play years later.

In 1909 James Huneker announced:

You can skip the plays, not the prefaces. Widowers' Houses is the most unpleasant, ugly, damnably perverse of the ten. The writer had read Ibsen's An Enemy of the People too closely. Its drainpipes and not its glorification of the individual, got into his brain. It filtered forth bereft of its strength and meaning in this play, with its nasty people, its stupidities....¹¹

And in 1916 Dixon Scott found that Shaw must be apologized for.

His heart is in the right place; it is only his tongue that has gone wrong; it has taken a permanent twist into his cheek. When he tries to preach gentleness, it turns the words into jeers; it makes him malevolent in the name of mercy, quarrelsome in the name of peace; and when he strives to shout friendly advice this interpreter, tutored too well, changes the message into a cold snarl of disdain. He sits down to write a play (called Widowers' Houses) pleading the cause of the oppressed; and the result makes the whole world howl him down as heartless and inhuman.¹²

10. G. B. Shaw, "The Quintessence of Ibsenism", Major Critical Essays, London, Constable and Company Limited, 1932, p.145.

11. James Huneker, "The Quintessence of Shaw", Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928, p. 244.

12. Dixon Scott, "The Innocence of Bernard Shaw", reprinted from Scott's Men of Letters by Louis Kronenberger in George Bernard Shaw: A Critical Survey, p. 94.

The third weakness of the play, the inconsistencies displayed by some of the characters, can also be attributed to Shaw's fidelity to the pattern he was parodying. Since he had refrained from adding to the parody an interpreting character, Shaw was compelled to make his characters reveal their own illogicalities and rationalizations and those of one another. Sartorius is something of a realist and is justified in extending the responsibility for the grinding of the poor to his secret partners in society, but he rationalizes when he declares his helplessness to combat the system and insists that his wretched tenants are incorrigible, beyond help. Yet since Trench gratefully embraces the latter theory, and Blanche is wholly contemptuous of her father's tenants, it is left to Sartorius to demolish his own case with the story of his mother. Similarly Trench, who is weak and easily mollified in Act Two, becomes more comprehending of the general guilt and more incisively critical of his confederates' hypocrisies in Act Three than he has hitherto shown an ability to be. But Shaw evidently felt that Trench must speak so in order to illuminate clearly the self-deceit and specious excuses which were typical according to Shaw, of apparently respectable property managers.

Despite the foregoing difficulties posed by conscientious adherence to the events of the sentimental play pattern, Shaw was quite faithful to his method. Yet it was in the 1893 "Preface" to Widowers' Houses that Shaw said: "As a fictionist, my natural way is to imagine characters and spin out a story about them,"¹³ and, "...the resultant play, whether good or bad, must on my method be

13. G. B. Shaw, "The Author's Preface" to Widowers' Houses, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 668.

a growth out of the stimulated imagination of the actual writer, and not a manufactured article constructed by an artisan according to plans and specifications supplied by an inventor."¹⁴ Shaw evidently believed that his playwriting was an act of spontaneous creation, just as André Gide believed that he was writing an unplotted novel in Les Faux-Monnayeurs. Perhaps one can reconcile Shaw's theory with his practice by applying to him S. C. Sen Gupta's comment on Shavian heroes:

In men with highly developed minds, such as Shaw's Caesar, Napoleon, and Bluntschli, the dictates of instinct are so far from caprice that it seems that they mechanically follow an intelligently laid-out plan.¹⁵

Shaw's loyalty to formula in Widowers' Houses can be defended. The play is obviously intended to be an expose rather than a 'plea for the oppressed' as Dixon Scott would have it, and it is a thorough, neatly-rounded exposure of both the economic system (as it concerned landowners and renters) and sentimental drama. Nevertheless, the technique manifestly entailed difficulties, and in Mrs. Warren's Profession, which has two positive themes and is also an inversion of stock situation, Shaw's ingenuity was taxed further.

Mrs. Warren's Profession

In Mrs. Warren's Profession Shaw undertook to deal with two themes, each of which he developed in two acts. Mrs. Warren, whose position is analogous to that of Sartorius though not the same, gives verbal expression to one of these themes: society's

¹⁴. Ibid., p. 669.

¹⁵. S. C. Sen Gupta, The Art of Bernard Shaw, Calcutta, A. Mukherjee & Co. (Private) Ltd., 1957, copyright 1936, p. 34.

unacknowledged sponsorship of prostitution, an evil which society deplores. Mrs. Warren's daughter Vivie, in her reactions to her mother's story and parental claims, states and illustrates the play's second theme: the individual's duty to himself and his fundamental right to reject such conventions as filial 'duty' and 'love', which hamper his self-assertion. Like Widowers' Houses, the play is a counterstatement to orthodox stage treatments of its problems, and like Widowers' Houses it reverses upon such treatments to make its unorthodoxies apparent.

Again hostile reactions to a Shaw play were evoked by the views given prominence in it rather than by technical features. Neither of the arguments Shaw dramatized in Mrs. Warren's Profession was entirely new in 1894 when the play was written; the family as a sanctified institution was beginning to come under attack, and the case for the much-maligned prostitute had been voiced occasionally from the middle of the century on. In 1858, "Another Unfortunate" enquired in a letter to The Times: "What business has society to have dregs -- such dregs as we?...Why stand you there mouthing with sleek face about morality? What is morality?"¹⁶ But the questions 'what is morality?' and 'how does morality fare when it conflicts with self-interest and group-interest?' were not given serious, objective consideration on the Victorian stage before the new drama came to pose them. Pseudo-realistic plays discovered the reasons for sin in very particular sets of circumstances rather than in esteemed institutions, and fallen women were invariably shamed and repentant; or terribly punished. Dumas fills Marguerite Gauthier

16. Quoted by Cyril Pearl in The Girl with the Swansdown Seat, New York, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1955, p. 62.

mothered a long line of Magdalens to water nineteenth-century stages with penitential tears while their authors titillated audiences with vice and placated them with expiation.

In the last decades of the century, playwrights became absorbed by the attempts of such women to re-enter the society out of which they had strayed. According to Pinero and Jones, their efforts were doomed to failure. Pinero's Paula Tanqueray shot herself, Jones's Mrs. Dane was defeated by conscience, and Pinero's Agnes Ebbsmith found hermit's sanctuary in a minister's home. All were routed by virtuous characters, dire circumstances, conscience, or a combination of these. Shaw's Mrs. Warren was the first scarlet-woman protagonist of stature to round on her critics and accuse them of responsibility for her past misdeeds and present thriving condition.

When Janet Achurch told Shaw a de Maupassant tale, "Yvette", about the ingenuous daughter of a disreputable woman, Shaw said, "I will work out the real truth about that mother some day."¹⁷ Mrs. Warren's Profession was the result of this resolution. Once again Shaw re-told a romantic tale, retaining the major events typical of sentimental drama, but draining them of their romance. This time, however, he employed a protagonist to expound his positive thesis, and in steering her through the formula pattern he had to exercise more ingenuity than he had needed to invert all the conventional ingredients of Widowers' Houses.

The initial circumstances of Mrs. Warren's Profession are akin to those of many contemporaneous plays. A virtuous

17. Quoted by Frank Harris in Bernard Shaw, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1931, p. 180.

daughter begins to suspect the past of her mother. The girl has some romantic interest in a young man of apparently impeccable background, a parson's son, and her mother's imminent arrival will inevitably be followed by a crucial interview. To a conventional Victorian playwright the possibilities of this situation would immediately have been clear. In an orthodox treatment the first climax would be the revelation concerning the mother -- a revelation achieved by confession or exposure. The ensuing drama would be shaped by the mother's subsequent behaviour, the daughter's reaction, and the response of the parson's son to the dreadful truth. The commands of duty would complicate the plot. If the mother were a sympathetic character, it would be her duty to make amends to her daughter, and it would be the daughter's duty to solace her repentant parent. Thus Ellean Tanqueray's duty compels her to make conciliatory gestures to Paula and introduce her to Captain Ardale (whereupon Paula is obliged to destroy Ellean's romance and kill herself). The possible variations on this theme are several, but the proper responses, as established by Pinero, Jones, and their followers, are few and plain. If the play were a tragedy, the heroine's future would be blighted and she would leave the painful scene. Probably her mother would commit suicide, join Agnes Ebbsmith in prayer, or otherwise retire defeated.

Shaw's dramatization of the situation takes him over some of this terrain, but comes upon its topography from an entirely different angle. The mother's purple past is disclosed, the daughter's relations with the parson's son are ended, and the daughter leaves her mother permanently. All of these events

are perfectly orthodox stage occurrences under the circumstances. But in motivating them Shaw created a radically different play from the typical 'Pinerotic' one.

As he had done in Widowers' Houses, Shaw provided some preparation for his startling revelations in the play's opening scene. Vivie Warren is not a sweetly naive ingénue like Yvette but a cool and puritanical young exponent of independence, self-expression, and responsibility; her qualities are firmly sketched in her conversation with Praed, a sentimental aesthete and would-be rebel. Vivie is obviously to be admired, although she is too capable and self-possessed to elicit much sympathy, and this scene foreshadows not a tearful tête-à-tête but a climactic clash between mother and daughter.

The debunking mechanism continues to function in the second half of Act One as Mrs. Warren, no penitent but a genial, showy, 'decidedly vulgar old blackguard', and Sir George Crofts, a gross businessman and man about town, invade the garden. Mrs. Warren is immediately revealed as a dominating parent with her own definite intentions for Vivie's future, and the remainder of Act One and most of Act Two build steadily toward the scène à faire between mother and daughter.

The first conflict between Vivie and Mrs. Warren draws together both themes of the play. The second theme, concerning personal morality, is not discussed fully until Act Four, but it is a part of Mrs. Warren's strong case. The second and fourth act finales are complementary in presenting a unified irony. In brief, Mrs. Warren was coerced into prostitution by an unfair economy; she sanely chose a lucrative profession rather than

respectable drudgery and hunger, thereby doing the duty to herself which is no duty. (Her further activities as a procuress are not stressed till Acts Three and Four.) But in attempting to impose her will upon Vivie she is asserting a conventional claim -- the right to filial submission -- which it is Vivie's duty (in Shavian terms) to refuse. This is propounded by the mature Vivie of Act Four. Ironically, when Mrs. Warren chose her immoral trade she was justified; when she now asserts a right ratified by conventional morality, she is immoral. By this double inversion of approved stage conventions, Shaw propelled his play to a superficially orthodox conclusion. The proposition is a neat one: beside his charge against hypocritical society Shaw developed the positive proposal that the individual be true to himself rather than to an artificial code. The first part of the proposition, society's guilt, is presented effectively. The second part does not emerge as successfully because it is confused with other issues.

Shaw's basic plan was to defend Mrs. Warren's 'unconventionality' in the second act and indict her of complicity in society's guilt in the third and fourth. Hence the fact that she continues to prosper as the active manageress of a string of brothels is withheld from Vivie and from the audience until Act Three. Vivie sets the pattern for what follows when she says in Act Two:

You claim the rights of a mother: the right to call me fool and child: to speak to me as no woman in authority over me at college dare speak to me; to dictate my way of life; and to force on me the acquaintance of a brute whom anyone can see to be the most vicious sort of London

man about town. Before I give myself the trouble to resist such claims, I may as well find out whether they have any real existence.

(Act II, p. 74.)

Accordingly the question of Vivie's proper reaction to the claims is postponed until Mrs. Warren has told her story.

Mrs. Warren's oration is the dramatic climax of the play. Although she has been delineated as a likeable vulgarian, her profession has been broadly hinted at in the grotesquely humorous speculations of Crofts about Vivie's parentage, and the audience has been led to form "a meanly false judgment" of her. But Mrs. Warren's response to her daughter's cold interrogation is no tearful stage confession; it is a passionate denunciation of the economic system which offered her no endurable alternative to prostitution. The speech is a debater's masterpiece, a systematic refutation of the conventional prejudice that the prostitute is a naturally immoral voluptuary. Rather, says Mrs. Warren,

...she has to bear with disagreeables and take the rough with the smooth, just like a nurse in a hospital or anyone else. It's not work that any woman would do for pleasure, goodness knows; though to hear the pious people talk you would suppose it was a bed of roses.

(Act II, p. 76.)

And the prostitute needs a number of middle-class virtues: she must be energetic, well-conducted, sensible. Furthermore, in maintaining her own health and independence, in giving value for money, she can sustain her self-respect as fashionably helpless brides cannot. What begins as self-justification becomes a trenchant criticism of society on several counts.

Vivie has been established as intelligent, self-disciplined, and critical. When she decides in her mother's

favour, Shaw's case against society is won in the play, and the first crucial inversion of stage 'morality' is achieved. The play might end here on a climax with the 'virtuous' daughter surprisingly but logically reconciled with her 'immoral' mother. For several reasons it does not.

First, Shaw had no intention of whitewashing Mrs. Warren. Although she was justified in choosing survival, she went on to batten upon society's rotten spots. Moreover, she is not merely a defiantly prosperous representative of a scape-goat group. She is now also a subscriber to expedient hypocrisies. Secondly, the consequences of society's left-handed fostering of prostitution have not been exposed thoroughly by the close of Act Two. Thirdly, to this point Vivie has been used chiefly as an intelligent but impressionable interlocutor rather than a protagonist in this play about duty to self; she is now awakened and can illustrate the lesson dramatically. And fourthly, the formula play has not been completely treated.

Acts Three and Four prepare for a second climactic conversation between Mrs. Warren and Vivie. In this clash Mrs. Warren is defeated when Vivie declares her decision:

If I had been you, mother, I might have done as you did; but I should not have lived one life and believed in another. You are a conventional woman at heart. That is why I am bidding you goodbye now. (Act IV, p. 92.)

On the face of it this is a cleverly effected union of the orthodox concluding event of a sentimental treatment with Shaw's ironic realism: the procuress's daughter is bidding her mother farewell, not because she is a procuress but because she is conventional (i.e. hypocritical). But this irony is not fully supported by the play.

In Act Three Vivie learns of her mother's flourishing business, and the dreadful possibilities engendered by Mrs. Warren's past traffic with 'respectable' clients are brought forward. Sir George Crofts proposes marriage, despite the possibility that he may have fathered Vivie. Frank is declared to be Vivie's half-brother. The finale to this act of accumulating horrors is a melodramatic piece of 'business' with a rifle, after which Vivie runs away. Obviously Vivie's flight is precipitated by abhorrence at the revelations forced upon her -- not by her mother's 'conventionality'. Under such circumstances a heroine could hardly be expected to overcome her repugnance in the interests of filial duty.

Shaw's point would have been made with more clarity if Mrs. Warren had indeed retired from her profession early, as Vivie at first assumed, and Vivie had simply refused to sacrifice her own ambitions to her mother's maternal desires. But Shaw's desire to thrust home the lurid significance of prostitution in the lives of new generations conspired with his penchant for creating effective 'theatre' to weight the scales in this case heavily. Vivie's right to live her own life does not alone outbalance her mother's claims on her; it is assisted by particular circumstances. And momentarily Vivie seems a sister character to Ellean Tanqueray. As William Irvine remarks, "...she recedes noticeably at times in Act Three toward Victorian woman, with suggestions of sentiment, tears, fainting, and suicide."¹⁸

18 William Irvine, The Universe of G.B.S., pp. 167-168.

The disparity which becomes evident in Act Four between the play and the analysis given by Vivie, the interpreter, is an unusual one in Shaw. For what the play seems to say is apparently a more trustworthy reflection of Shaw's sentiments than what Vivie says in her fourth-act curtain speech. Both Shaw and Vivie are manifestly repelled by Mrs. Warren's profession. Yet Vivie's last speech suggests only that Mrs. Warren should be consistent, that she should not seek social status by masking her activities under a conventional business facade, but should openly 'go her way'. If this is one's duty to self, it would seem to allow absolute licence. Yet Vivie is critical of Frank, whose chosen line is pleasant idling. And other Shavian protagonists -- such characters as Caesar, Napoleon, Dick Dudgeon -- are active, effective citizens of the world and servants of the Life Force while consistently being themselves and submitting to no compulsion. Therefore, doing one's duty in Shavian terms apparently involves what Matthew Arnold called 'asserting one's better self'. It can thus be posited that Mrs. Warren is untrue to herself in promoting a vice, expending her energy to gratify society's lower pleasures, and gathering wealth as a passport to luxury and a measure of social approval. But if Vivie means this she does not make it sufficiently explicit. And if she did so explain herself, the explanation might well not convince the spectator who had witnessed Act Three.

Several critics indicate some dissatisfaction with the final scene. Eric Bentley suggests one diagnosis for the play's difficulty:

Mrs. Warren's Profession has been criticized on the grounds that the main problem is obscured by the emergence of a strong emotional nexus that ties Vivie to her mother. The vitality that in Shaw's earlier works was more or less kept under comes bubbling here to the surface.¹⁹

Frank Harris says of the final dialogue: "This isn't mother and daughter, but the realist Shaw unsexing both."²⁰ Shaw certainly did not spoil the play's unity by 'unsexing' his characters, but he did make Vivie the spokeswoman of the second part of his thesis epigram instead of allowing her consistency. The fault is not too little neatness but too much; the clever double inversion is insisted upon even when it does not quite fit the play.²¹

The unconvincing cleverness of Vivie's summation does not mar the play seriously. Mrs. Warren's Profession sheds a strong light on its principal subject, prostitution, nonetheless. But the conclusion does illustrate the kind of confusion Shaw risked when he attempted to convey a new, convention-baiting idea in a play founded on a familiar romantic pattern and making serio-comic use of stock melodramatic climaxes.

The play has a number of melodramatic moments. Mrs. Warren's ingenuous unmasking of the Reverend Samuel is a theatrical climax given a comic twist. The allusions to incest are handled half humorously, but are nevertheless deliberate

19 Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 105.

20 Frank Harris, Bernard Shaw, p. 178. See also E. Strauss, Bernard Shaw: Art and Socialism, London, Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1942, p. 31.

21 An example of the kind of misunderstanding Act Four is liable to appears in James Agate's review of a 1925 production reprinted in Agate's The Contemporary Theatre, 1925, London, Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1926, pp. 232-233.

sensational strokes. And the conclusion of Act Three is pure melodrama. Mrs. Warren's tirade in Act Two is not the kind of climax the Victorian audience had been trained to expect, but it is not dwarfed by the other peaks. Although, as William Irvine says, "Mrs. Warren strides with magnificent confidence along the very brink of psychological credibility,"²² her second-act eloquence is at once powerful and sufficiently plausible. It is Vivie who falters, for her path is more precarious. As a heroine combining the characteristics proper to the old drama and the rationality and assertiveness appropriate to the new, she is sometimes over-emotional, sometimes super-rational. To guide the play to its planned conclusion -- the formula-play's farewell scene viewed from a realist's angle -- she must give a reasoned account for her histrionics of Act Three. The explanation smacks of rationalization and is therefore a somewhat dissatisfying and flat culmination.

The play's ending is the final inversion of pattern. In a conventional play the severance scene would almost certainly be an unhappy finale. In this play the curtain falls on the heroine's contented smile. But in arriving at this conclusion Shaw had to resort to some manipulation which could have been avoided had he been less addicted to his carefully balanced thesis and to the form and mode of the sentimental drama he was re-casting.

Mrs. Warren's Profession is a long step forward from Widowers' Houses, despite the former's tidy, contrived resolution. Both plays mock the polite atmospheres, stock characters,

22 William Irvine, The Universe of G.B.S., p. 167.

predictable events, and conventional assumptions of sentimental drawing-room drama, but whereas the characters of Widowers' Houses are static and the play's impact is negative, Mrs. Warren's Profession deals positively with a more dramatic theme and features a maturing protagonist. Widowers' Houses is little more than a sardonic caricature of a conventional play. It is historically notable as a trenchant statement of a point of view seldom before treated dramatically, and it contains the seeds of several ideas Shaw was to develop later, but it lacks momentum and clings to the story-line of Augier's sentimental play and Archer's sentimental plot. Mrs. Warren's Profession has some life and continuity of its own, independent of the conventional play it satirizes.

Nevertheless, the final act of Mrs. Warren's Profession is anti-climactic, not because it is a 'discussion' act, but because discussion is forced away from the play's primary point to a secondary issue. The gathering complexities of Shaw's inversion technique frequently make themselves felt in his last acts. Major Barbara, an important drama among Shaw's sociological plays, also demonstrates the problem.

Major Barbara

Written nine years and eleven plays after Mrs. Warren's Profession, Major Barbara is a much more ambitious play. Like its sociological predecessors, it deals with society's guilt, but does so on a much wider scale than they. The principal character disillusioned and converted in this play is a Shavian saint, the parent who initiates her transformation is an

imposing Mephistopheles, and the dialogue brings into focus man's moral condition, his religious doctrines, his economic and political dilemmas, and the inter-relationships of these. This vast idea-content poses the play's technical problems, for it is too large and complex for the situation which must support it.

Major Barbara's principal topic is the 'crime' of poverty already revealed to the Victorian reader by Samuel Butler's Erewhon. This fundamental evil is touched on in both Widowers' Houses and Mrs. Warren's Profession, but not isolated and identified, merely hinted at in the discussion of two faces of the existing economic situation. In Major Barbara it emerges as a fact which society prefers to ignore in formulating its philosophies and policies. The second theme is Shaw's belief that Christianity becomes misleading "Crosstianity" when it paralyzes the human conscience with its threats of damnation and its expiation-bought pardons, and that it abets the crime of poverty by preaching of humility, resignation, and the inscrutable wisdom of a God who blesses the meek. The two themes merge around the person of Barbara, who attempts to alleviate the sufferings and save the souls of London's poor.

Again in this play a strong parent is the agent of transformation. Like Sartorius and Mrs. Warren, Undershaft is apparently guilty of anti-social activity, and like them he wages a vigorous campaign to modify the obvious, conventional judgment on him, to justify himself and to embarrass the spectator in his easy prejudices. But unlike the rack-renter and the procuress, this armament manufacturer is totally

conscious of his own motives and rôle; being of philosophic mind he is aware of his own economic, political, and social significance. A less plausible but more complicated and impressive character than the other two, Undershaft is a Lucifer-like creation, a man who knows precisely how he sustains the situation he thrives on, yet suggests to his less perceptive juniors a mode of assault on the bulwarks he vows to defend. This aristocrat among realists stands at the play's centre, frank and ruthless but not hostile to Barbara's idealistic vision so long as it involves a clear recognition of the reality from which it must grow, if it can, into a fact. His peculiar ambivalence allows him to appear Barbara's antagonist in Act One and utter the challenge to the 'saint' which establishes the general pattern of the play.

Aside from this arrangement for an exchange of visits, the content of Act One is lightweight and incidental. Like the settings and initial conversations of Widowers' Houses and Mrs. Warren's Profession, Lady Britomart's library and her opening conversation with Stephen suggest that the play will be little more than a witty, frivolous drawing-room comedy set against a safe, solid, upper-middle-class background. To impose this deception upon the audience, Shaw dealt with his characters rather flippantly in Act One. Lady Britomart's plaintive comments on her husband, Stephen's discovery of Undershaft's foundling dynasty and his own plight, and Undershaft's brazen boasts are all informative about characters and situations and thus prepare for the debates and events to follow, but primarily they are comic interludes in which Shaw satirizes

slick, sentimental comedy. And, in the course of this act, one major irrelevance mars the play's balance. A large proportion of the act features staunchly Tory Stephen, his resentment of his father, and his stirrings of revolt against Lady Britomart's maternal dominion. The first curtain descends upon Stephen, alone and brooding. But thereafter Stephen, except as a satirical portrait of a conventional idealist, receives only casual treatment.

Act Two contains no such digressions and distractions, and is the most artfully devised of the play's three stages. This act is a departure from the drawing-room milieu to the sphere of Barbara's Salvation Army missionizing. This kind of field trip to scenes of poverty, disease, and injustice is rare in Shaw's plays. Brieux and Galsworthy depended heavily upon the emotional impact of courtroom scenes; Brieux's doctors and lawyers held forth eloquently among striking exhibits of man's cruelty and folly. But Shaw's interest was in the causes of social evils and the vested interests that maintained them rather than in distasteful consequences, and his reasoned contempt for unrealistic theories about the existence and treatment of society's plague spots moved him to caustic satire rather than to emotional denunciations. He did not resort to dramatic assaults upon his spectator's hearts and consciences with exhibitions of wretchedness. In this play Shaw simply moved the debate among Undershaft, Barbara, and Cusins into the street and arranged a compact little illustration of Barbara's correct (according to Shaw)²³ treatment of souls and Undershaft's

²³ G.B. Shaw, Preface to Major Barbara, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 128.

correct estimate of charity to prove the debate's points. Act Two is therefore not a change from Shaw's discursive approach, although it is a much more integrated and serious act than its predecessor. Barbara's failure with Bill Walker, caused by her father's purchase of the Army's blessing, knits together the strands of Shaw's argument.

The act is also quite plausible, for the most part. Although the arrival of Bill Walker, a ruffian with the saving grace of Shavian pride, is fortuitous, there is little of melodrama's coincidence in Act Two. The ideas Undershaft proffers are of great magnitude, but they arise naturally from the situation. And whether or not the spectator accepts Shaw's optimism about human nature, the act substantiates his points plausibly and events are thoroughly motivated. In its skillful manipulation of happenings in time and its distribution of activities and conversations among nine characters, Act Two demonstrates Shaw's mature ability to handle and direct a well-populated and intensely significant scene.

Moreover, the harmony of comedy and high-seriousness is maintained. Barbara is in many ways comparable to a tragic hero. She is a sympathetic, purposeful character -- and therefore admirable -- but she lacks wholeness of vision and is over-confident. The unsoundness of her course is revealed in Undershaft's conversation with Cusins, and her inherent weakness is exposed in a brief interchange with Undershaft:

BARBARA ...I am getting at last to think more of
the collection than of the people's souls
....I want to convert people, not to be
always begging for the Army in a way I'd
die sooner than beg for myself.

UNDERSHAFT [in profound irony] Genuine unselfishness
 is capable of anything, my dear.
 (Act II, p. 481.)

Barbara's disillusionment is not caused merely by Undershaft's Machiavellian charity; it is shown to be an enlightenment that she must inevitably suffer. And her despairing cry is genuinely moving. At the same time, her defeat is comic, for the illusions taken from her are inimical to social reform. In traditional comedy terms, she is 'deflated' rather than destroyed. Her 'antagonist', Undershaft, is sympathetic toward her, and Cusins, who acts as an ironic chorus in these scene, sustains the comic note. Snobby Price's pilfering of Bill's money is a semi-comic touch to complete the proof of Undershaft's theory that poverty begets vice. Thus, at the close of the act a reversal proper to Aristotelian tragedy coincides with a comic inversion of the stage convention that Christian charity is unassailable.

Once again a first inversion of the predictable is successfully dramatized by the end of a second act. And once again Shaw succumbed to temptation and constructed an ending compatible with the finale typical of his orthodox models. Simultaneously he set out to establish the exact converse of the play's first proposition. He provided a trim happy ending for his characters by compelling them to endorse the view that, since economic security is the only trustworthy foundation for public morality, power must be seized and used before justice can prevail.

To accomplish this final movement, Shaw had to inject one rather tritely startling note into Act Two. The capitalist

changes his colours. He still speaks with the realism which, according to Shaw in this play, only capitalists display possession of, but he begins to talk of a new dispensation. He asserts the desirability of class revolt, though he does not trust in its inevitability and is an aristocratic authoritarian rather than a communist in his attitude toward the abject masses: "We three must stand together above the common people: how else can we help their children to climb up beside us?" Undershaft suffers occasional relapses into his exaggeratedly villainous role -- witness his kicking of the dummy targets in Act Three while he announces his latest success in wholesale destruction -- but from his abrupt announcement in Act Two of his love for Barbara he has an entirely new rôle in the play. Perhaps the most momentous and implausible event in Act Two is Undershaft's 'conversion' at the very moment when he seems to be triumphing over his daughter. The Nietzschean doctrine of strength embodied by Undershaft reaches out to include the hope and faith in common humanity embodied by Barbara. But this resolution is not confirmed until Act Three, and Act Two closes upon Barbara renouncing the haplessly dependent Army and momentarily in disillusioned despair.

Act Three re-assembles Act One's complement of characters in Lady Britomart's library and disposes of Stephen's future in dialogue that wavers between irony and farce while it reinforces Undershaft's contention regarding complacent idealists. Thus the problem of Stephen, underlined in Act One, is lightly solved in Act Three -- the significance of the solution being that the way is cleared for Cusins, and so, in part,

for Barbara, to succeed Undershaft. Similarly, Barbara's trampled spirits are resuscitated with a single stroke:

UNDERSHAFT. Does my daughter despair so easily?
Can you strike a man to the heart and leave no mark
on him?

BARBARA [her face lighting up] Oh, you are right:
he [Bill Walker] can never be lost now: where was
my faith? (Act III, p. 492.)

And the scene shifts to Undershaft's serene and spotless foundry town where the rest of the drama is played out in a philosophic debate to an incredible treaty between Undershaft and Cusins.

Cusins comes to the fore in this act, after serving chiefly as Undershaft's prompter in Act Two. (The professor's eligibility to succeed Undershaft is proved with an adroit Shavian stroke of multi-level comedy: the foundling revelation reverses on upper-class suitor-testing, parodies French plays with their bastard heroes, capitalizes on the deceased-wife's-sister issue, and harmonizes with Shaw's insistence that the realist-reformer must be free from conventional bonds.) But Cusins, attractive independent though he is, has fared too feebly and spoken too objectively in his earlier discussions with Undershaft to succeed in presenting himself thus belatedly as an important factor in the synthesis of Undershaft's energetic realism and Barbara's high purpose.

Even more dissatisfying than Cusins' late emergence is the transition in Act Three from plausible situations on a mundane level to the dizzying heights where the huge and complex social dilemma defined in Act Two is speciously solved with generalizations and abstractions. Shaw's answer to his

own question -- how shall mankind be saved? -- is positive, grimly optimistic, and attractive in theory: the poor shall be armed and empowered to free themselves of the seven deadly sins begot of poverty, to take their rightful privileges and responsibilities as human beings who can afford souls, and to develop the consciences now hushed by a blood-steeped religion. What is required, says Act Three, is inspired purpose, certainly -- but first, power. Intellect, will, and spirit are powers, but they are futile unless they control the crude brute force of the tiger, of explosives. However, concerning practice Shaw's only suggestion is that the means of physical destruction be given into the hands of the poor. Says Cusins: "I want a power simple enough for common men to use, yet strong enough to force the intellectual oligarchy to use its genius for the general good." But the problem that remains -- the difficulty of insuring just use of the terrible instruments once they are in the grasp of the as-yet-unsaved and therefore soulless masses -- this problem is evaded. What Shaw seems to propose is revolution benevolently begun and supervised by a dictatorship of the elect. In fact, the practical counterpart of Shaw's metaphysical program is far from obvious.

There are two common reactions among critics to this resolution. Some ascribe it to the gloom of a discouraged Fabian.²⁴ Others agree with John Gassner that Major Barbara's conclusion is a deliberately devised irritant. Says Gassner:

Shaw's ... plays often leave us in a state of animated, tinglingly sharp suspension. It does

²⁴ Desmond MacCarthy asserts this explanation in The Court Theatre, 1904-1907, London, A.H. Bullen, 1907, p.112. Edmund Fuller also suggests it in George Bernard Shaw: Critic of Western Morale, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950, p.53.

not matter even when the tongue-in-cheek solution that he places at the end of a play, as in Major Barbara, is one so patently inconceivable as that the world will be saved by efficient manufacturers of war munitions. The outrageousness of the proposal is only a further provocation to thought.²⁵

But surely it does matter to the play as a play that its elements should suddenly change their natures in the last act. Although comedy is interwoven with truth-seeking till the end of Act Two, the strain of intense seriousness is always clear; it seems unlikely that Shaw should endow three characters with his own passion for truth, only to transform them, for the sake of a neatly-turned paradox, into deluded visionaries. It is more probable that he sacrificed exhaustive and necessarily inconclusive debate on his vast theme to the interests of a rounded, playable drama, and that Joseph Frank is closer to the mark than the aforementioned critics when he comments

...the superficial plot structure of Major Barbara, with its contrived, almost distorted, happy ending, pokes fun at a chronic stage situation.²⁶

The impression made by Cusins in this disingenuous last act is probably not entirely what Shaw envisioned. Some slight tension on the surface level is sustained by the suggestion that Barbara's acceptance or rejection of Cusins depends upon his acceptance or rejection of Undershaft's offer, and that, like Bassanio, he does not know which answer will win the lady. Cusins' marital future as well as his monetary one is at stake, and the audience may with justice feel that at

²⁵ John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times, New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1954, p. 128.

²⁶ Joseph Frank, "Major Barbara - Shaw's 'Divine Comedy'", PMLA, Vol. LXXI (Mar., 1956), p. 62.

least one of the strands with which he bridges the "abyss of moral horror" between him and Undershaft's "accursed aerial battleships" is self-interest. This impression, it is true, derives less from what Cusins says than from what he does not say: his only defiance of Undershaft is his stipulation that he will sell arms selectively rather than to any buyer offering a fair price. Otherwise, his tentative objections are demolished one by one by Undershaft, whose epigrammatic wit is sufficiently clever to distract the audience from his, and Shaw's evasions. And Cusins assists in the diversionary action:

CUSINS....there are things in me that I must reckon with. Pity -

UNDERSHAFT. Pity! The scavenger of misery.

CUSINS. Well, love.

UNDERSHAFT. I know, You love the needy and the outcast: you love the oppressed races, the negro, the Indian ryot, the underdog everywhere. Do you love the Japanese? Do you love the French? Do you love the English?

CUSINS. No. Every true Englishman detests the English. We are the wickedest nation on earth; and our success is a moral horror.

.

CUSINS....I hate war.

UNDERSHAFT. Hatred is the coward's revenge for being intimidated. Dare you make war on war?
Here are the means.... (Act III, p. 500.)

And so Cusins is propelled into acceptance of the bombs, a fortune, and Barbara, while Barbara is called from the slums into the foundry town where bodies are healthy and souls are ripe for the plucking by an evangelist who has renounced the bribe of bread and also her humility:

Let God's work be done for its own sake: the work he had to create us to do because it cannot be done except by living men and women. When I die, let him be in my debt, not I in his, and let me forgive him as becomes a woman of my rank.

(Act III, p. 503.)

Barbara and Cusins are evidently quite reconciled to their new rôles, and, though the spectator may be doubtful of the grounds for their satisfaction, Shaw's intention seems quite clear: this is a Shavian happy ending, as Widowers' Houses' ending was not, and a conventional happy ending, as the finale of Mrs. Warren's Profession was not.

Although Major Barbara is not obviously patterned on any standard plot, stock assumptions and stock characters constitute an important undertone in the play. Undershaft shares some traits with the mustache-twirling villains of melodrama, and Barbara bears similarities to other saintly ladies of the stage, such as Barrett and Scott's Sister Mary. But instead of completely debunking the audience assumptions which these traits provoke, as he had done in Widowers' Houses, Shaw made subtle use of them through compromise. Barbara's disillusionment is orthodox, but her continuing appeal is conventional. Undershaft's theories are vindicated but his policies are not, and he is converted from his amoral opportunism as in a conventional play he would have to be. Moreover, in making the West Ham 'penitents' unprepossessing, and in coupling Barbara's 'conversion' with her rise from this rough, dissembling company to the peace and plenty of Perivale St. Andrews, Shaw satisfied the spectator's habitual desire that the protagonist's virtue be rewarded materially as well as spiritually.

The careful balance of orthodoxy and iconoclasm is paralleled by the symmetrical arrangement of settings: scenes in Lady Britomart's library alternate with scenes presenting the neat contrast between the West Ham shelter and Perivale St. Andrews. Similar precise balance and form is exhibited in much of the dialogue. Lomax's "Oh I say!" and Cusins' classical allusions in defense of cliches punctuate the play with refrain-like regularity. And Undershaft's arguments are frequently marked by epigrammatic parallelism. The device is apparent in such interchanges as Undershaft's exchange of addresses with Barbara:

BARBARA. In West Ham. At the sign of the cross.
Ask anybody in Canning Town. Where are your works?

UNDERSHAFT. In Perivale St. Andrews. At the sign
of the sword. Ask anybody in Europe.
(Act I, p. 469.)

It appears again in Undershaft's clash with Peter Shirley:

SHIRLEY...I wouldnt have your conscience, not for
all your income.

UNDERSHAFT. I wouldnt have your income not for all
your conscience.... (Act II, p. 476.)

And again concern for rhetorical form is evidenced in the stichomythia of the Cusins-Undershaft debate in Act Two:

UNDERSHAFT. I prefer sober workmen. The profits
are larger.

CUSINS - honest -

UNDERSHAFT. Honest workmen are the most
economical.

CUSINS - attached to their homes -

UNDERSHAFT. So much the better: they will put
up with anything sooner than change their shop.

CUSINS - happy -

UNDERSHAFT. An invaluable safeguard against
revolution. (Act II, p.480.)

Such regard for order and pattern in the play's parts is suggestive. It implies strongly that Shaw was also governed by an artist's concern for shape in constructing the whole and that Maurice Valency has abstracted only a half-truth when he says:

The essence of Shaw's method...is to construct or adapt a theatrical contraption of the greatest banality, very busy and swift in its movement, and then to cause the characters to examine the situation in which they are involved in the most observant and sensible way. Thus the characters, without abandoning for an instant the canonical line of action, are able to transcend mentally into a higher and more valid reality, dragging what is left of the plot after them.²⁷

In Major Barbara it is the plot and the demands of external form that chivy and drag the philosophic theme to a hasty conclusion. Shaw's followers, notably Granville-Barker, accepted his dictum that "The moment the dramatist gives up accidents and catastrophes, and takes 'slices of life' as his material, he finds himself committed to plays that have no endings"²⁸ quite literally, and hence left their audiences dissatisfied. But Shaw himself was a showman, and unruly ideas do not triumph over symmetry of story and tailoring of theme in Major Barbara.

Summary

A mirthless discussion of any Shaw play from a reader's point of view, though safer than any attempt to emulate the master, is bound to omit many comic climaxes which, particularly

²⁷ Maurice Valency, "Shaw, the Durable Dramatist", Theatre Arts, Vol. XL (July, 1956), p. 86.

²⁸ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Three Plays by Brieux, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 200.

when the play is new to an audience and the jokes are still topical, tend to distract the spectator from critical concentration on the argument. Aphorisms and epigrams which are applauded and passed by during the play's performance are stationary targets for argument, quibble, and qualification to the reader, and are apt to be treated with a deadly earnestness that ignores their theatrical effectiveness. Similarly, a neatly-rounded play structure may satisfy the spectator with its seeming finality, whereas it irritates the reader when examination proves that it pinches and constricts the ideas raised in the play. It is therefore well to remember that Shaw's precise inversions of run-of-the-mill plays, his trimly formulated jokes, and his conventional endings are no more mere faults in dramaturgy than they are unmixed triumphs. Nevertheless, their less happy effects are increasingly apparent with age.

Shaw, who was seldom wholly trustworthy on the subject of himself and his methods, made a number of comments on his weaknesses as a playwright. He admitted to his fondness for tomfoolery. In a 1928 address to The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Shaw said:

This is a curious psychological thing. It has prevented me from becoming a really great author. I have unfortunately this desperate temptation that suddenly comes upon me. Just when I am really rising to the height of my power that I may become really tragic and great, some absurd joke occurs to me, and the anti-climax is irresistibleI cannot deny that I have got the tragedian and I have got the clown in me; and the clown trips me up in the most dreadful way. The English public have said for a long time that I am not

serious, because you never know when the red-hot poker will suddenly make its appearance or I shall trip over something or other.²⁹

Certainly Shaw did not let the jesting impulse lure him away from the seriousness of a play's theme, but it did colour his reputation to the degree that critics could be amused and unperturbed by the 'outrageousness' of Major Barbara's prescription for the world's ailments and miss the real motives for that prescription -- Shaw's penchant for paradox and his custom of writing tidy, conclusive plays.

Another admission from Shaw requires some examination and modification before it can be taken as a trustworthy guide to interpretation of his plays. It appears as a footnote to J. S. Collis's book Shaw in which Collis, discussing Shaw's superiority as a dramatist to Pinero and company, says:

By a Pinero play is simply meant a good play, a strong drama. A story is told, and told well. The dramatist considers that his first duty is to tell a story, his second duty is to tell a story, his third duty is to tell a story. (Those acquainted with Shaw's character can scarcely doubt that he therefore considered it to be his supreme duty never to tell a story.) In writing a Pinero play the dramatist must have good entrances and exits -- that is to say everyone will come into the room for a good reason and go out for a reason which he is careful to state. He must have good 'curtains' -- those enjoyable, easily conceived, unreal touches. He must finish his play (or game of chess) properly with an embrace, a suicide or a sudden surprise.³⁰

To this summary of the commercial dramatist's aims, Shaw appended a note:

It would be more correct to say that his first duty is to invent a situation, his second to lead

29 G. B. Shaw, Shaw on Theatre, pp. 194-195.

30 C. S. Collis, Shaw, London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1925, pp. 121-122.

up to it, and his third to get out of it as best he can. He begins with the end of Act II and goes on to Act I and Act III the latter the most likely to be a makeshift. I am assuming that you are referring to the Proficient Playwright in general of the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian school. But the formula applies to the Merchant of Venice and to many of my own plays.³¹

This statement can also be substantiated in Shaw's plays. The three discussed above abound in effective entrances, exits, and curtain-lines, and give evidence that the conclusion of Act Two was frequently Shaw's initial idea and the raison d'être for Acts One and Three (and, in Mrs. Warren's Profession, Act Four). But the finales are scarcely "makeshift"; Widowers' Houses is a faithful inversion of formula to the end, there are preparations for the last act of Mrs. Warren's Profession in Acts One and Two, and Undershaft's declarations in Act Two, as well as the consistent contradictions of stage axioms to the end of Act Two, foreshadow Major Barbara's last act.

Shaw's reputation as a humourist and a playwright whose principal interest in the collision of ideas was such that he would use a plot as a mere convenience for dramatizing that conflict is apt to distract his critics from his ingenious manipulation of characters and events and the calculated tidiness of his plays. His 'anti-construction' statements are similarly slightly misleading. Although many of his scenes move with an ease and vitality that suggest they were indeed "born alive", ³² the plays as wholes exhibit the craftsmanship of an artist who cut and polished most carefully. And the

31 Ibid., footnote, p. 122.

32 Shaw's phrase in a 1927 letter to Alexander Bakshy reprinted in Shaw on Theatre, p. 184.

precise inversion of stock situation in Widowers' Houses, the switch from melodrama to cool debate in Mrs. Warren's Profession, and the specious solution to Major Barbara's stupendous problem do not appear the natural evolutions of 'live' situations so much as the contrivances of a calculating dramatist bent on creating neat, complete plays.

Assuming, then, that Shaw was a planning as well as an inspired playwright, consciously exploiting contemporary patents for his own serious purposes as well as his comic ones, one can trace a development through these three plays. From mere inversion Shaw moved to Mrs. Warren's Profession with its complementary though ill-balanced themes, and thence to Major Barbara, in which a number of ideas are bound together and worked out in a single, unbroken action. Although its last act leaves something to be desired, Major Barbara is impressive proof that Shaw was learning to subordinate traditional dramaturgy to the demands of his positive realism.

MELODRAMA AND MEN OF ACTION -- THE DEVIL'S DISCIPLE

Two years after the completion of Widowers' Houses, Shaw began to develop the second of his principal themes, the actual nature of the 'heroic' man of action as opposed to the heroic temperament familiarized by nineteenth-century drama. Captain Bluntschli of Arms and the Man has not the obsessive passion of a Napoleon or a Julius Caesar, but he evinces the practical realism and 'ignoble' shrewdness Shaw was later to discover in these heroes of history. Arms and the Man was followed by The Man of Destiny (1895), and in 1897 Shaw finished The Devil's Disciple, a play about a sacrificial hero whose realism is united with disinterested altruism. Shaw's Caesar climaxes this series of vital, positive, 'heroic' realists, but among these plays The Devil's Disciple remains the strongest combination of integrated, developing plot and admirable hero.

In exhibiting his men of action, Shaw made use of a number of theatrical standbys, ranging from the romantic comedy at the base of Arms and the Man to 'Sardoodledum's' politics, passion, and intrigue, historical drama's glamour and pageantry, and melodrama's coincidences, sacrifices, and breathtaking rescues. But the critics, ever wary of Shaw, frequently failed to recognize that he had consciously exploited popular plots and the devices common to 'thrillers', and that occasionally these elements had retaliated by overshadowing the Shavian themes they were intended to serve.

The Devil's Disciple

In the October 7, 1899 issue of The Saturday Review, Max Beerbohm, reviewing a production of The Devil's Disciple, remarked delightedly, "In a bad melodrama by Mr. Shaw there would have been no incongruity. But that he should write a really good one, in spite of himself -- that was irresistible!"¹ And in the February 1, 1902 issue of the same journal, Mr. Beerbohm prefaced his criticism of a presentation of Mrs. Warren's Profession by saying:

With all due deference to Mr. Archer, "Not a masterpiece, no! with all reservations, not a masterpiece" is my cry. The play is in Mr. Shaw's earlier manner -- his 'prentice manner. It was written in the period when he had not yet found the proper form for expressing himself in drama. He has found that form now. He has come through experiment to the loose form of "Caesar and Cleopatra", of "The Devil's Disciple" -- that large and variegated form wherein there is elbow-room for all his irresponsible complexities.²

These two comments reveal a misconception about The Devil's Disciple; they suggest that in experimenting toward an original form capacious enough to spoof the paraphernalia of the current drama and to contain his ruminations on the local and universal scenes, Shaw inadvertently wrote a recognizable melodrama. But in 1896, when Shaw began The Devil's Disciple, his avowed intention was not to develop a new pattern but to write a melodrama for William Terriss, the celebrated principal of melodrama's London home, the Adelphi Theatre. In November, 1896, Shaw wrote to Ellen Terry:

1 Max Beerbohm, Around Theatres, Vol. I, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1930, p. 50.

2 Ibid., pp. 244-245.

...I have never tried melodrama before; and this thing, with its heroic sacrifice, its impossible court martial, its execution...its sobbings and speeches and declamations, may possibly be the most monstrous piece of farcical absurdity that ever made an audience shriek with laughter. And yet I have honestly tried for dramatic effect.³

For several reasons Shaw hewed closer to established pattern in the early scenes of The Devil's Disciple than he had done in those of his sociological plays. First, his intention was not to debunk melodrama -- he enjoyed it too much for that -- but to reveal what he considered the valid motives for absolute heroism, and he was therefore obliged to construct a genuinely tense situation. Secondly, he was employing a popular stock situation, the substitution plot made popular by Edward Rose's stage adaptation of The Prisoner of Zenda (January, 1896), and the stock scapegrace character whose startling heroism is the climax of an orthodox play. Dickens' Sidney Carton was the prototype, soon to delight theatregoers as the hero of The Only Way (an adaptation of A Tale of Two Cities by Freeman Wills and Frederick Langbridge produced by John Martin-Harvey in 1899). Shaw did not renounce this climactic heroism; Dick Dudgeon does what is expected of a hero in Act Two of the play. Thirdly, Shaw could not afford thorough sabotage of his stock situation or his principals early in this play, as he could in The Man of Destiny and Caesar and Cleopatra, wherein the protagonists were familiar heroes to the audience, but had to establish Dick's traditional identity before reversing on it. Shaw's apparent awareness of these reasons for loyalty to formula led

³ G. B. Shaw, Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence, p. 97.

Beerbohm to comment that "For the space of two acts, Mr. Shaw has pretended...to be not himself. The result is that these two acts are fine and moving drama",⁴ but that the ensuing two acts undermine and ridicule the impressions made by their predecessors.

But Shaw was too skilful and honest a dramatist to change tacks completely in mid-play. The road to Act Three's 'anti-climax' is gradually cleared in Acts One and Two. One obvious signpost is Dick's uncompromising repudiation of imposed and restricting rules of morality -- the adherence to the law and loathing of the spirit exemplified in their extremes by Mrs. Dudgeon. Dick's mother is neither the God-fearing mother of a romantic blackguard nor the patently wicked mother of a mis-used and embittered hero. Rather she is the ugly-tempered and sharp-tongued result of resentful but excessive devotion to a misconceived Puritanism. In presenting her first, Shaw prepared a contrast and an advance explanation for Dick Dudgeon, whose humane nature and self-respect have driven him from her unloving God to His antithesis -- an unSatanic devil. From the moment Dick enters it is clear to every spectator that Dick is the sympathetic protagonist of this play -- and to spectators of normal alertness it is equally clear that he is no Byronic hero, no Heathcliffe, and no Mephistopheles, but a strong, kindly man adopting cynicism and sarcasm as the most effective defenses against the attacks his mother launches in the name of her joyless religion.

⁴ Max Beerbohm, Around Theatres, Vol. I, p. 52.

Shaw solved the problem of maintaining his integrity while concocting melodrama in Act One by alternating his stock tricks. Mrs. Dudgeon's position, for instance, is ambivalent. On the one hand she is repellent. She berates a pathetic orphan, and orphans had been audience favorites since 1853 when Jenny Lee first captivated as Little Jo in a stage adaptation of Bleak House. Furthermore, she receives word of her husband's death unemotionally and exhibits jealous rage at word of his new will and complacency as a righteous martyr. On the other hand, she is manifestly 'virtuous', and although the will-reading scene is comically comparable to a similar scene in Bulwer-Lytton's Money (1840), it ascends to a climax of pathos as Mrs. Dudgeon, dispossessed, departs from her home. Similarly, Dick is alternately sympathetic, particularly in his treatment of Essie, and pseudo-villainous, as in his baiting of his convention-bound family, his exultation at his mother's discomfiture, and his noisy professions of devotion to the devil. The act is given finality and a culminating touch of melodrama by Mrs. Dudgeon's parting curse and Essie's grateful tears. (Poor Essie dissolves twice more -- at the close of Act Two into tears of woe and at the end of the play into tears of joy -- apparently to satirize the repetitions and the tear-jerking curtain scenes of sincere melodramatists.)

Act Two is similarly ambivalent. The principal character development is Dick's disillusionment -- or rather, 'reillusionment'. In the stronghold of Christianity, the minister's house, he finds tolerance, humanity, and kindness, rather than his mother's fanaticism, misanthropy, and cruelty.

But like Bill Walker he has chosen his rôle and is proud; his pride precludes any further concession than his request that Anderson be the enemy he can respect. He does not profess his own unworthiness in comparison with Anderson, nor does he exhibit signs of love for Judith. However, his relations with Anderson and with Judith are improved successively, and the two most common motives for Sidney-Cartonish sacrifice, respect for a good man and love for the good man's pretty wife, are made possible inferences. And Dick's lightning decision to accept the identity and the martyrdom foisted upon him supports the spectators' assumption of one, the other, or both of these motives.

Here Shaw's interests were comparable to those of the writers of run-of-the-mill melodrama. Both authors preferred to postpone explanation of their protagonists' motives; the melodrama author wanted to build tension toward the predictable climax -- his martyr-hero's speech of love and renunciation; Shaw wanted his audience to take a firm grip on its stage-bred expectations so that the shock inflicted by Dick's denial of self-glorifying or gratifying motives would be a pronounced one.

The major Shavian reversal, Dick's disillusioning of Judith, occurs early in Act Three. To her declaration of love he replies:

If I said -- to please you -- that I did what I did ever so little for your sake, I lied as men always lie to women. You know how much I have lived with worthless men -- aye, and worthless women too. Well, they could all rise to some sort of goodness and kindness when they were in love. This has taught

me to set very little store by the goodness that only comes out red hot. What I did last night, I did in cold blood, caring not half so much for your husband, or for you as I do for myself. I had no motive and no interest: all I can tell you is that when it came to the point whether I would take my neck out of the noose and put another man's into it, I could not do it. I don't know why not: I see myself as a fool for my pains; but I could not and I cannot. I have been brought up standing by the law of my own nature; and I may not go against it, gallows or no gallows. I should have done the same for any other man in the town, or any other man's wife.... (Act III, p. 239.)

In a sense this reversal is anti-climactic and might therefore be considered a departure from the format of melodrama, for it disappoints the sentimental spectator. But in two other senses it is climactic: its impact is severe because the Victorian spectator was accustomed to other fare, and, more important, it is climactic in that the hero is making a tremendous claim. He is saying that he does not need motives for heroic action -- that he simply is by nature, and despite his baser desires, of the heroic martyr species. Like the Shavian Caesar and the Shavian Napoleon, he is not so much above the ordinary forms of selfishness as incapable of them.

Dick's speech to Judith completes a large phase of Shaw's revelation of the 'true' martyr-hero. In Act One Dick rejected the bargain offered by his mother's religion: future heavenly reward for temporal sacrifice and present embittering frustration. In this oration he rejects two other bargains commonly presented on the stage as fitting choices for a hero -- his life in return for his community's benefit or the heroine's love. But the relationship between the play and its models continues ambiguous. Plays about parsons who could not live

up to the rules imposed by the God they believed in were popular in the 1890s, and these parsons, so the plays implied, were forgiven by a much more indulgent and merciful God.⁵ Mrs. Dudgeon's God was distinctly out of fashion, and Dick's rejection of Him was not iconoclastic. As for his protestations to Judith, melodrama's familiar hero would also deny these motives to spare the heroine's sensibilities, and despite the eloquent speeches with which Dick prepared his audience for his unmotivated heroism, and the vehemence of his explanatory speech, his behaviour was still open to the stock interpretation, and indeed was so interpreted when Murray Carson presented the play in London in 1899.⁶

To this point, then, the play may be regarded as running true, or very close to true, to predictable pattern -- in its inter-acting coincidences, in its misunderstandings, and even, superficially, in its characters. However, it does appear to break from the mold completely and to violate unity in the late introduction of a strong and likeable personality, General Burgoyne. It is conceivable that a melodrama might feature its arch-villain, the representative of militaristic barbarism, late in its action, thus arriving at a dramatic crescendo with the forces of persecution incarnated. The villain would balance the predominance of the unpleasant Mrs. Dudgeon in Act One and complete the circle of evil around the hero, adding malicious cruelty to the disguised malevolence

⁵ E.g. Michael in Henry Arthur Jones's Michael and His Lost Angel and John in Hall Caine's The Christian.

⁶ Archibald Henderson gives details of the production in George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, pp. 452-453. Shaw describes the Carson interpretation in his Preface to Three Plays for Puritans, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, pp. 715-716.

and envy of Dick's family and the politic injustice of the British army. But General Burgoyne is an intelligent wit of good-humoured urbanity whose evident intention it is to comfort and divert Dick in the interval before his regrettable but inevitable execution. He is sympathetically responsive to and appreciative of Dick, kind to Judith, and sarcastic to the dullard Major Swindon. On the face of things he is an odd intrusion into any melodrama, including this play. Even the astute Shaw critic Eric Bentley finds him an irrelevancy; he remarks: "The most fully Shavian passages of the play -- those in which Burgoyne speaks -- are inserted without the establishment of any very significant relationship between Burgoyne and the main story."⁷ Yet Burgoyne does correspond to the villain admissible to melodrama's act three. Besides warding off the danger that the British become the dark forces in a tale of a patriot and keeping the focus on Dick's reaction to the 'absurd' ultimatums that can confront a man, Burgoyne, despite his realism, represents the perniciously romantic code whereby the genuine gentleman will die passively rather than exhibit poor taste by howling for life. Attractive though he is, Burgoyne is the decadent product of an artificial code, and Dick must reject his attitude as he rejected the other motives before he can prove that he is dying because he has chosen, in these peculiar circumstances, the alternative of death. Hence the speech

Hark ye, General Burgoyne. If you think that I
like being hanged, youre mistaken. I dont like it;
and I dont mean to pretend that I do. And if you

7 Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 109.

think I'm obliged to you for hanging me in a gentlemanly way, youre wrong there too. I take the whole business in devilish bad part....
(Act III, p. 248.)

In this way Burgoyne prompts Dick to prove that his 'suicide' is no more passively gentlemanlike than it is motivated by love or the lofty satisfaction procurable from sacrifice for a cause. It is the total commitment of a man who has recognized his destiny and found his freedom in agreeing to will that destiny. Dick has traversed the whole Shavian path from disillusionment to self-discovery, and thence to transformation and conscious adherence to the Life Force whose direction he divines.

Had Shaw ended the play at the moment prior to Dick's execution, he would have exploited the tidy pattern and broken from the neat resolution of melodrama, and he would have concluded the presentation of his thesis about the human comedy. But the play goes on; Dick has his last-breath reprieve -- because so good melodramas end and because protagonists rarely suffer violent ends in Shaw plays except where history is obstinate. And the consequence of the Shavian method is the same as the result of melodrama's tenet that virtue must be rewarded. The hero is saved. Judith is reunited with her husband, because wives return to their husbands in the Shaw's-eye view of the world and because her return to marital grace completes a melodramatic incident with the finality dear to fiction. and Shaw's ending is pat, amusing, and carried to the implausibility of logical extreme. While Dick's transformation has been verbalized, Anderson's has been observable only in his hasty departure at the close of Act Two and is unveiled as a semi-comic

surprise at the end of the play. Both Dick and Anderson have sustained metamorphoses, and the two have changed places; the sinner has discovered himself a saint and the man of peace has recognized himself as a man of action and, if need be, of war. The play concludes, as melodramas will, with the hero aloft on the shoulders of his jubilant townsfolk and the loyal orphan child in tears of thanksgiving.

It is quite clear that Shaw's intention in this play was not to debunk the exterior of melodrama but to refurnish its interior with what he considered to be true motives and real people in an extraordinary situation. In the Preface to Three Plays for Puritans he warns that an excess of sentimental melodrama will inculcate in audiences a melodramatic conception of life,⁸ and The Devil's Disciple administers one or two raps to the knuckles of those who swallow Shaw's melodramatic bait. But ironically, in using the formula to expose and refute the sentimental psychology proffered by stock melodrama, Shaw came close to compromising his anti-romantic theme. The happy conclusion seems to suggest that virtue is indeed rewarded, no matter what its professed motives, and the lightness of the conventional ending sheds a retroactive aura over the play, picking up the glints of wit and humour, lessening the impact of the knuckle-rappings, and glossing over the genuinely moving moments of Judith's agonizing emotional conflict during the mock trial and Dick's horror in the face of impending death. The wit of Burgoyne, though justifiable in itself, combines

⁸ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Three Plays for Puritans, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 711.

rather unfortunately with this operetta ending. Hence, perhaps, Archibald Henderson's feeling that Burgoyne lifts the play to a new plane of satiric comedy -- although Shaw certainly did not write entirely to this end -- and Ellen Terry's dissatisfaction with Burgoyne which led Shaw to lament: "...indeed I think I shall die lonely, as far as my third acts are concerned."⁹

Conventional 'action' plays and Shavian heroes

The formula's revenge on Shaw is even more obvious and ironic in the other male-protagonist plays. Arms and the Man, The Man of Destiny, and Captain Brassbound's Conversion, plays in which the heroics, the eavesdroppings, the wandering papers, and the intrigue of Sardou, Dumas, and Scott are mocked, achieve their comic effect while maintaining the symmetry and wholeness of their prototypes. But in sabotaging his fiction with anti-climaxes, Shaw produced plays of decreasing urgency; in proving that his objects of satire were unrealistic and romantically superficial, he created plays without the tension of their models and suffering from the very triviality they were written to expose. Had Shaw been less faithful to the stock plots and familiar patterns of theme and story he was playing with, he might have communicated his own sense of what is true and significant more emphatically and escaped the critics' over-simplifying charge that these comedies are at best brilliant burlesques of sentimental drama, full of satirical

⁹ G. B. Shaw, Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence, p. 125.

wit and sparkling polemic, and establishing very little of a positive nature. The Devil's Disciple comes nearer than the others of the man-of-action group to making effective use of melodrama's format without falling victim to it, but Act Three relapses into triteness, and although there is humour in Shaw's exaggeratedly tidy denouement, he again weakens his play by attempting to combine his own theses with the stagey resolution of conventional drama.

Like Arms and the Man, The Man of Destiny, Caesar and Cleopatra, and Captain Brassbound's Conversion, The Devil's Disciple attempts to examine the nature of a man capable of decisive action; like them it features a romantic setting and initial situation, and like them it is satirical and ends, at least superficially, on a light note. But, unlike these others, it approaches tragedy, if modern tragedy may be partially defined as drama depicting a man's progress toward the self-destruction which he gradually recognizes as the inevitable final expression of himself in his particular dilemma. Therefore the play has a single focus and a growing seriousness of rising intensity until late in Act Three when Anderson, almost a deus ex machina, gallops to the rescue.

In Arms and the Man and Captain Brassbound's Conversion, Shaw's intention was apparently less positive; he was not exhibiting in either play the consequences of man's discovering what he is, so much as playing with the comic disillusionment of the sentimentalist as he begins to realize what he is not. In these two plays steady descents of anti-climax follow from melodramatic

opening scenes. Arms and the Man opens on Bluntschli's desperate midnight invasion of Raina's bedroom and ends with his triumphant inventory of hotel-keeper's assets and a flurry of wedding arrangements. Captain Brassbound's Conversion builds up to revelation of a vengeful pirate's plottings and ends with the deflated pirate safely harnessed and led to his 'freedom' in the apronstrings of mothering, managing Lady Cicely.

In Arms and the Man and Captain Brassbound's Conversion, plays about fictional heroes, Shaw let the stale air out of romantic situations. In The Man of Destiny, a pseudo-historical anecdote, he pricked the bubble of a hero's reputation, ostensibly in order to reconstruct that reputation around a plausible human being. The Man of Destiny combines a thespian Napoleon, Sardou's elusive documents, Shakespear's female masquerades, and a Dumas intrigue at an inn with a Shavian heroine who, despite her weakness for disguise, has Lady Cicely's charm and unaffected common sense. But the emphasis is on the man Napoleon, the practicality with which he builds his romantic legend while serving his own interests, and the unheroic canniness with which he seizes advantage -- as opposed to the righteous altruism of a stock hero. This comedy too is a debunking play rather than a positive one; Napoleon does expound his positive doctrines, but he is self-revealed as a Superman immersed in his own concerns, and the effect of the closet drama is anti-romantic more than it is hero-enhancing. The stakes are slight and the game is silly; Dumas and Bulwer-Lytton would at least have pretended to take them seriously -- Shaw lampoons them and

yet goes through the cliché movement. The result is comic but undramatic, largely because of the author's conscientious attention to the details and shape of the formula he satirized.

Caesar and Cleopatra has its powerful moments as well as its many comic ones, but since it is devoted to the exhibition of the fully conscious Superman in a series of situations eliciting his various qualities, and since history dictated the major events, it is a collection of vignettes rather than a developing drama. There is a strong suggestion at its close that Caesar is going to the fate he foresees and wills, and a rather unconvincing implication that Cleopatra, his pupil, has matured and become a ruler capable of seeing beyond the horizons of her own immediate concerns, but on the whole the masterly comedy is comparable to The Man of Destiny in its anecdotal character. It lacks the harmony of theme and plot, the singleness of action, and the effective tragi-comedy which near-serious use of conventional romance made possible in The Devil's Disciple. And it is weakened by Shaw's very thorough disposal of the qualities conventionally attributed to Caesar, for the exposé necessitated frequent, short-lived evocations of romance punctuated by reversals.

This criticism is not meant to disparage any of these scintillating plays except as they fall short of a specific ideal. But all suffer from Shaw's involvement in conventional drama. The playwright came closer in The Devil's Disciple than in any other of the group to exploiting the formulas exhaustively while escaping their excessive neatness and artificiality.

THE MOTHER WOMAN AND THE ARTIST MAN -- CANDIDA AND MAN AND SUPERMAN

Candida, written in the autumn of 1894, and Man and Superman of 1903 are comparable with respect to characters and theme though they differ in form. Each play features an aggressive, 'unscrupulous' woman, an agent of the Life Force, in the process of choosing between an infatuated artist and a virile, practical extrovert. Although there are profound differences between the male counterparts of the plays, superficially they are similar, and both plays contain triangles in which variants of the Mother Woman - Artist Man relationship are depicted. Like the trio discussed in Chapter Two, these two plays on like themes reveal the trend of Shaw's development in the art of play construction from the early, tightly-knit, realistic 'well-made' play to a more supple form of drama in which vital theme and coherent story are less forcibly mated.

Candida

Candida is a naturalist's 'well-made' play. In external form it could not offend the most rigid neo-classicist; the unities of time, place, and action are scrupulously observed; the plot is single, its events are meticulously placed, and the final act is logical and climactic. It was during this phase of his development as a dramatist that Shaw was most conscious of what was considered 'playable' and felt his delight in ranging discussion and his desire to emulate the effect of freedom achieved by the best artists to be inhibited by the

'rules'. He said as much in a letter to Charles Charrington dated March 1, 1895:

...the effect the artist produces on others is that of unlimitedness; and it is this great mystery and infinitude which attracts us all in these days. but [sic] when you get to practice an art, you find that the unlimited length before you is of exactly the same nature as the unlimited length before a horse in a circus
....¹

And in the same letter, touching on Candida, he wrote:

I have my feeling for the exquisitely cultivated sense of beauty - an almost devotional sense - and the great pains and skill of execution which produces work of one kind, and for the bold ideas, the daring unscrupulous handling, the imaginative illusions that produce another kind. And I have a leaning towards the former that you don't sympathise with....

...when you see a man like me, trying to do in counterpoint in even so few as three parts, as in Candida...never tell him he ought to go and write choruses instead. I grant you the work is not so skilful as if I had been more years at it; but there is no more worthy sort of work to try for. It is as good as I can get it at my present stage
....²

Clearly Shaw was feeling the inevitable pinch in attempting to express his uncommon truths within the confines of a naturalistic, conventionally-planned three-act drama. To reveal the underside of romanticism while amusing its devotees, to communicate an unorthodox 'message', to satirize stock characters and their peccadilloes while coating the pill with sweetening and humour, and simultaneously to create a plausible situation with the usual stage elements of tension, crisis, and climax -- this was the many-sided aim of Candida's author, and in this

¹ Quoted by St. John Ervine in Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends, p. 257.

² Ibid.

comedy he came as close as he ever came to pleasing both Shavians and anti-Shavians of all kinds.³

Candida's situation is the commonest of stock ones: an intruder into an apparently happy marriage declares his passion for the wife and wakes fears and doubts in both husband and wife. A crisis moment in which the wife must choose between husband and intruder is inevitable, as is the climax -- her decision. As Eric Bentley points out,⁴ the situation would have done for Sardou, Augier, or Dumas films, and the play seems to be an Augier "vindication of hearth and home". The husband, James Morell, is a robust, genial, broad-minded man, a hard-working Christian socialist; Eugene Marchbanks is a physical weakling, financially insecure and prone to impractical rhapsodizings. It might appear that healthy useful virtue is victorious, and so it seems to have appeared to non-Shavian spectators, according to Shaw's biographers and critics.⁵ Yet Morell shows poorly in every encounter with Marchbanks; Eugene is not so much beaten in the rivalry as disillusioned, and goes out into the storm freed of dependence on woman and cherishing the secret that he is one of the Life Force's elect, born to carry the vision of man's destiny and to play midwife to his consciousness. And Candida is consistently mistress of the domestic situation, rather than the soft-hearted female

³ Edmund Fuller testifies to Candida's universal appeal in George Bernard Shaw: Critic of Western Morale, p. 26.

⁴ Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, pp. 132-133.

⁵ E.g. William Irvine, The Universe of G.B.S., p. 174, and Edmund Fuller, George Bernard Shaw: Critic of Western Morale, p. 29.

cipher of conventional stage sentimentalities. Only the ghost of the usual lovers' triangle remains.

Like Dick Dudgeon, Candida refuses to accept convention as a molding force on her life; like Eliza Doolittle, she prefers the man she can mother and use to the genius she feels to be essentially independent of her. Shaw's unorthodoxy about woman and marriage, iconoclastic on the stage though it was being explored by such novelists as Thomas Hardy, was that marriage is not an institution inherently inviolable but an association founded on continuing mutual need and affection and valid only so long as the need and affection are felt and voluntarily met. Shaw goes on to insist that woman, being fundamentally maternal, gives herself to the man whom she can mother into a self-respecting, undistracted father and breadwinner for her children. The sanctity of marriage upheld by Pinero and Jones and the idealistic, sentimental heroines common to the 'old' and pseudo-'advanced' drama are thus dismissed.

The humour of the central situation comes chiefly from the deflating of James Morell and the incongruity of the conflict; the exaggeratedly timorous and excitable Marchbanks is forced upon the audience as a serious opponent for Morell. According to Shaw the poet represents

...the higher but vaguer and timider vision, the incoherent, mischievous, and even ridiculous unpracticalness, which offered me a dramatic antagonist for the clear, bold, sure, sensible, benevolent, salutarily shortsighted Christian Socialist idealism.⁶

⁶ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Plays Pleasant, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 697.

Yet on the surface he is ridiculously handicapped in the contest for Candida, and his first scene with Morell is constructed so as to exhibit this surface comedy. There is additional humour in Candida's sweetly cutting derision of her husband. Laughter of a less stinging nature is occasioned by the incorrigible old scoundrel Burgess, by the lovelorn, tart-tongued Prossy, and by Morell's devoted imitator, Lexy. But in the main the play's humour is of the sharp-edged variety inherent in a self-confident character's disillusionment and in the wit his antagonist uses to accomplish it; it is the least sweet of Shaw's comic flavourings.

In addition to its reversal of a stock situation, its renovated stock characters, its unorthodoxies, and its humour, Candida does have something of the tension, the crisis, and the climax of 'serious' sentimental drama. By the end of Act One, Morell has recognized Marchbanks as an opponent to be reckoned with, has lost his tolerant good-humour, and is perplexed, fearful, and angry. The dramatic irony of Candida's tidying Marchbanks -- "One would think somebody had been throttling you" -- and Morell's pathetic last line end the act in low but ominous key. Act Two proceeds into deepening gravity as weight is added to Eugene's side of the scale; Candida sings his praises and laughingly belittles her husband's sermonizing career:

They're all in love with you. And you are in love
with preaching because you do it so beautifully.
And you think it's all enthusiasm for the kingdom
of Heaven on earth; and so do they. You dear
silly! (Act II, p. 141.)

Even in her reassurances to her increasingly alarmed husband there is a note of contempt:

Put your trust in my love for you, James; for if that went I should care very little for your sermons: mere phrases that you cheat yourself and others with every day. (Act II, p. 141.)

Moreover, in this speech, which repelled Beatrice Webb,⁷ Candida makes it clear that the 'sanctity' of marriage and the social prestige of that ideal would not keep her from teaching Eugene the facts of love, were there no other deterrent. Morell's concern for his marriage's prospects begins to look well-founded.

Act Three brings the situation to a crisis: Morell's attempts to defend his position and hold his wife are exhibitions of the complacent oratory Marchbanks ridicules, and his failure to appeal to Candida's love for him and her strength rather than to her economic and social needs brings the hitherto dormant misunderstanding between the Morells to a crisis and the 'auction' of Candida. Her decision is the logical conclusion to a play that has insistently stressed her control over both men and her protection of Morell, yet a degree of uncertainty is evoked by her evident freedom from conventional assumptions. And though the tenderness which alternates with her belittlement of her husband indicates whom she must choose, this moment of decision has a peculiar lingering impact achieved by the dramatic irony of Morell's reaction to her verdict: "I give myself to the weaker of the two."

To a healthy degree, then, Candida meets the demands of both Shaw's disciples and his incorrigibly romantic Victorian spectators. But probably much of the play's popularity with the latter group depends upon their misunderstanding of it.

⁷ Mrs. Webb's estimate of Candida as a "sentimental prostitute" is widely quoted; e.g. by St. John Ervine in Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends, p. 277.

They were right, as Shaw affirmed,⁸ in admiring Morell. Act One deliberately builds a prepossessing picture of him as an energetic, forthright philanthropist of original but rational views. He is physically attractive and the incidental dialogue suggests that Candida is jealously possessive as well as protective of him; she has substituted Prossy for a younger secretary and tolerates Prossy only because her selfless devotion goes largely unnoticed by Morell. And the romantic audience was right in admiring Candida, who is wise, capable, and loving. But if they discovered in the finale a chastened hero's victory over a ridiculous but strangely effective rival for the hand of an impressionable, emotional lady, they were wrong, for the play is not fundamentally concerned with the imminence of a marital rift, although events on this plane are the most obvious. It is concerned with the painful progress of Morell and Marchbanks to self-realization and recognition of their respective roles. Candida alone is unaffected by the emotional crisis and remains, in one sense like the puppet heroines of duel-and-intrigue drama, essentially the same from the beginning of the play to the end.

Into one play, in which he achieves both compression and ease of dramatic movement, Shaw brought his three archetypes: the visionary genius, the well-meaning but short-sighted man of the present moment and current affairs, and the Mother-woman, close to the mainstream of the Life Force and therefore intuitively knowing about the other two types. But the artist's

⁸ Shaw's approval of Morell is expressed in a note to the 1937 London production quoted by Archibald Henderson in George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, p. 544.

destiny does not emerge clearly from the pattern. Shaw overplayed his hand in his double reverse of the familiar and the obvious, and although the seeming strong man is effectively proved to be vulnerable and needy, the poet's physical weakness is so much emphasized that his strength and independence are difficult to credit, and he appears to be merely an irritant in the play when he is actually, according to Shaw⁹ (and as a part of Shaw's well-documented views), its protagonist.

Marchbanks' weaknesses can be accounted for in terms of Shavian philosophy. He is shy and sensitive because absorbed in his vision and attuned to cosmic currents beyond the prosaic extrovert's ken. He is physically weak because he is a messiah of the era of the intellect when material will have been transcended. His poetic fancies are naturally above potatoes and onions because he would use Candida as his inspiration but would not be enslaved and used by her as the provider of sustenance for her children; this she knows, and because of this she must either break him or renounce him for a more malleable mate. His fanciful speeches are not promising specimens of his art, as G. K. Chesterton remarks,¹⁰ but this is his author's fault, for he is evidently intended to be taken as a genuine artist; in any case there is good reason for his lofty scorn of menial tasks and mundane necessities. Yet none of this explanation of Marchbanks is made sufficiently clear by the play, which clings to the line of the marital problem and its implications, and affords only faint clues to a proper understanding of

⁹ G.B. Shaw, Preface to Plays Pleasant, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 697.

¹⁰ G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, New York, The Devin-Adair Company, 1950 copyright 1909, pp. 93-94.

Marchbanks. This singleness of focus is clean and classical, but it obscures the significance of Marchbanks, which might have been developed into a patent complement to the woman-and-marriage theme had Shaw's predilection for theatrical extremes and his concern for a compact creation been less operative.

Concerning Marchbanks the 'mystery play' remained a mystery to many spectators; literary historians attest to the number of guessing-games initiated by the enigmatic joy of the departing poet, and enthusiastic Eton schoolboys, asked to define Marchbanks' secret, suggested six solutions -- every one of them wrong.¹¹

Nor is Candida a completely successful character. Like Mrs. Warren, she is an eloquent shatterer of illusions. In this play of few characters, the responsibility of expounding a 'realistic' view of the marriage state as opposed to the Victorian ideal dear to Morell falls to her. Eloquent frankness threatens Mrs. Warren's plausibility; fluency is quite credible from Candida, but her emphatic revelations do not mar her attractiveness and they resound with some incongruity from the tongue of an otherwise warmly protective and charming wife of a loving husband. Her motivation for breaking the silence of years is slight. Although, as Shaw conceives it, she is revealing a truth which wives know instinctively about the husband-wife relationship, Candida's statement proves that she knows it intellectually, and suggests that she has lived with Morell for years silently harbouring her secret, good-humoured

¹¹ Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, p. 545.

recognition of his weakness. Discovering herself in an approximation of Morell's position, Ibsen's *New Woman*, Nora, slammed the door behind her. Shaw's browbeaten man gratefully accepts his wife's revelations. In her attitude toward her husband, *Candida* appears to have disturbingly more in common with Laura of Strindberg's The Father than with *Griselda*.

The topics of courtship, marriage, and infidelity are perennially popular material for drama. When *Candida* was written, English plays dealing with infidelity were prone to prove that marriage is a heavenborn institution, and that infidelity, whatever its motivations, is to be condemned. The most charitable treatments, such as Henry Arthur Jones's The Liars (and later Pinero's Mid-Channel), damned adultery and divorce as socially disruptive and inevitably disastrous to the careers and ultimately the personalities of those who indulged in them. Jones's *Lady Jessica* returns to her husband because persuaded that she will destroy Falkner's prospects if she leaves with him. Pinero's *Zoe*, finding herself beyond the social pale, is driven to suicide. No such external considerations would deter Shaw's heroine, who is in this respect much more idealistic than the romantic heroines of the contemporary plays that toyed tantalizingly with adultery before denouncing it. *Candida* deliberately considers the importance of Eugene's education against the depths of her husband's need and love and shocked otherwise friendly nineteenth-century audiences, even though she decides in her husband's favour.

Candida's difficulty is that whereas contemporary heroines faced by temptation or a marital tempest could assume

the established morality they were supporting or about to flout, Candida must explain her part in Shaw's unorthodox moral philosophy as well as live it. In defining her role as a maternal wife she appears to be breaking the spirit she claims to coddle. Yet in external form the play conforms to the general pattern of conventional 'problem' plays dealing with marriage -- even to the 'happy ending', the wife's return to her marriage, for this conclusion also fits into Shaw's theory about the nature and purpose of marriage. As Getting Married insists, marriage is a frightening contract of life-long bondage, but an alternative is hard to find, and the married state, galling though it often is, at least works for the Life Force by providing for children. The genius naturally avoids its toils, for he has other work to do which domesticity would hamper. Morell is therefore Candida's necessary choice. But only Shaw's faithful spectators and readers are aware of this background theory, and the tidy compression of the play hinders the development of Marchbanks while Candida's self-conscious assertion of maternal dominance slightly distorts her. It is probably the effect of the responsibility set upon her not merely to be but also to explain herself that leads W. H. Auden to say "...his Shaw's only insufferable characters are his good people (using 'good' in the Shavian sense); like Candida who is a dreadful woman...."¹²

Two other plays dealing with marriage and family life, Getting Married (1909) and Misalliance (1909-1910) seem

¹² W. H. Auden, "The Fabian Figaro", reprinted from The Commonweal, October 23, 1942, in George Bernard Shaw: A Critical Survey, pp. 155-156.

to escape the confines of strict form but are not as satisfying plays as Candida. In fact, although even those critics who recognize the careful construction of other Shaw plays are apt to give them only passing notice as bright farces overloaded with largely irrelevant and wandering conversation, and Eric Bentley exclaims: "...he tried to put us at ease with Getting Married and Misalliance by invoking the classical unities!",¹³ both plays contain considerable plot and action as well as discussion. But the characters are almost all 'unreasonable' as Shaw uses the word; that is, they are humanly inconsistent and often diverge from the paths indicated by the conclusions of their debates. In Getting Married, the playwright's argument is substantiated by the characters' failure to draft a substitute for marriage vows, a civil contract that would satisfy all parties. While this monopolizes attention, the action of the plot progresses off-stage and in corners. Edith marries Sykes; Leo returns to Reggie. Ultimately the characters, all of whom represent extreme attitudes toward marriage, marry or do not marry according to their natures. As spokesmen for points of view they are logical but extreme; as representations of human beings they are perversely real and sometimes betray the causes they speak for. The serious undertones of the conversations are oddly consorted with the frivolities and farcical events of the surface situation. The entertaining but unmoving result shows that although structures in which Shaw's new stage themes are worked out through familiar plots are not always

13 Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 132.

completely successful communications, the structures in which theme and plot are not harmonized are less clear and cogent lessons, and are memorable for particular passages of repartee rather than for the themes their prefaces claim for them. Man and Superman avoids the problems of both these types of treatment, and is a towering achievement among the comedies as Saint Joan is the major success among the tragi-comedies.

Man and Superman

The most conspicuous feature of Man and Superman's structure is the interpolation of the philosophic "Don Juan in Hell" scene which constitutes almost all of Act Three and which is often performed separately. The scene is a problem for critics subscribing to the organic view of art, but Man and Superman usually escapes criticism on this score. Shaw's acquittal by St. John Ervine is typical. Says Ervine:

The third act's detachability would seem to show that the play is not an organic whole; and the fact that it does not bleed when its substantial part is amputated, arouses the suspicion that it has no blood to shed. But these reasonable suspicions have no foundation in fact. The singular quality of the play is that it remains a complete play when it has suffered what in any other play would be mutilation. This being so, the critic may wonder whether the third act is superfluous, and find it in fault on the ground that it merely adds bulk to the play's body. But this also fails to be a fact. As a piece of craftsmanship, Man and Superman is probably the most remarkable comedy that has ever been written.¹⁴

Aside from the Hell scene, Man and Superman is comparable to the other plays discussed thus far in its general

¹⁴ St. John Ervine, Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends, p. 368.

conformance to a popular pattern -- that of the romantic comedy ending in marriage. The comic differences between stock romantic comedy and this play are the woman's aggressive nature and the male's determination to escape her. Besides contributing comedy as a doomed but game quarry, Tanner provides the obstacles to the course of 'love' that have to be manufactured out of circumstances in other lovers' comedies. In place of romantic meeting, complication and misunderstanding, reunion and explanations, and reconciliation, Shaw presents Tanner as an unwitting prey, Tanner's alarm and flight, the cornering of Tanner, and Tanner conquered. Love conquers all, here as elsewhere, but it is Shavian love -- that is, a form of madness generated by the biological attraction that subserves the Life Force, rather than a romantic passion largely spiritual -- and herein lies the frame play's principal theme.

The nature and functions of love and marriage also comprise the theme of Candida, but whereas Candida suffers from the necessary yet irritating didacticism of its chief character, the didactic realist in Man and Superman is an unqualified success as a comedy's hero. A more philosophic realist than Candida, Jack Tanner preaches socialism and Shaw's Bergsonian philosophy with wit and passion, but he is not in Candida's privileged position and is heckled and scolded by his fellow characters. The dramatic irony of his belated discovery that he is being manipulated in the system he anatomizes so eloquently fuses plot and theme, foreshadows the inevitable climax, and affords a sound basis of comedy for this dramatic illustration of the Life Force at work. There are

related ironies. As William Irvine suggests, Tanner can be regarded as a fictional Shaw, orating and writing to increase the self-consciousness of the Life Force, but an anachronism in his own age. According to Irvine -

...Tanner triumphantly spouts all the ideas of the Preface with an unrivaled flow of eloquence and wit - and meets, like Shaw in real life, with almost universal ridicule and disapprobation. In the higher sense, Tanner is not a failure. The world is a failure. Yet, as a man of action, he does fail. His marriage undoubtedly climaxes that failure and at the same time symbolizes a new hope.¹⁵

The new hope arises from the fact that although Tanner expounds vitalism, Ann, his antagonist, practises it, helping to evolve the era of the Superman by using the established system of marriage; Tanner only talks. Thus Tanner, while repudiating system, becomes the pawn of it. Ann and Tanner are more thoroughly developed than the characters of Candida and more complexly significant; they illustrate Shaw's theories in a variety of ways and lend emphasis to the rather slight events of the play. Particularly valuable in this respect is Tanner, who in Acts One and Two provides a prophetic commentary to his own downfall.

The third member of the play's comic 'lovers' triangle', Octavius, is reminiscent of the Marchbanks of Candida's Act One, but he does not develop and therefore does not have Marchbanks' difficulties as a character. As Ann, who shamelessly uses conventions, is not a model of decorum, and Tanner is not a successful fugitive from the institutions he dissects, Tavy,

¹⁵ William Irvine, The Universe of G.B.S., p. 241.

the would-be poet, is not a visionary genius but a conventionally romantic worshipper of women, who presents no challenge and no incentive to Ann. He is a prop who serves Tanner as a sounding-board, Ann as a red herring, and Shaw as an example of blind servitude to society's love-cult. This being so, there is no danger that he will steal the spotlight from the central characters and main issue, or, like Marchbanks, receive just enough illumination to distract and puzzle the audience.

The other minor characters are similarly obliging. Eric Bentley points out that "In each Act one main object of satire is added to the main story through the agency of extra characters - Ramsden the Liberal, Straker the New Man, Mendoza and his band of Radicals, Hector Malone, Sr., the Irish-American."¹⁶ Each of these characters contributes to the story, is a figure of fun, and illuminates by contrast and comparison the qualities and theories of Jack Tanner. Ramsden is an obvious contrast as a mid-Victorian rebel who does not realize that his old heresies have become respectable and even antiquated. But he is also comparable to Tanner, who is similarly oblivious to his own susceptibility to system. (For system in this play is rather ambiguously treated - it is the old servant of the Life Force, growing outmoded but still useful.) Straker, Mendoza, and Malone, Sr. also harmonize with the play's theme; they too are - variously - rebels, but demonstrate in their unorthodoxies that although they thrust outward from tradition their rebellions are reactions generated by that tradition and

¹⁶ Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 154.

they are involved and held by it. Straker is morally old-fashioned for all his scientific education; Mendoza is a sentimentalist despite his realistic views on economy; Malone, Sr. is imprisoned by his involvement in the caste system, despite his American emancipation. Each of these has his turn as sparring partner or foil for Tanner during the play's four acts, but all four are static characters, and the major action, the conflict between Ann and Jack in which Jack states the general theorem and learns his place in its formula, is unimpeded by them.

The sub-plot, which traces an action complementary to the central one, is Violet Robinson Malone's attempt to win her father-in-law's approval and pecuniary blessing. This secondary plot reveals a less prepossessing version than Ann of the Mother Woman in pursuit of security for her children; Violet sets off Ann to Ann's advantage. Her conscious motives are mercenary, whereas Ann is impelled by an irresistible mating urge. As ruthless as Ann, Violet is nevertheless wholly faithful to social conventions. She can bear to masquerade for a time as a 'ruined woman' because she is aware of her 'innocence', whereas Ann, who dresses for the hunt in propriety's protective colouring, is consciously free from artificial restraints and even faintly aware that she campaigns and will suffer in a higher service than Mrs. Grundy's.

Violet is also useful as the immediate cause of Tanner's first comic disillusionment, which occurs at the close of Act One. His deluded admiration of her courage and unconventionality establishes his optimistic idealism and foreshadows his climactic

discovery of Ann's real purpose and his precipitate flight at the end of Act Two. The conclusions of Acts Three and Four complete the pattern of Tanner's curtain defeats: by the end of Act Three he is at bay, and in the play's final moments he capitulates.

Tanner's flight is crucial; the conflict is in the open. At this point Shaw introduces the Sierra Nevada interlude and the 'Hell Scene'. The contemporary story is suspended at a high pitch, and the characters undergo a dream-transformation into their forebears, who debate the natures of Hell, Heaven, and humanity. Don Juan carries forward the philosophy proffered by his descendant, Tanner, in Acts One and Two, and posits the Superman as the end toward which the Life Force gropes blindly but inexhaustibly.

Superficially the scene is all talk, and has been so described frequently. Yet it has tremendous dramatic assets. The Shavian view of Hell as the home of the useless, the resigned, the romantically hypocritical, and the aesthetic isolationists has shock value. And the posthumous meeting of Ana, her father, and Don Juan is the climax of an old story. It is the ultimate in scènes à faire, for it needs no introductory acts, having its famous legend as background. And there is a degree of suspense and some decisive action in the scene; the argument, upon which man's fate seems momentarily to depend, leads to Don Juan's movement from plaintive talk in Hell to the 'different way of looking at things' which is Heaven. The scene is taut, for the Devil's argument is a well-founded denunciation of humanity and a death sentence, and Juan can counter only with his hope

that the human brain will evolve into mature consciousness before it has exercised its infantile powers to commit universal suicide. The debate does not end with a victory for Juan but with his act of faith by which he renounces detached discussion and gives himself over to Heavenly meditation, which is apparently here defined as the purest form of action. Thus the scene has dramatic qualities of its own. It is independent of the frame play, but is also smoothly fitted to it and importantly complementary.

As the frame play reverses on conventional notions about the sexes, the Hell scene reverses on orthodox assumptions about Hell, while it clarifies and extends the ideas illustrated in the external comedy. Hell, like society on earth, is full of idealists, romantics, and hedonists. It is the natural abode of the hypocritical and the self-deceived, and is therefore a congenial atmosphere for Doña Ana's father, who on earth masked his hedonism with old-fashioned righteousness and 'did the right thing' by being killed by Juan, the apparent seducer of his daughter, when he had every intention of killing Juan. He has, therefore, ironically, been relegated to Heaven, but seeks relief in the pleasant pretences and irresponsibility of Hell:

Written over the gate here are the words, "Leave every hope behind, ye who enter." Only think what a relief that is! For what is hope? A form of moral responsibility. Here there is no hope, and consequently no duty, no work, nothing to be gained by praying, nothing to be lost by doing what you like. Hell, in short, is a place where you have nothing to do but amuse yourself.

(Act III, p. 371.)

Although Roebuck Ramsden would not have stated this attitude as candidly, the similarities between the Statue and Ramsden are apparent. Ramsden poses as an advanced thinker and realist, but is patently a self-indulgent man, fond of his comforts and alarmed by new ideas. Ramsden and Tavy, the sentimental aesthete, are illuminated by the frankness of the Statue, who embodies their qualities. Similarly, Mendoza's sentimentality, romantic despair, and compromise with the status quo are condemned when they appear, intensified, in the Devil. The Devil is repelled by the stupidity, cowardice, and rapacity of the world of men and advocates retreat from them and the problems they pose to love and art, the escapist pleasures which the world also contains. Mendoza denounces capitalism, but makes a romantic career of living upon its profits (by robbing the 'robbers') instead of dedicating his perception and strength to reform. Ann's relation to Doña Ana is also apparent. Both are unscrupulous schemers who dissemble and lay claim to the utmost propriety, but both are 'redeemed' by their overwhelming urge to create and to suffer pain and risk death in the fulfillment of their purpose. And the identification of Tanner with Don Juan is developed to clarify Tanner's rôle in the frame play and to confirm and enlarge upon his philosophy. Both Juan and Tanner are inspired 'talkers' who posit Shaw's truth about the Life Force and the functions of men and women as its agents, but whose wisdom is at first imperfect. Juan does not know till the end of the Hell scene how to reach Heaven; he discovers the necessity of linking will with idea during the debate. Similarly Tanner, for all his philosophic insight, does not

recognize Tavy's ineligibility for the rôle of 'father' to the Superman (while Ann is instinctively aware of it) and does not at first realize that he is Ann's natural choice because he possesses the genius necessary to a procreator of a higher form of life. "You seem to understand all the things I dont understand," says Ann, "but you are a perfect baby in the things I do understand." (Act I, p. 348.) Doña Ana's pursuit of Juan, symbolizing woman's age-old chase, underlines the necessity of Ann's particular chase as well as providing transition to it. As the Hell scene fades on Ana's purposeful departure for Heaven, the realistic play resumes with Ann's arrival at Mendoza's camp. Thus the interpolated scene is both a complete little drama in its own right and a dramatized preface to the climactic events of Act Four.

The concluding act begins with the victory of the practical realist Violet over her romantic father-in-law and husband, moves on to Ann's dismissal of Tavy, and culminates with the unequal combat between Ann, strongly abetted by the Life Force, and Tanner, who is, to this point, still unaware of his dual service in vitality's cause. In this odd 'love' scene, he envisions himself married and growing stale "like a thing that has served its purpose", but is swept into Ann's arms by the Life Force, as his forebear, Juan, had been 'thrown like a fish' to the huntresses. The only possible confusion arising from this compact, logical play enclosing the Hell scene stems from the disparity between Tanner's Act-One description of the "remorseless struggle" of the Artist Man and the Mother Woman and his capitulation to Ann. But Ann's last words to

him, "Go on talking," do not necessarily signify his total subjection to her, though the "universal laughter" implies that they do. Her tolerance merely proves Juan's contention about Woman's attitude toward her mate: "Whilst he fulfils the purpose for which she made him, he is welcome to his dreams, his follies, his ideals, his heroisms...." (Act III, p. 378.) Obviously he will continue to articulate his vision of 'Life as it really is'. Then too, Tanner has written his book and is not a ruthless incipient artist 'independent of happiness' as Marchbanks apparently is. The Life Force has classified Tanner's usefulness and employed him accordingly. The conflict between Juan and Doña Ana, archetypes of the Artist Man and the Mother Woman, is not ended, but the particular phase of that conflict engaged in by two particular people, Ann and Tanner, does have a conclusion. Tanner's future has been decided, at least partially, and the frame play has the trim completeness of Candida without that play's disturbing character inconsistencies and 'mysterious' hints of ideas stillborn.

Regarding the relationship between theme and form, Man and Superman's major advantage over such plays as Mrs. Warren's Profession and The Devil's Disciple is that in Man and Superman a very broad stage assumption, the basis of conventional love comedies, is completely overturned. Since Shaw shared the general distaste for prostitution and admiration for heroism, the conventional patterns of the pseudo-modern problem play and the popular melodrama were his natural choices as bases for Mrs. Warren's Profession and The Devil's Disciple. But

his specific unorthodox views on these subjects did not combine readily with the conventional patterns he used, and though the conflict between the assumptions these patterns usually depended on, still latent in them, and Shaw's vital realism was often tellingly dramatic, the views he shared with the majority and the popular formats he used were apt to join forces and overwhelm or partially obscure the original points he was attempting to make. Once he had abandoned mere negation after Widowers' Houses, Shaw was launched on a tricky course. But with Man and Superman he was clear of the shoals he had struck in other plays, because his theme was no longer complicated by partial agreement with popular opinion and yet was positive. Once he had declared through Tanner and illustrated his thesis that the male is not the monogamously-minded sexual aggressor of the human species and that the course of love is not hindered only by maidenly coyness and external circumstances, he had established in Man and Superman a natural conflict independent of Sardovian plotting and yet amenable to the old scheme of rising action, crisis, and climax. The comedy is a triumphant escape from the artificiality of the old, plotted drama and also a successful evasion of the pitfalls likely to entrap the 'slice-of-life' dramatist.

But in Major Barbara Shaw was once more beset by form-versus-theme problems and compromised by contriving a happy ending for a play essentially almost tragic. In the disquisitory plays which followed he side-stepped these problems and made comedy of incongruous combinings of farcical plots with serious conversation. Heartbreak House, which makes

use of some Russian techniques, is a decided improvement upon Getting Married and Misalliance, and with Saint Joan Shaw achieved the great tragi-comedy he had not written in Major Barbara.

HARMONY OF STORY AND THEME -- HEARTBREAK HOUSE AND SAINT JOAN

Several plays intervening between Major Barbara and Heartbreak House exhibit interesting facets of the form-theme problem, but have special features and difficulties which cloud the issue or else have been thoroughly discussed as throwbacks to nineteenth-century drama elsewhere. The Doctor's Dilemma confuses a fascinating questions -- who best deserves to live? -- with the extra elements of Shaw's distrust and scorn of doctors and Sir Colenso's love for Jennifer Dubedat, a melo-dramatic element which weights the doctor's decision. John Bull's Other Island cannot be accused of revealing the tyranny of accepted form, but it is a play depending for much of its effect upon the audience's familiarity with English and Irish traits and is therefore excluded from this paper in favour of plays of more general appeal. Pygmalion, subtitled "A Romance in Five Acts", marked a return to inversion of formula and is analyzed as a 'well-made' play by Milton Crane.¹ After Pygmalion, the first powerful play constituting a departure from inversion of orthodox pattern was Heartbreak House. In this "fantasia", Shaw improved upon the earlier disquisitory plays with a haunting drama co-ordinating a semi-farcical surface situation with a serious theme. There followed Back to Methuselah, a huge work, impressively aspiring but of uneven artistic merit, then Jitta's Atonement, a translation of a play by Siegfried Trebitsch, and in 1923 Saint Joan, a play in which the theme is the story.

¹ Milton Crane, "Shaw's Dramatic Theory and Practice", PMLA, Vol. LXVI (Dec., 1951), pp. 879-885.

Heartbreak House

Heartbreak House, begun in 1913, completed in 1916, and eventually produced in 1919, when Shaw's pre-war infamy had ebbed, comprises a new development in the Shavian method. This "Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes" displays similarities to Maxim Gorky's The Lower Depths (1912) and to Tolstoy's The Fruits of Enlightenment as well as to Chekhov's Uncle Vanya and The Cherry Orchard with which it is often compared. But it is also a legitimate follower of the disquisitory plays, Getting Married and Misalliance, and shares some of their weaknesses.

The principal difference between Heartbreak House and the earlier, so-called "dramatized conversations" is in the strong current toward disaster which lends both events and discursive dialogue in the later play an urgent significance. It was perhaps this evocation of a sensation recently felt in Europe as World War I dragged on, the play's frequent flashes of perception and prophecy, its diverse and eccentric characters, and its sustained atmosphere of tragi-comic eeriness that elicited critical bravos for Heartbreak House from some formidable contemporary critics. Despite production deficiencies and difficulties in the play's London debut, A. B. Walkley was loud in his praise² and A. G. Gardiner, Sir Barry Jackson and others³ swelled the chorus of laudation. But several critics

2 Walkley is quoted by Archibald Henderson in George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, p. 627.

3. Ibid., p. 628.

admitted to fading enthusiasm some years later. Frank Harris, who at first agreed with Shaw that Heartbreak House was his best play, confessed in 1931 that the drama had palled on him.⁴ After the 1948 Orson Welles production, Stark Young, who had shared Edmund Wilson's delight in the play, found that "An astonishing sort of inner monotony, as it were, was apparent and had to be coped with."⁵ Attempting to diagnose the play's ailment he wrote:

Taking a work of art as a kind of biological whole, which is the only way it makes any sense, I should say that nothing Mr. Shaw presents in Heartbreak House to prove his case could be better evidence of the decay, if you like, of the English scene than this play itself is, with its lack of any organic unity or exciting technique, its fuzzy lack of power, its exhibitionistic self-assertion, its futile chatter in coquettish monotone about what the first bomb could obliterate or the first ism could make stale.⁶

And although this summary is over-harsh, and Heartbreak House has continued to win defense and warm praise from some stalwart critics, a reason for Young's dissatisfaction is discernible in the mis-mating of form and theme.

Heartbreak House, like Getting Married and more overtly than Misalliance, contains a continuous thread of plot in the development of Ellie Dunn, who moves from disillusionment to disillusionment. The villain of her story is Mangan, the conniving capitalist whose hold on her father has coerced her to the brink of practical but loveless marriage. Ellie's exaggeratedly romantic yearnings after 'Marcus Darnley' complicate this initial situation -- a plot base at least as

⁴ Frank Harris, Bernard Shaw, p. 171.

⁵ Stark Young, "Heartbreak House", reprinted from Immortal Shadows (1948) in George Bernard Shaw: A Critical Survey, p. 233.

⁶ Ibid., p. 235.

old as Douglas Jerrold's Black-Ey'd Susan (1829) and Boucicault's The Colleen Bawn (1860). But after Ellie's theatrical disillusionment in Act One and her unconventional, tearless "Damn!" with which Shaw abandoned straightforward, orthodox dramaturgy, her story is upstaged by Shavian reflection and discussion, though it continues as something more than a convenient motivation for conversation.

The triteness of this opening situation give the play a faintly quaint, old-fashioned air, which is augmented by a plethora of coincidences: 'Marcus Darnley' is Hector Hushabye, Ariadne arrives opportunely, the burglar is Captain Shotover's villainous mate and Nurse Guinness's husband. Moreover, the characters and the ensuing events are too small, too familiar, and too particularized to give rise to the thundering wrath of Captain Shotover or the vague, exalted pronouncements and prophecies of Shotover and Hector.

"Here Shaw gives us the type of drama he held in highest esteem: the play of thought prompted by deep underlying emotion,"⁷ says Archibald Henderson. But the "deep underlying emotion" is not the product of factors obvious to the audience. Although the ark-like house represents the English Ship of State, and also "cultivated, leisured Europe before the war,"⁸ according to Shaw, the sea and its reefs are not visible. And the enemy, the stupid, unregenerate crew, remains unseen, for the only emissary from the 'practical' business group who, says

⁷ Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, p. 626.

⁸ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Heartbreak House, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 376.

Captain Shotover, are 'strangling the souls' of the cultured incompetents, is Mangan, an unsubstantial villain easily reduced to infantile sobs and frenzied disrobing by the withering candour of his supposed victims. The burglar is at odds with both Heartbreak House and its oppressors. The only other voice from the world outside sanely advises that Heartbreak House's lights be extinguished during an air-raid.

Heartbreak House's problem as a drama to convey ideas is that of Candida. The enlightened class whom Shaw here despairs of are futile drifters on a doomed ship, but they must reveal their uselessness by denouncing it themselves, just as Candida had to reveal her onerous protective role by declaring it, thereby destroying the ego she claimed to foster. Thus the characters display a clairvoyance and an energy that, one feels, could right the Ship of State in a week and, simultaneously, a pitiful disposition to fritter their lives away in assorted trivialities -- Hector in romancing, philandering, and gratuitous acts of insane daring; Hesione in heart-winning and heart-breaking; Mazzini Dunn in serving Mangan, campaigning idealistically, and hoping resignedly; and Chaptain Shotover in fantastic experimenting with dynamite and rum and his deliberately eccentric sorties to disconcert. Two dimensions of these characters are borrowed from conventional comedy and farce: Captain Shotover is the comically irascible and abstracted country-house host of comedy; Hector is a theatrically handsome swashbuckler; Ariadne is akin to other stage sophisticates with wantonly wandering eyes; Hesione is a charming, distractable lady of the manor; and Ellie, Mazzini, and Mangan are, in Act One, easily identifiable as inhabitants of a common plot. But

all these characters have a third dimension of allegorical significance which often gives them leave to speak profoundly and prophetically. And so the characters frequently stand self-condemned.

The combination of abortive plot and a majority of feckless, ignoble, partially stock characters with a grave theme moved William Irvine to complain with some justice:

Impressive as it is, both in conception and execution, "Heartbreak House" seems to me nevertheless inadequate to its theme. Its weakness lies partly in the amorphous and essentially undramatic structure of the last two acts but chiefly in the conflict of mood resulting from the use of comic characters to symbolize a tragic significance. Especially on a first reading of the play, we are struck with astonishment that these thin caricatures are meant to typify the moral degeneration of Europe, that they are meant to explain a gigantic disaster. The captain is certainly adequate, and perhaps Boss Mangan, particularly if he could be kept formidable a little longer. But the others - one might as well try to explain the Crimean War by the failings of the Pickwick Club. Again, the long discussion of the last two acts, brilliant and searching as it is, robs the splendid first act of its momentum, so that the bombs fall not merely as an ironically relevant irrelevancy, as Shaw intends, but as an artistic irrelevancy as well.⁹

Although Shaw's debt to Russian plays is apparent in Heartbreak House in the play's relatively actionless flow from which little change but much truth emerges, and in the atmosphere of recognition and anticipation of crisis and change which pervades it, the Shaw 'fantasia' is in other respects a quite different kind of creation. The major differences lie in Shaw's judgment of his characters -- the 'blessed' and the 'unblessed' are differentiated -- and in their seeming near-

9 William Irvine, The Universe of G.B.S., pp. 295-296.

isolation from the world they discuss. Gorky's and Chekhov's characters reveal themselves almost involuntarily and are not judged against a set standard of morality, whereas Shaw's analyze themselves expertly and are judged by the measure of their usefulness and integrity. Chekhov's plays illustrate the truth working itself out in the flow of time -- in the flux of society's development. In The Cherry Orchard, for instance, the report of the auction of Madame Ranevsky's estate, the sound of axes in the orchard, and the family's last-act departure reveal the disintegration of the old order, which such nostalgia-bound characters as Madame Ranevsky and her brother are powerless to hinder and which Lopahin, representative of the less-refined, more vital new order, cannot help but assist. In Shaw's play the characters pursue the truth articulately and ceaselessly, are highly self-conscious and critical, and seem to fulminate in the void against a present world-sickness which is not clearly apprehended by the audience. In fact, Shaw's play is less modern, in at least one sense, than The Cherry Orchard, for whereas Chekhov's play adheres to the fourth-wall convention and allows the audience to watch and overhear a representation of reality, Shaw's play verbally interprets reality, and its characters frequently address the audience in orations thinly disguised as plausible conversation.

Since Shaw's verbal searches for truth in this play lack a story-framework of events offstage, they require a sequence of events onstage to provide coherence and motivation for reflection and argument. Concerning coherence and plausibility, Shaw was more conscientious in Heartbreak House than he had been in Getting Married and Misalliance. In the latter

plays an opening situation promotes dialogue which is thereafter sporadically galvanized by a series of tenuously related, stagey events. In Getting Married, after a deluge of climactic meetings, Hotchkiss abruptly falls victim to a passion for an eccentric Mayoress; engagements, civil alliances, and divorces are agreed to and abandoned; and Mrs. George lapses into an inspired fit. In Misalliance a vengeful intruder hides in the Turkish bath and a Superwoman and a multi-fathered young man literally descend from the heavens. Heartbreak House has its burglar, a character farcically linked to the others by past associations, and his invasion is largely a digression motivating a brief conversation about criminal exploitation of respectability's reticence, but this incident is the only arbitrary, theatrical surprise event in the play. Otherwise the sequence of events till the start of the bombardment is orderly. Hesione's determination to save Ellie from Mangan results in Mangan's infatuation and his Act Two revelations to Ellie. Ellie's loss of Marcus Darnley and resultant cynicism lead to dialogue in which the Captain furthers her education:

...if you sell yourself, you deal your soul
a blow that all the books and pictures and
concerts and scenery in the world wont heal.

(Act II, p. 789.)

On a mundane level, the plot disappears thereafter into conversation, but Ellie's acceptance of the demanding philosophy underlying the Captain's potterings and rum-inspired dreams indicates that she has been reconverted to a measure of idealism. Her 'spiritual marriage' in Act Three is a fantastic resolution of a prosy plot, but it is nonetheless a conclusion to a single development.

In this coherence, as in the play's drawing-room-comedy setting and its comedy-of-manners element, Heartbreak House is related to the tradition of English comedy. Except for the bombs which end it, the play, on this level, can be regarded as a relatively orderly farce. But as allegory the play is a serious inter-action of symbols, and the air-raid is a wholly appropriate conclusion to this study of fatal tendencies, dire portents, and desperate causes.

Stripped of his individual, comic idiosyncrasies, Captain Shotover becomes a tragic figure representing the aged remnant of England's past glorious spirit beleaguered by a new generation of personally-minded men and "the happiness that comes as life goes, the happiness of yielding and dreaming instead of resisting and doing, the sweetness of the fruit that is going rotten." (Act II, p. 790.) His rejection of Mangan is a rejection of parasitical self-interest and of the stupid cunning that is shrewd enough only to prosper and to hinder and thwart other men's attempts at 'navigation'; Mangan is "not able-bodied". The Captain's sudden appearances and exits suggest sporadic resurgences of clean purpose and responsibility in a civilization that is foundering. (They are also the only instances of Chekhov's free flow of characters; the rest of the entrances and exits in Heartbreak House are carefully explained.)

Hector and Hesione are similarly suggestive figures. Hector's heroism links him with Troy's Hector, while his surname suggests his ignominious domesticity and Hesione's overwhelming femininity and maternalism. Hesione, ironically named after the wife of the highly effectual warrior Telamon, may

also have been intentionally coloured by the myths that associate Hesione of Troy with Andromeda and Astarte, the lecherous sea-goddess and 'ruler of men'.¹⁰ Moreover, just as the Hesione of legend was the prize won by the valour of Heracles and given by him to Telamon, Hesione Hushabye is a luxury begotten by Captain Shotover during his successful voyaging and given to the brave Hector. As symbols of heroism and love and beauty respectively, Hector and Hesione are "blessed", but both are adrift in romance. Hector is representative of the misled generation that succeeded Shotover's -- well-intentioned and courageous, but wooed away from the arts of navigation by romance, eroticism, and complacent indulgence (Hesione), by the glamour of the far-flung Empire (Ariadne), and by the sophisticated games of the artificial, hypocritical segment of society (also Ariadne).

Drifting, living upon the proceeds from lethal inventions, these characters seem variously guilty but equally doomed. However, symbolically, Ellie's union with Captain Shotover in Act Three -- a union of England's lingering positive spirit and her enlightened youth -- is a hopeful sign, as are Hector's increasingly dedicated speeches and Ariadne's yearning for the ability to feel. And although some of the characters are so despairing of themselves and the world they have allowed to degenerate that they greet Heaven's judgment, the bombs, ecstatically, only the despicable, destructive characters are killed.

From even so cursory a glance at the play's symbolism,

¹⁰ The association is mentioned by Robert Graves in *The Greek Myths*, Vol. I, New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1959, p. 244.

one can see that as allegory the play is not a formless collection of debates among society's elements and points of view, but a meaningful and directed pattern of symbols. And the whole is united by a haunting atmosphere which gradually intensifies until the note of impending doom becomes predominant. Said Shaw: "...the fly walks into the parlour with the happiest of anticipations, and is kept amused until it gets fixed there as by a spell."¹¹

Events on the realistic plane are leagues below the symbolic movement, but there are correspondences. Ellie's reluctant acceptance of Mangan in Act One is young England's unavoidable involvement in the mistakes of its elders. Hector's capture of the opportunistic burglar reveals the courage for which the dispossessed leaders among the intelligentsia can be relied on. Story and theme are oddly harnessed, but they do move together. As a consequence of this degree of harmony, Heartbreak House leaves on the spectator an impression of wholeness and consistency which earlier reversalplays achieved at the expense of some clarity and impact, and is an advance from the internal confusion and blurred outlines of Getting Married and Misalliance. Shaw achieved a further advance to fusion of plot and theme in a highly serious drama with Saint Joan.

Saint Joan

It might appear that in writing Saint Joan Shaw had an historical outline which he was obliged to follow in minute

¹¹ Quoted from The Sunday Herald, October 23, 1921, by Archibald Henderson in George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, p. 626.

detail rather than a theatrical sketch upon which he was free to play. William Irvine suggests that such coercion accounts for many of the play's best features:

The great merit of Joan's story was that here, apparently, history had worked out his heroic theme for him better than he had ever done himself. It was simpler, nobler, more complete, more tragic, and in better taste.¹²

But in fact Shaw had several melodramatic and comic versions of Joan's story as precedents for improvisation and as subjects susceptible to Shavian treatment. Shakespeare's Henry VI had presented a hostile, English view of Joan; Voltaire's La Pucelle d'Orleans (1738) had debunked the Roman Catholic Church's idealization of her in ribald fashion; Anatole France's Jeanne d'Arc (1906) had essayed a realistic, non-miraculous presentation of her; and Andrew Lang and Mark Twain had written eulogistic histories of her which condemned her judges of malice and prejudice. Jules Quicherat's records of Joan's trial, published in 1841, imposed some limits upon a conscientious artist's representation of this controversial figure, but left considerable leeway for interpretations of the characters of Joan and her tribunal. It was still possible after 1841 to portray Joan as divinely inspired or deluded, and to represent Cauchon as a ruthless Church politician, a vengeful villain, or a conscientious Churchman. There is material for many kinds of play in Joan's story.

Predictably, Shaw chose to reduce the traditional, romantic, miraculous, and melodramatic elements of the eulogistic.

12 William Irvine, The Universe of G.B.S., p. 320.

Joan legend and to add his own kind of realism, to contrive theatrically forceful scenes but provide his characters with human foibles and passions. But instead of depicting his vitalist heroine as a victim of universal stupidity and contemporary blindness and prejudice, constantly explaining herself to the befuddled, antagonistic, and self-centred people around her, as the author of Caesar and Cleopatra might have been expected to do, Shaw portrayed a relatively uncomprehending heroine endowed with the "evolutionary appetite", whose significance is understood but feared by well-meaning, rational, conservative men. Instead of undercutting the legend by depicting its events on an unheroic, human plane, Shaw exalted the story, raising it from a crude conflict between saintliness and despicable villainy to a clash between two kinds of good irreconcilable in a world of men. In his Preface to the play, Shaw quoted approvingly the view of a Catholic priest who found in Saint Joan "the dramatic presentation of the conflict of the Regal, sacerdotal, and Prophetical powers, in which Joan was crushed," and preferred "their fruitful interaction in a costly but noble state of tension" to the victory of any one.¹³ To reveal the continuance of such tension in the world, Shaw added the much-criticized dream Epilogue in which the persistent but progressive struggle between the warring forces of evolution and order is exposed in the general homage to Joan for accomplished good and the general opposition to a reappearance of her spirit on earth.

¹³ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Saint Joan, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 601.

Manifestly the play is Shaw's more than it is history's. And although Shaw insisted upon the essential truth to history of his drama, he himself argued in the Preface for two incompatible kinds of authenticity. On the one hand he claimed to have dramatized the trial fairly: he had compressed its events and thereby created tautness and pace, but essentially his trial scene revealed the actual attitudes, hinged on the recorded arguments, and included all the significant events of the trial at Rouen. He admitted to having improved upon the self-awareness, the understanding, and the eloquence of the Bishop, the Inquisitor, and the English commander, maintaining that

...it is the business of the stage to make its figures more intelligible to themselves than they would be in real life; for by no other means can they be made intelligible to the audience. And in this case Cauchon and Lemaître have to make intelligible not only themselves but the Church and the Inquisition, just as Warwick has to make the feudal system intelligible, the three between them having thus to make a twentieth-century audience conscious of an epoch fundamentally different from its own.¹⁴

But on the other hand, another justification for his characterization of Cauchon implies strongly that Shaw had done more than improve upon Cauchon's self-awareness and powers of elucidation:

...the writer of high tragedy and comedy, aiming at the innermost attainable truth, must needs flatter Cauchon nearly as much as the melodramatist vilifies him.¹⁵

The "innermost attainable truth" Shaw was after was the truth that change is necessary and inevitable but that sanity and order are also necessary, and change will be resisted mightily.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 609.

¹⁵ Ibid.

This truth, culled from the chaos of human affairs and stressed in the play, is apparent because Shaw suppressed the other factors which undoubtedly played a part in determining Joan's fate. Historians including G. G. Coulton, W. P. Barrett,¹⁶ and Charles Sarolea have criticized Shaw's play on the grounds that although his Joan conforms to the Joan that emerges from the trial records, her trial is much distorted. According to Sarolea

...in the case of Joan of Arc the paramount issue was political, and ... it is the political passions and prejudices alone which can make us understand the trial and condemnation.¹⁷

Shaw was dramatizing not what did happen but what might happen in a supremely just human court if a "genius" such as Joan were arraigned by the best arguments for the status quo. The consequences are dire for the genius, who is ahead of his time. But the over-all effect of Saint Joan is not oppressively pessimistic. The evolutionary appetite continues to find bodies to inhabit, and although the bodies may perish violently, the work of the Life Force is gradually accomplished. The Epilogue puts Joan's history into perspective: as an individual's story it is tragic, but as a chapter of the world's history it is merely moving and by no means depressing.

Thus, despite its high seriousness, its broad implications as vehicle of a philosophy of history, and its

¹⁶ Coulton and Barrett are quoted by Archibald Henderson in George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, pp. 500-501.

¹⁷ Charles Sarolea, "Has Mr. Shaw Understood Joan of Arc?", The English Review, Vol. XLIII (Aug., 1926), pp. 175-182.

heroine's terrible end, Saint Joan is comparable to the comedy Man and Supermah. In both plays the protagonists are vitalists in advance of their ages (though Tanner talks while Joan, like Ann Whitefield, lives her vitalism), are unable to approve the useful conventions and shams of system, and are eventually overcome by system, to be employed by the Life Force in a new way -- Tanner in begetting a new generation and Joan in inspiring, as only a martyr can. In both plays, the proper culminations of Shaw's theses coincide with the conclusions dictated by tradition: Man and Superman ends with a marriage, as romantic comedies usually do, and Saint Joan ends with an execution. And in both plays the conflict arises directly from the characters and is interesting as a progression toward resolution of a situation as well as interesting for the ideas it generates.

But whereas Man and Superman is built upon a giant stage iconoclasm reversing the conventional male and female roles, Saint Joan is a harmonious blend of Shavian philosophy and the romantic, tragic story of the heroine Jeanne d'Arc. The French saint is Shavianized but retains the appeal and the stage potency of romance heroines.

From the beginning Joan is battering against short-sighted reason and conservatism, and Shaw's renunciation of miracle increases the drama of Joan's successive victories with de Baudricourt, the Dauphin, and Dunois. Joan is powerfully conceived as a good-humoured, managing country girl whose conversions are the more marvelous for being achieved by her conviction, practicality, and strength of will rather than by heavenly forces external to her. The Life Force is inexhaustible,

as Shaw presents it, but only as strong in its individual servants as they are capable of making it. As Dunois puts it, the Life Force, or God

...is no man's daily drudge, and no maid's either.
If you are worthy of it He will sometimes snatch
you out of the jaws of death and set you on your
feet again; but that is all: once on your feet
you must fight with all your might and all your
craft. (Scene V, p. 987.)

This heroine is as human as the characters of Heartbreak House, but she is large enough to embody her part of the play's theme instead of merely expounding it while half living up to it. Moreover, she is free from the didacticism of *Candida* and Shaw's *Caesar*, for although she shows flashes of insight into the nature of her inspiration, she is incapable of grasping the Churchmen's reasons for fearing and condemning her claim to unauthorized personal convictions. The trial records bear witness to this incomprehension and the utter certainty Shaw stresses in her. Joan appears in them as possessor of a full set of Shavian virtues: she is innocent, vital, practical, dedicated, and convinced. Eric Bentley comments: "It almost seems that if Joan had never existed Shaw would have had to invent her."¹⁸

Since what Shaw took from Joan in the form of conventional saintliness he amply repaid her in human virtues and powers, the first three scenes rhythmically depicting the stages of her rise to the battle of Orléans are not unlike the orthodox success scenes of heroic melodrama. Shaw scrupulously included the 'miracles' of the eggs and the death of the profane soldier, but handled them humorously. The subtle Archbishop puts miracles

¹⁸ Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, p. 168.

in their place in Scene Two. Nevertheless, they are present half-ambiguously, explained yet effectively suggestive: apparently events sometimes conspire to aid the Life Force, just as Heaven aids the righteous in religious melodrama. Shaw's metaphysics here are questionable, but the result is good theatre.

Subtle Shavian transformation continues in Scene Four. Shaw was no longer merely inverting as he had done in Widowers' Houses, or tortuously introducing new themes to justify stagey events as he had done in Mrs. Warren's Profession, but was steadily infusing new significance into the legend's familiar events. Scene Four of Saint Joan is an example of the technique; it shows the sinister plottings of the Earl of Warwick, representative of the English, and the Bishop of Beauvais, Cauchon, who has been expelled from his diocese by Joan's supporters. These arch-villains of the pro-Joan legend meet to discuss Joan's fate as villains meet to plot their infamies in melodrama. Initially the conventional motives, English hatred and fear of a successful enemy and Cauchon's vengefulness, are brought forward. But it soon becomes clear that Warwick and Cauchon are spokesmen for contemporary institutions as well as individuals dependent upon those institutions. Warwick's determination is largely dispassionate and has some justification in his theory that Joan may promote nationalism and thus play a significant part in the breakdown of the feudal system in which he believes. And more important, Cauchon proves to be a conscientious ecclesiastic not consciously motivated by personal malice but impelled by his certainty that

Joan is a misguided believer threatening the supremacy of the holy Catholic Church and thus the very foundation of moral order. Anachronistically, Warwick and Cauchon term the two tendencies represented by Joan as "Protestantism" and "Nationalism" -- the first a threat to unity, the second a threat to feudal division. The only vindictive voice in the proceedings is that of de Stogumber, the clown at the council, whose animosity to Joan is ironically based on his nationalism. The scene is theatrically ominous, yet it foreshadows Cauchon's earnest attempts to save Joan, and the identification of Joan with forces that eventually prevailed in the centuries following her death palliates the gloom engendered by audience awareness of her impending death, just as consciousness of that end modifies the frequent gusts of humour and even gaiety in the play.

Scene Five is a Shaw scene, though its construction exhibits the stage sense of a seasoned spectator of melodrama. Eschewing the splendours of Charles' coronation -- despite the "heartfelt instructions"¹⁹ of many critics -- Shaw concentrated on the growing unpopularity of the insatiable genius and upon the growing antagonisms to her in her own camp. These antagonisms show the ignoble underside of the Church and feudal-state objections to Joan: The King fears the risks in which she would involve him and the responsibility with which she would burden him. United France is not a concept to entice him. The Archbishop is nettled by her 'pride' and asserts his ecclesiastical authority in a petty preview of the Church court's august censure.

¹⁹ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Saint Joan, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 610.

Even Dunois is piqued by her "insufferable"²⁰ certainty. Each interchange strips Joan of a supporter until she stands bereft of all allies but La Hire, cast off at the moment of her triumph. The scene is a small play in itself, moving from denial to denial toward a final affecting moment in which Joan, shaken and deserted though still determined, utters a ringing statement of faith; her capture, France's desertion of her, and her fatal adamancy are all completely foreshadowed.

The trial scene is a magnificent climax. In it Shaw fused his characteristic drama of clashing ideas with moving human drama akin to but elevated from the crude pathos of less complex plays. The scene is comparable to the climaxes of both the sex-and-salvation dramas and the 'problem' plays of the nineties in its emotive power, but is free from the bathos of these predecessors. The stage nobility, spirituality, and latent death-wish of such Christian heroines as Mercia in The Sign of the Cross are replaced by Joan's human doubts, stubbornness, and horror of death. As for the problem plays -- such dissimilar playwrights as Brieux and Galsworthy had used trial scenes effectively, but almost invariably the prosecution and defense were clearly representative of simple moral antitheses. Galsworthy had shaded his diagrams -- the prosecution in Justice is well-intentioned though blind -- but, in the main, stage trials were the epitome of melodrama, simple confrontations of just and unjust causes which assaulted the audience's emotions far more than they challenged their minds. Shaw's climactic

²⁰ An adjective Shaw frequently applied to Joan. See Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 605, and Hesketh Pearson, Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality, London, Collins, 1942, p. 376.

scene has considerable emotional impact too. Audience sympathy remains with Joan, though the conflict of ideas is a close battle. The tribunal's evident pity and concern for the maid, its powerful reasons of state, and its obvious anguish in a predicament wherein its convictions virtually compel it to doom a child to the small mercy of the English and the Church's secular arm -- all of these are stressed. And these elements are highlighted by the ferocity of the English and Parisian clerics and illuminated by the Inquisitor's lengthy oration on heresy. Nevertheless, the court is guilty; ultimately it compels Joan to choose between death and life-long imprisonment. And the Inquisitor exposes his recognition of the atrocity he is a party to when he comments grimly: "...it is a terrible thing to see a young and innocent creature crushed between these mighty forces, the Church and the Law." "There are no villains in the piece";²¹ Cauchon's motives are impeccable, and the Inquisitor's professional ones are also imposing. But Lemaître's conscious resignation is akin to villainy, despite the emphasis Shaw laid on his air of moderation and patience. Shaw revealed his view of the eloquent Inquisitor in a note on Shavian characterization written in the third person for Archibald Henderson:

Always Shaw makes the best of his bêtes noires. He made the Inquisitor in Saint Joan such a complete picture of saintly, silver-haired, sweetly reasonable, old cathedral canon that some of the critics were half converted to the necessity for burning Joan, and the author had to ask them not to forget that the Inquisitor, like the saintly Torquemada, was "a most infernal old scoundrel".²²

²¹ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Saint Joan, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 608.

²² Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, pp. 740-741.

In thus showing Joan's destruction under the weight of approved attitudes and doctrines, the massive inertia of an era, Shaw seemed to be removing villainy, the lifeblood of melodrama, from the story; but in bequeathing the Inquisitor with the special ability to see beyond contemporary views and affairs and to know his own sophistry, the playwright demonstrated that the trial was historically a crime, though fair in its own time. Melodrama is not absent from Shaw's play, but it is transformed.

The Epilogue returns the play to the realm of the human comedy and makes it difficult to classify Saint Joan as tragedy. There was widespread critical objection to this 'appendage' when the play was first reviewed,²³ yet it is not a breach of unity. It is not wholly comic, as Shaw seemed to suggest that it was in the Preface,²⁴ and it is not a "detachable problem play",²⁵ for the human dilemma it clarifies has been stressed throughout the play. Shaw's defense for it ranged from his semi-facetious declaration to Henderson:

The Epilogue will never be omitted as long as actresses are actresses. Saint Joan will always be a star play for a big actress. Catch her cutting the Epilogue and letting Stogumber steal the end of the play from her!²⁶

to a grave assertion of his philosophic optimism:

²³ Ibid., p. 600, and Blanche Patch, Thirty Years With G.B.S., London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1951, p. 53.

²⁴ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Saint Joan, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 606.

²⁵ William Irvine's phrase for it in The Universe of G. B. S., p. 324.

²⁶ Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, p. 600.

The Epilogue is obviously not a representation of an actual scene, or even of a recorded dream; but it is none the less historical. Without it the play would be only a sensational tale of a girl who was burnt, leaving the spectators plunged in horror, despairing of humanity. The true tale of Saint Joan is a tale with a glorious ending; and any play that did not make this clear would be an insult to her memory.²⁷

Shaw's lack of a sense of horror, evidenced in his life as well as in his plays, allowed him to view Joan's dreadful death unsentimentally: "...many a woman has got herself burnt by carelessly whisking a muslin skirt into the drawing room fireplace...."²⁸ Her martyrdom did not disturb his cheerful pragmatism which allowed him to see truth in the views of medieval authority and also universal truth in the ideas Joan represented. He therefore did not linger over Joan's reaction to her sentence. By depicting de Stogumber's horror and remorse he gave his audience a climactic experience, but for him the poignantly moving moment in his play was not in Scene Six, not in a situation's end, but in Joan's final, half-despairing question about a situation which continues -- humanity's loitering. The Epilogue does not negate the pathos of Scene Six but expands on it; Joan's spirit, her "evolutionary appetite", persists but suffers continual checks and rebuffs. The scene is in keeping with the tenor of a play which is about an individual and also about the human comedy. In Saint Joan Shaw used a most romantic story to dramatize his

²⁷ From the Program Notes reprinted by Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson in Theatrical Companion to the Plays of Shaw, London, Rockcliff Publishing Corporation, 1954, p. 207.

²⁸ G. B. Shaw, Preface to Saint Joan, Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, p. 610.

own view of reality, and succeeded in adapting the contemporary conventions for religious melodrama to his distinctive kind of drama.

In using Joan's romantic tale straightforwardly, and availing himself of its opportunities for 'stage' climaxes, Shaw proved his freedom from the grasp of the 'old' dramaturgy. When he had reacted against it, he had often written good comedy, but he had also set in motion conflicts within the plays which obscured his positive themes. When he concentrated upon his own vision of reality, as he did in Man and Superman and Saint Joan, he created his own crises and climaxes and exploited the formulas without risking their domination of the plays. The formulas had patent assets as stage fare; they had story, suspense, pace, and completeness. Shaw discovered that these could be retained and that the 'messages' the formulas usually carried could be debunked or modified by a skilful dramatist possessing his own comprehensive view of the world. Saint Joan is a triumph of high seriousness and high comedy in which Shaw's constant theme -- the relentless struggle of vitality against system -- is developed with both theatrical impact and integrity.

Shaw's contribution to twentieth-century drama

"One might classify with justice much of the modern repertory as the Shavian drama, as one classifies the Elizabethan repertory as Shakespearean,"²⁹ says Alan Downer, and many critics

²⁹ Alan Downer, The British Drama, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1950, p. 311.

and theatre enthusiasts would agree. Certainly Shaw played a major rôle in the movement to replace crude melodrama, sentimentality, and farce with intelligent, provocative drama reflecting modern life and probing modern problems. He "cut his way into the theatre of the nineteenth century at the point of his pen"³⁰ and consolidated his gains with plays infused with a combination of intelligence, wit, humour, and moral passion. He proved that the drama of ideas need not lack story or theatrical impact. And eventually -- after a lengthy campaign waged upon the Lord Chamberlain, the theatre critics, the actor-managers, and the public -- he established himself as the foremost among British dramatists. The sheer brilliance of his works and his enormous popularity undoubtedly gave weight to his precepts, and it is unquestionable that much of the credit for ousting lightweight, implausible, irresponsible drama from its former unchallenged tenancy of London's fashionable theatres belongs to him.

At the same time, it should be remembered that Shaw was only one contributor -- though a very prominent one -- to a movement which had begun on the continent before his criticisms and his plays reached the English public, and that England would certainly have begun to develop realistic, intelligent drama eventually, even if there had been no Shaw to speed the process. The 'new' dramatists had other theorists and reformers to heed and other dramatists as guides. Shaw is sometimes credited for too much, just as he is occasionally blamed for too much.

³⁰ G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. I, p. xxi.

In his recent book How Not to Write a Play, a work whose seriousness and purpose belie its frivolous title, Walter Kerr finds Shaw guilty of inspiring drama that would attract William Morris -- rigorously honest, uncontrived, relatively storyless, improving drama that has almost every virtue except wide audience appeal. "What we are left with," says Kerr, "is a joke almost too grisly to bear: Shaw tumbling on, in infectious high spirits, to become the most popular playwright of his time; the while he strenuously taught the rest of us how to be thoroughly unpopular."³¹ Kerr's lament assumes that the dramatists who followed Shaw to the stage conscientiously adhered to the new 'rules' implied by his play reviews, prefaces, and essays and ignored his practice. But in fact, Shaw's writings on theatre repeatedly emphasize his delight in story and in well-motivated crises and climaxes. If the dramatists who came after him chose to abstract his negative criticisms of trite, superficial plays from the whole body of his works and to renounce the traditional forms and devices he used, the fault is not Shaw's.

Shaw never forgot that the principal attraction of the theatre is its power to entertain. While other reforming dramatists wrote plays that provoked Beerbohm Tree to exclaim: "A work of art should make us say 'Ah!' -- not 'Ugh!'"³² and still others reacted against melodrama and spectacle by writing subtle, 'unconstructed', and pallid pieces, Shaw was learning

³¹ Walter Kerr, How Not To Write a Play, p. 35.

³² Quoted by Lynton Hudson in The English Stage, 1850 - 1950, London, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1951, p. 128.

to harmonize fresh ideas and unconventionally real characters with effective theatre. And his plays continue popular while the works of such minor Shavians as Granville-Barker and St. John Hankin are forgotten. The latter dramatists usually escaped the toils of plot and stagey technique as Shaw did not always do, but they also renounced much showmanship. After them came a gradual shift toward honest but tolerant, uncontroversial drama. John Gassner describes the aftermath of the revolutionary period:

The British theatre, which began somewhat reluctantly to modernize itself with Wilde and Shaw, moved toward the mid-point of the twentieth century somewhat tired by the struggle with momentous crises. Some playwrights turned to religious drama, and a few of their plays ... were exquisitely written and noble in spirit. A few writers, notably Auden, Isherwood, and Spender, tried to create a "left-wing" poetic drama. But the rest of the dramatists avoided social and spiritual encounters. They were almost invariably adroit, but they were content to be amiable and urbane.³³

No dramatist currently writing in England or the United States exhibits Shaw's formidable array of interests and talents, but a few twentieth-century playwrights have written drama comparable to Shaw's in certain specific respects. Somerset Maugham's works have some of Shaw's humane hilarity and cogent satire, though Maugham's financially disastrous venture with A Man of Honour dissuaded him from further outright defiance of public prejudice. Noel Coward's plays also reflect the comedies of Shaw as well as those of Wilde. Shaw's social criticism may well have given some impetus to the steady stream of such criticism being written on both sides of the Atlantic.

³³ John Gassner, "Modern Drama in England and Ireland", A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 508.

His profound concern for moral issues and his emphasis upon personal responsibility have also reappeared in the works of such playwrights as Arthur Miller. His 'athletic', eloquent prose dialogue and his prose poetry anticipated a renewed interest among modern playwrights in the possibilities of poetic drama. And his 'fantasias', farces, and dream interludes are precedents for the non-realistic modes used by some latter-day dramatists to convey their views of reality.

Shaw's influence may also be detected in what does not flourish in contemporary drama. Stark melodrama was not driven completely off the stage by Shaw's mirth and his colleagues' repudiation of it; it has held its ground in films till recently, and it continues to dominate run-of-the-mill television presentations. But it is tempered and disguised in the modern theatre. In this era of wars, anxieties, and neuroses, it appears in political and war dramas and in psychological plays depicting the machinations of the id. But it is usually melodrama backed by intelligence. Since Shaw laboured to entrench ideas and integrity in the theatre, they have not been lacking in modern drama.

A statement Shaw made soon after the outset of his playwriting career defines the elements of his plays, elements which have been demanded of plays, though not always provided by them, since Shaw's mature works demonstrated their combined power. "...vital art work," he wrote, "comes always from a cross between art and life: art being of one sex only, and quite sterile by itself."³⁴ When Shaw managed to discipline

³⁴ G. B. Shaw, Dramatic Opinions and Essays, Vol. II, p. 362.

his art and to imbue it with vitality and intelligence, as he did in Saint Joan, he was a playwright difficult to equal. No matter how his plays may age as philosophical, social, economic, or political theses, the best among them are durable proofs of the happy truth that life and dramatic art are compatible.

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