

THE
—SHAVIAN—
PLAYGROUND



MARGERY M. MORGAN

The Shavian Playground

*An Exploration of the Art
of George Bernard Shaw*

MARGERY M. MORGAN

*Methuen & Co Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane London EC4*

*First published in 1972 by Methuen & Co Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane London EC4
First published as a University Paperback 1974
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Bernard Shaw previously unpublished texts © 1972 by
The Trustees of the British Museum, Governors and
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*Printed in Great Britain by
Butler & Tanner Ltd, Frome and London*

ISBN 0 416 82500 1

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For Siriol

‘Linguistic usage . . . is wont to designate as “play” everything which is neither subjectively nor objectively contingent, and yet imposes no kind of constraint either from within or from without.

. . . In a word: by entering into association with ideas all reality loses its earnestness because it then becomes *of small account*; and by coinciding with feeling necessity divests itself of its earnestness because it then becomes *of light weight*.

. . . how can we speak of *mere* play, when we know that it is precisely play and play *alone* which of all man’s states and conditions is the one which makes him whole and unfolds both sides of his nature at once? What you, according to your idea of the matter, call *limitation*, I, according to mine – which I have justified by proof – call *expansion*.’

Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*,
Letter XV, trans. Wilkinson and
Willoughby

‘The well-fed Englishman, though he lives and dies a schoolboy, cannot play. He cannot even play cricket or football: he has to work at them . . . To him playing means playing the fool.’

G. B. Shaw, Preface to
Three Plays for Puritans

Acknowledgements

Chapter 5 of this book substantially reproduces the Introduction to *You Never Can Tell*, Gateway Library (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane: Hicks Smith, 1967). A variant form of Chapter 8 has appeared in R. Zimbardo (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Major Barbara*, Spectrum Books (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970). Chapter 11 and the section on *The Apple Cart* in Chapter 17 incorporate material published respectively in *Modern Drama*, Vol. IV (1962), and *The Shavian*, Vol. II, No. 6 (1962), this last under the title of 'Two Varieties of Political Drama'. Chapter 13 is a revised and extended version of an article originally published in *Essays and Studies*, New Series, Vol. XIII (1960), and reprinted in R. J. Kaufmann (ed.), *G. B. Shaw, Twentieth Century Views* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

Unless another version is specified, the text of Shaw's plays, prefaces, novels and shorter pieces is quoted from the Standard Edition of *The Works of Bernard Shaw* (London: Constable, 1931-50) and Shaw letters of the early period from Dan H. Laurence (ed.), *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1874-1897* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1965), volume I of an immense project. Permission to quote published writings by Shaw has been granted by the Society of Authors for the Bernard Shaw Estate. For access to unpublished material, including Rehearsal Copies of plays, I am indebted to the staff of the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum, the Keeper of the Enthoven Theatre Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Librarian of the British Drama League.

Acknowledgements are due to the Beacon Press, Boston, and Sphere Books, London, for permission to quote from *Eros and Civilization*, and to Allen and Unwin, London, and Russell and Russell, New York, for permission to quote from *The Birth of Tragedy*.

My gratitude to individuals is very inadequately suggested by the occasional reference in the notes. I should also like to thank Professor H. F. Brooks of Birkbeck College and my colleague Mr Peter Naish

for reading and criticizing certain chapters in manuscript. Special mention is due here to Mrs Maureen Mann, for assistance in compiling the index, and to Mrs Elizabeth Moore for much unofficial help in the preparation of the typescript.

I am grateful to the Council of Monash University for granting me the period of study leave which made the final compilation of my work possible.

The author and publishers wish to thank the following for permission to reproduce the illustrations that appear in this book:

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Contents

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	xi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xiii
INTRODUCTION	1
1 The Novels	9
2 Socialist Drama	23
3 Tales for the Nursery	46
4 The Virgin Mother	64
5 Making the Skeleton Dance	83
6 <i>Man and Superman: Verbal Heroics</i>	100
7 <i>John Bull's Other Island</i>	119
8 <i>Major Barbara</i>	134
9 Problem Plays	158
10 The Greek Form Again: <i>Getting Married</i>	176
11 Shaw on the Tightrope: <i>Misalliance</i>	187
12 <i>Heartbreak House: Shaw's Dream Play</i>	200
13 <i>Back to Methuselah: The Poet and the City</i>	221
14 The Histories	239
15 Farewell to Platonism: <i>Too True to be Good</i>	258
16 Eschatological Plays	272
17 Late Burlesques	303
18 The Shavian Muse – In Conclusion	326
Bibliographical Note: Shaw in the Sixties	345
INDEX	351

List of Illustrations

	FACING PAGE
1 Jean Fouquet, 'The Martyrdom of St Apollonia'. Miniature of a medieval theatrical performance, c. 1450. (Musée Condé, Chantilly.)	18
2 Porcelain figure after a model by Franz Anton Bustelli, c. 1760. Probably Ottavio from the Italian Comedy. (Victoria and Albert Museum.)	19
3 Porcelain figure of Il Dottore after a model by Simon Feilner, c. 1755. (Victoria and Albert Museum.)	19
4 <i>Mrs Warren's Profession</i> , Act III. Theatre Royal, Windsor, 1967. (Photo: Castle Studio, Windsor.)	50
5 Romance and realism in <i>Arms and the Man</i> (a) Laurence Olivier as Sergius Saranoff. Old Vic Company, New Theatre, 1944-5. (Photo: John Vickers.)	51
(b) Cyril Cusack as Bluntschli. Paris Festival, 1960.	51
6 Katherine Cornell as Candida. New York, 1937.	82
7 D. G. Rossetti, 'Proserpine with the pomegranate'. The model was Jane Morris. (Tate Gallery.)	82
8 Titian, 'Assumption of the Virgin'. (Santa Maria dei Frari, Venice.)	85
9 Alan Badel as John Tanner in <i>Man and Superman</i> . New Arts Theatre, 1966. (Photo: Lewis Morley.)	114
10 Alec Clunes in <i>Don Juan in Hell</i> (Act III of <i>Man and Superman</i>). Arts Theatre, 1952. (Photo: Angus McBean.)	115
11 <i>Major Barbara</i> , Act II. New York, 1915. Grace George and Ernest Lawford as Barbara and Cusins.	146
12 <i>John Bull's Other Island</i> , Act IV, scene 2. Kingsway Theatre, 1912. Granville Barker as Larry Doyle; William Poel as Keegan; Louis Calvert as Broadbent.	147
13 <i>Getting Married</i> . Haymarket Theatre, 1908. Robert Loraine as Hotchkiss; Henry Ainley as the Bishop; Fanny Brough as Mrs George Collins.	147

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 14 | 'Death watching a combat'. A miniature from Olivier de la Marche, <i>Le Chevalier délibéré</i> , c. 1485-90. | 178 |
| 15 | <i>The Doctor's Dilemma</i> , Act III. Haymarket Theatre, 1942. (Photo: Angus McBean.) | 178 |
| 16 | Greek stamnos, Villa Giulia 983. (Photo: Alinari, Florence.) | 179 |
| 17 | <i>Misalliance</i> . Yale University Theatre, 1957. | 179 |
| 18 | <i>Saint Joan</i> - a puppet play? | |
| | (a) Teatr Stary, Krakow, 1956. (Photo: F. Myszkowski.) | 242 |
| | (b) Kamerny Theatre, Moscow, 1924. Setting shows Expressionist influence. | 242 |
| 19 | <i>The Apple Cart</i> , Interlude. Queen's Theatre, 1929. Edith Evans as Orinthia; Cedric Hardwick as Magnus. (Photo: Sasha.) | 243 |
| 20 | <i>Too True to be Good</i> | |
| | (a) Act III: Theatre Guild, New York, 1932. (Photo: Vandamm.) | 274 |
| | (b) Strand Theatre, 1965. Dora Bryan and Kenneth Haigh as Sweetie and the Burglar. (Photo: Houston Rogers.) | 274 |
| 21 | <i>The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles</i> . Malvern Festival, 1955. (Photo: J. W. Debenham.) | 275 |
| 22 | <i>Geneva</i> . Saville Theatre, 1958. | 275 |

Introduction

Man is an animal that laughs; he also possesses faculties of speech and reason more highly developed than in other animals. The observation is older than Aristotle. The curiousness of the combination it recognizes forms the basis of the drama of G. B. Shaw, himself supremely endowed with all three powers: laughter, speech and reason.

The element of truth in the twentieth-century view of Shaw as a late Victorian sage needs to be supplemented by recognition that there was no place in the official Victorian canon for his greatest and most characteristically 'Shavian' virtue: gaiety of mind. Matthew Arnold had repressed his share of that quality. Oscar Wilde's insinuations against earnestness were partly disabled by their author's reputation for cynicism and his ultimate fate. Twentieth-century criticism has been slow to appreciate the seriousness of humour, although Freud considered jokes worthy of deep attention and acknowledged the value of humour as a weapon against neurosis,¹ and Nietzsche had rejected a god of gravity for one who could dance.² It has been justly remarked that a true assessment of Shaw cannot be made without an understanding of comedy – as the twin rather than the degenerate poor relation of tragedy. For the dramatist who wrote, 'The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is Despair' (Preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*), the difference between tragedy and comedy is a matter of perspective and deliberate attitude; and humour is a response to distress, cleansing the personality of morbid emotions and intimate confusions which otherwise inhibit positive action and limit the possibilities of change.

Victorian popular culture preserved the crudest and most vigorous forms of comedy in its theatre: in farce, the swiftest paced of dramatic

¹ Many of the examples of 'jokiness', including the literary example of Heine, discussed by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1960), are interestingly comparable with Shaw.

² See the quotation from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* included in the discussion of *You Never Can Tell*, p. 90 below.

styles, which defies reason and has no need of speech; and in burlesque, which always preserves a relation to some vision and set of values outside the comic mode. Eric Bentley has asserted,¹ and Martin Meisel has amply demonstrated,² the importance of connecting Shaw's art with this popular tradition. But insistence on his technique of borrowing the conventions of his day, and proceeding to invert or distort them, has involved a neglect of the compulsive quality in Shaw's procedure. A happy inability to treat either his material or his medium with consistent seriousness made him one of the most idiosyncratic of Victorian novelists before ever he wrote for the theatre; Granville Barker drily called him 'a merry fellow' for laughing through his mother's funeral; such jokiness as traditionally afflicts medical and theological students was evident in the remark, 'No flowers, no congratulations,' made on the occasion of his wife's death.³ Burlesque was a fashion of the day, but it was also expressive of Shaw's personal response to some kinds of experience.

The comedian's cast of mind is sometimes embodied in a character who functions to preserve the comic balance in a play that might easily have overbalanced into another category. Even Lickcheese, in *Widowers' Houses*, operates as such a control more than as a source of incidental comic relief. Frank Gardner, Burgess, Apollodorus, Charles Lomax, the Dauphin are other figures serving the same general purpose, though the style of comedy they embody varies from one to another. There is a tragic idea to be abstracted from *The Doctor's Dilemma*, but the play is a 'tragedy' only in a sense unique to Shaw whose impulse was to guy the form – as Dubedat does. The Epilogue to *Saint Joan* constitutes a decisive rejection of the finality of tragedy. Even Shavian melodrama, as in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* or *Heartbreak House*, is more properly to be termed farcical melodrama (like Stevenson and Henley's *Macaire*). *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* is Shaw's straightest exercise in the convention, and even here the sense of make-believe and the sceptical

¹ 'Critics who see Shaw's relationship to the ordinary Victorian theatre, or even to Gilbert and Wilde, are likely to avoid the errors of those who see only his relation to the Higher Theatre movement under whose auspices his plays first appeared.' (Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, revised and amended edition (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1957; 2nd ed. London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 174–5.) Cf. the well-known passage from the Preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*: 'my stories are the old stories; my characters are the familiar harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloone . . . ; my stage tricks and suspenses and thrills and jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy, by which time my grandfather was tired of them.'

² Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, and London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

³ See (e.g.) St John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Constable, 1956), p. 453.

coolness of distance are sufficient to dissipate the true tone of melodrama.

As an imitator of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov or Shakespeare, Shaw produced work that impresses us much more by its differences from his models, radical differences of tone and quality, than by the detectable similarities. Did he believe that he was carrying out William Archer's plan when he began to write *Widowers' Houses*, then to be entitled *Rhinegold*? How like what is usually known as Pre-Raphaelite art is Shaw's 'Pre-Raphaelite play', *Candida*? It is not only when his point of departure is a commonplace, or even shoddy, domestic drama, or social problem play, or romantic historical play, that the result is a travesty of the source. Whatever he borrowed was transformed in an imagination so extravagantly individual that it takes a strict dialectical framework to hold its anarchic energies. He joked about the extraordinariness of his perfectly 'normal' eyesight; its mental equivalent is just such a natural gift as El Greco's astigmatism, rendering what he sees surprisingly different from the way most of us customarily see it. Whether he was as aware of the difference as we are is not always clear. The problem of determining where the dividing line falls between conscious contrivance and unconscious effect continually nags at the student of Shaw's plays and will be one of the preoccupations of this book. Like all reformers, he had to fight his chosen enemies within himself as well as in society, and the battle proceeds on other levels besides the rational. Under the extreme pressures of puritan tradition in morals and manners, humour may be both personally liberating and socially subversive in a gradual and insidious fashion.

There is nothing ambiguous about Shaw's addiction to knockabout scenes of crude physical violence: from Blanche Sartorius's attack on her maid right through to the Interlude in *The Apple Cart*, *The Millionairess* and *Good King Charles's Golden Days*, the element of physical aggression challenges any account of the plays as intellectual drama, in the usual tepid sense which disdains such violence on stage as undramatic and in effect interprets man as mind. These scenes farcically underline the equal aggressiveness in the verbal assaults and conflicts the plays contain. There may be an underlying connection to be traced with Rugby-inspired notions of muscular Christianity. Certainly there is an inheritance from eighteenth-century rumbustiousness and its relation to the idea of natural man, such as George Meredith also derived from Fielding.

The relation between jest and earnest is not constant throughout the plays, and to define its nature in each instance is one of the main tasks of the critical interpreter; not, of course, to explain the jokes away. Shaw employs a considerable range of comic forms, and the degree of subtlety in

his comedy varies greatly. There is an element of truth in the caricaturist's view of him as a clown with a trick of standing on his head to catch the crowd's attention. No term has been bandied about more freely in discussion of his work than 'paradox', usually with this clownish image in mind. Used precisely to indicate a strategy of bringing to light the neglected aspects of accepted truths, to reveal the relativity of all truth, or to induce a widening of the horizons of our thinking, it is indeed acceptable as a central term of Shaw criticism. In so far as it is loosely used of exhibitionist shock-tactics, perpetrated by a fundamentally irresponsible intellectual, I have chosen to avoid it at least until the case is proven one way or the other. A questioning of the value and function of reason in relation to the rest of the personality is one continuing concern of Shaw's drama anyway.

Certainly there is intellectual control in his plays, most obvious when he moves away from plots of strong narrative interest to the dramatic equivalent of philosophical debate. This can be seen as an aspect of his discarding of the artistic conventions of realism in a move towards greater abstraction. But he also seems to have felt restricted from the first by tight, 'organic' plots inasmuch as they excluded any play of fantasy or comic improvisation. His experimentation with fragmented, wilder-seeming forms, approximating in some degree to the extravaganza, can be traced back at least as far as *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Alternatively, and in line with symbolist practice, he sought a fluidity of development in emulation of music.¹ In this respect, the handling of dialogue in *Candida* anticipates the much more fully 'musical' structuring of *Misalliance* and *Heartbreak House*. The more completely he was able to convert the dramatic medium to his own ends the more likely is the real unity and coherence, which all art must have, to be pervasive; but the conceptual principle from which the play has sprung may then be hidden deep and takes patience to tease out.

Only in one instance, in *Fanny's First Play*, does Shaw actually employ a critical frame-play around an inset as Fielding, his admired predecessor, sometimes did. But general practice of burlesque can be related to Fielding's practice of the 'journalism of the theatre', the staged topical commentary or satire written in the margins of literary drama, bringing that more self-contained art closer to the daily concerns of the audience.²

¹ See Charles Loyd Holt, Doct. Diss. (Wayne State University, 1963); 'Music and the Young Shaw', *The Shavian*, Vol. III (1966), pp. 9-13; '“Candida” and the Music of Ideas', *Shaw Review*, Vol. IX (1966), pp. 2-14.

² *Pasquin* and *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* are the most obvious examples from Fielding, though all his plays can be considered in these terms. Shaw expressed his consciousness of following in the steps of Fielding in the Preface to *Plays Unpleasant*, where he calls him 'the greatest practising dramatist,

As puritan and as politician, Shaw was opposed to any autonomous, enclosed world of art, without social responsibility and cut off from public affairs. Even the blatantly stagey quality of his drama is anti-illusionist, a reminder that even a national theatre, where such a play as *John Bull's Other Island* might be part of an actual election campaign, is still a playhouse licensed for the enactment of fantasies.

It is significant that Shaw never wrote a naturalistic play which remained in that style throughout its length, though he sympathized with the principles of naturalism. Another political dramatist, Bertolt Brecht, who learnt much from Shaw, explained his own avoidance of naturalistic technique when he observed: 'That "assimilation of art to science" which gave naturalism its social influence undoubtedly hamstrung some major artistic capacities, notably the imagination, the sense of play and the element of pure poetry. Its artistic aspects were clearly harmed by its instructive side.'¹ One of the aims of the present book is to explore the relationship between Shaw's art and his politics, to discover the extent to which his art is political and the sense in which it is political. He was well known outside the theatre as a dedicated socialist, an active public speaker and pamphleteer for the cause. But the wares inside can seem oddly at variance with the sign over the shop: Shaw's first socialist hero is a mountebank who conducts his operations under cover of an antic disposition and the absurd false name of Smilash; Candida devastates her Christian Socialist husband with the revelation that his oratory is an effective form of sexual display; Jack Tanner's socialist challenge to old-fashioned liberalism is brushed aside as peripheral to an apparently apolitical theme, in *Man and Superman*. It is all drama of ideas in a superficial sense: epigrams fly thick like missiles through the air; theories are expounded which testify to the range of Shaw's reading and the eclectic habits of his mind. His description of himself as a crow that has followed many ploughs² sounds as little like the cry of a man who has found some absolute value as it is a claim to originality. Some of the late plays, notably *On the Rocks* and *Geneva*, are centrally concerned with political themes of some topical urgency. But to suppose that the dramatist acted as the delegate of the socialist, even here, is too naïve.

Imaginative thinking, thinking through the medium of art, is a different activity from scientific reasoning or the mode of argument followed by a political orator, educator or polemicist. The two types of

with the single exception of Shakespeare, produced by England between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century'.

¹ *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. and notes by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 132.

² Preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*.

activity seem to have been complementary to each other in Shaw's life: the one didactic and directive, the other turning inward with a self-searching regard as much as outward in communication with others. Shaw's methods of self-publicity gave a lead to commentators which has continued to draw attention away from his work towards his public personality (including the 'private' personality he chose to display). The present study is an attempt to let his art speak for itself with a minimum of interpolation. Accepting that the understanding of the artist, reached through imaginative processes, is richer and deeper than the man is often able to reach in other contexts, I have generally refrained from interpreting the plays in the light of what Shaw said, or wrote, or is thought to have believed, on other occasions. The total structure of the individual work defines the ideas it contains. In the complex metaphor which any Shaw play is, what Comte, or Lamarck, or Samuel Butler; Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche may have supplied becomes part of the imagery. To extract such elements of 'thought' and substitute them, literally interpreted, for the play's aesthetic statement has been common practice in Shaw commentary, the body of which has not been distinguished for rigour of method or imaginative grasp.

Alongside this tendency, I have found it necessary to challenge the supposition that Shaw's plots, whether adapted or invented, do not count; that these and other elements of his art that give pleasure to audiences and readers of no highly intellectual pretensions were offered merely as sugar-coating to the valuable mental stuff of the plays. At the very least they served their author as a genial, temporary environment for thought. To identify certain recurrent features of plot, recurrent situations or character-types, as stock items in contemporary or earlier theatre is not enough in itself. Shaw's selection of these fictive elements from a much larger range of possibilities is likely to correspond to certain persistent preoccupations; and their dramatic functioning may be more interesting than their origins. I have given them their due of attention as bridges for communication with audiences whose human nature is open to conversion by pleasurable emotion as by no unaided theory, but also as consciously or unconsciously expressive of forces at work in the intimate personality of the artist. I have settled on the idea of the mask as a meeting-point of theatrical tradition with the private symbolism employed in a search for identity. The idiosyncratic treatment of conventional plots I see as developing, in the course of Shaw's career, in directions similarly both more personal and more universal: from some variety of intrigue-plot towards allegory, or fable, or myth, approaching the patterns of ancient drama even as form becomes more plastic to the current of the author's thought and feeling on his chosen theme. To understand Shaw involves

appreciating the relation of his drama to Aristophanes, to Molière, to Mozart, but also not neglecting the significance for his art of his friendship with Gilbert Murray and his championship of Wagner, both associated with the nineteenth-century cult of Dionysus: the discovery of the unconscious in individual man and in human communities.

A considerable proportion of Shaw's dramatic *œuvre* is still little known. Certain of the plays are well established in the general theatrical repertoire. Others, particularly the plays following *Saint Joan*, have rarely if ever been revived since their original production. The availability of texts in popular cheap editions has contributed to general familiarity, or tired over-familiarity, with some plays, while others are forgotten. The inferiority of the less familiar (and the over-familiar) is often assumed, and perhaps wrongly assumed. *Misalliance* is an example of a play from what is often regarded as Shaw's peak period, which made little mark theatrically when it was first performed because of circumstances that had little to do with the play's quality.¹ The natural caution of directors and entrepreneurs meant that it had to wait before a small number of productions in different parts of the world established its theatrical merits. But it is not one of Shaw's easy plays for amateurs, and it has not been made widely available in paperback form. Uninterpreted in stage terms, it has puzzled readers and been given little critical attention. *You Never Can Tell* has been much better known and widely enjoyed, but Shaw's own deprecating description of it as a pot-boiler, when it seemed acceptable to a theatre that had rejected his earlier work, seems to have discouraged the serious critical treatment it deserves. A few recent scholars, in particular Martin Meisel, have drawn attention back to the late plays by making higher claims for them than have been heard before. In one instance – *Too True to be Good* – subsequent production has vindicated the claim. But the unspoken assumption that Shaw, after *Saint Joan*, was too old to write good plays has to be defeated by such close scrutiny of the others as they have never yet had. His art changed direction many times. Difference in kind from an established favourite need not mean failure. And it is time it became impossible to base critical dismissal on ignorance of a play's nature and meaningful coherence.

By discussion of individual plays one by one, or in small related groups, I hope to encourage theatrical attention to neglected works as well as the understanding of readers that Shaw's plays are artistic unities. The coverage of this book, long as it is, is not encyclopedic: some minor plays, or plays about which I had little to say that had not been said better

¹ On the conditions of the first repertory production, see P. P. Howe, *The Repertory Theatre* (London: Martin Secker, 1910), pp. 151–64, and C. B. Purdom, *Harley Granville Barker* (London: Rockliff, 1955), pp. 99–107.