

# PLAYS

BY

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GEORGE  
BERNARD  
SHAW

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*Man and Superman*  
*Arms and the Man*  
*Mrs. Warren's Profession*  
*Candida*



GEORGE BERNARD SHAW was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 26, 1856. He attended four different schools but his real education came from a thorough grounding in music and painting, which he obtained at home. In 1871, he was apprenticed to a Dublin estate agent, and later he worked as a cashier. In 1876, Shaw joined his mother and sister in London, where he spent the next nine years in unrecognized struggle and genteel poverty.

From 1885 to 1898, he wrote for newspapers and magazines as critic of art, literature, music, and drama. But his main interest at this time was political propaganda, and, in 1884, he joined the Fabian Society. From 1893 to 1939, the most active period of his career, Shaw wrote 47 plays. By 1915, his international fame was firmly established and productions of *Candida*, *Man and Superman*, *Arms and the Man*, *The Devil's Disciple*, were being played in many countries of the world, from Britain to Japan. In 1925, the playwright was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Between the ages of fifty-seven and sixty-seven, Shaw wrote such dramas as *Heartbreak House*, *Back to Methuselah*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *St. Joan*. During his lifetime he was besieged by offers to film his plays, but he accepted only a few, the most notable being *Pygmalion*, which was adapted (after his death) as the basis for the musical *My Fair Lady*. He died at the age of ninety-four at Ayot St. Lawrence, England, on November 2, 1950.



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MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION

ARMS AND THE MAN

CANDIDA

MAN AND SUPERMAN

*With a Foreword by* ERIC BENTLEY



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## FOREWORD

### *The Making of a Dramatist (1892-1903)*

It was clear from the start that Bernard Shaw was a man of ideas. Later it turned out that he was a fabulous entertainer. But few have granted that the two Shaws were one. The old tendency was to grant that he was a publicist, a critic, an essayist, even a philosopher, but to add: "not, of course, a dramatist." The later tendency was to concede that he was a great showman but to discount his thoughtful side. As Egon Friedell said, you could suck the theatrical sugar from the pill of propaganda, and put the pill itself back on the plate.

Neither in the old days, then, nor in the later ones was Shaw considered a dramatist, for even the later generations have only thought him a master of the theatrical occasion, a man with a theatrical line of talk and a theatrical bag of tricks, a highly histrionic jokester—a comedian, certainly, but hardly a writer of serious comedy. The fact is that the shock of that long career in the theater has still not been absorbed. Shaw has not yet been seen in perspective.

In these circumstances, it is interesting to go back and look at what happened in the eighteen nineties. In 1891, Bernard Shaw had still not written a play, though he was thirty-five years old. A dozen years later, though he could describe himself as "an unperformed playwright in London," he had written *Widowers' Houses* (1892), *The Philanderer* (1893), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893-94), *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1894-95), *The Man of Destiny* (1895), *You Never Can Tell* (1895-96), *The Devil's Disciple* (1896-97), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899), *The Admirable Bashville* (1901), and *Man and Superman* (1901-03).

Let us take for granted that these plays are full of ideas and jokes, and ask if they do not also meet the demands of



dramatic criticism as such. The drama, everyone agrees, presents character in action. Human actions become "an action" in the drama when they are arranged effectively—when, that is, they are given what we can recognize as a proper and praiseworthy structure. Of character dramatic critics have required many different things. One of them is emotional substance.

Let us ask, then, how Shaw, when he set about playwriting, tackled the problem of structure; and let us ask if he gave his characters' existence the requisite emotional substance.

### Structure

How did Shaw put a play together? To think of questions about Shaw is to think also of the answers he invariably provided to them. In this case, he said: "I avoid plots like the plague. . . . My procedure is to imagine characters and let them rip. . . ." The quotation is from his *Table-talk* but (again, as usual) he said the same thing on many other occasions. One always has to ask not what he means (which may be clear) but what he is getting at. All Shaw's critical prose is polemical, as he freely admitted, and his writing on the theater is devoted to the destruction of some kinds of drama and their replacement by some others (or one other). Here the enemy is the kind of play which had been dominant throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century—"the well-made play," as perfected by Eugène Scribe. In this dramaturgy, the Aristotelian doctrine of the primacy of plot had been driven to an improper extreme. The plot was now not *primus inter pares*, but all that mattered. It lost its originally organic relation to character and theme. So it became anathema to the apostles of the New Drama at the century's close. As late as 1946, when Allardyce Nicoll declared that Shaw was himself influenced by the well-made play, the old playwright went into print to deny it.

If the well-made play is defined as having no serious content, if it is defined by the relation (or lack of relation) of its plot to character and theme, then obviously Shaw did not write well-made plays. Yet, Professor Nicoll had a point, and a strong one, which was that, for all the disclaimers, Shaw's plays did have plots and, furthermore, that these plots tended to be old acquaintances for those who knew

their well-made play. Actually, the playwright had no need to be scandalized, for no dramatist had been more influenced by the well-made play than his own idol of those days, Henrik Ibsen. The Norwegian had begun his theatrical career by directing a large number of these plays; he made an exact imitation of them in his own *Lady Inger of Östråt*; and he had continued to the end to use many of their characteristic devices. Hence, it would have been quite possible for a writer in 1890 to denounce Scribe and Sardou and simultaneously to steal their bag of tricks—from Ibsen. It is doubtful, though, if Bernard Shaw needed to deceive himself in this way. It seems more likely that he took the main situation in *Arms and the Man* from one of Scribe's most successful plays, *Bataille de Dames*.

A situation is not, of course, a plot, and the plot of *Arms and the Man* is not simply lifted from Scribe, even though parts of it may have been. Plagiarism is not the point. The point is that even when Shaw's story diverges from Scribe, it remains Scribean. The play *Arms and the Man* is hung, as it were, on the cunningly told tale of the lost coat with the photograph in its pocket. The reader need only go through the text and mark the hints, incidents, accidents, and contretemps of this tale and he will be finding the layout, the plan—yes, the plot—of this play. Or at any rate, the plot of what could have been a first draft of the play. Shaw, one gathers, did not write such first drafts but, supposing he had, what would be the difference between the first draft and the final one? In the answer to this question lies the secret of Shavian dramaturgy.

A corollary of the view that "plot is all" is this proposition: the cause of any incident is another incident. It is known that Scribe used to chart out a configuration of incidents and then write his play. This is to go far beyond Aristotle. It is to set no store at all by human initiative and assign to events themselves a kind of fatality: they are a network in which mankind is caught. Granted that the conception might in certain hands have its awesomeness; in Scribe's hands it had only triviality, because he manipulated the events till the issue was a pleasant one. It is curious how often that manipulation had to be arbitrary and drastic. Do events, when given their head, rush downward to disaster? To guarantee a happy ending, the well-making playwrights often needed their emergency weapon: sheer accident. Hence

the Shavian complaint that well-made plays were badly made, after all.

Hence also Bernard Shaw's first drama, which is an adaptation of an adaptation of a well-made play. The subject is one that Scribe and the younger Dumas brought to the nineteenth-century theater: marrying, or refusing to marry, money. The immediate source is an unfinished play of William Archer's, *Rhinegold*. Archer's source is *La Ceinture Dorée*, by Emile Augier. When a young man discovers that his young lady's inherited money was acquired by her father in an immoral way, what does he do? William Archer's answer was: he pitches it into the Rhine. One presumes that Archer's action would have been set on a convenient balcony beside that river. Augier's hero is not so privileged. To preserve his honor, he would simply have to forgo the pleasure of marrying the lady, if the author did not provide him and the play with a convenient accident (or money *ex machina*). The whole French economy has to meet with a crisis (war breaks out) so that our heroine's father may be reduced to poverty; it is now honorable for our hero to propose to our heroine. In the well-made play, one incident leads to another with a logic that is inescapable—except when the author decides to escape it. Perhaps Shaw's objection was less to the inescapability than to the egregious, last-minute escapes.

His first play, *Widowers' Houses*, may not be great art but it is a great reversal of custom. Shaw's key decision was to refuse to accept Augier's ending, to refuse to have accident (masquerading as fate or otherwise) intervene. Such a refusal leads a man—leads a born playwright, at least—back and back into the earlier stages of a story and he ends up writing an utterly different play—an utterly different *kind* of play.

Not one but two conceptions of Augier's were being rejected: not just the solution-by-sheer-accident (which condemns a play to meaninglessness) but also the autonomy-of-incidents—something, by the way, which was no part of Augier's conscious philosophy but was imposed on him by the Scribean design. Dramatists are committed to the doctrine of free will. They can say they don't believe in it, but they have to write their plays as if they did. (In this they resemble human beings in general, for your most ardent determinist acts on the assumption that determinism is false.) People in plays have got to be able to make decisions,



and these decisions have got to be both real and influential: they have to affect events. I see no reason to object to Aristotle's declaration that plot is the soul of the drama, but Aristotle would have objected to Scribe's attempt to cut the soul off from the body—that is, from character.

What *does* a young man do when he finds that his bride's dowry comes from a tainted source? There are two ways for a writer to arrive at an answer. He can say: "I can think of several answers—on the basis of several different possibilities of 'theater.' Answer A will give you Big Scene X; Answer B will give you Ending Y; and so on." Or he can say: "I cannot give you any answer at all until the terms of the proposition are defined, including the term 'tainted.' Above all, I need to know who these people are: what bride? what young man?" The first way to arrive at an answer would commonly be thought the playwright's way: the reasoning is "craftsmanlike" and "of the theater," and would earn a man commendation on Broadway in 1960. The second way is only the human way. That makes it the way of the real dramatist and so of Bernard Shaw.

It could be said that we have this perfectly functioning machine of the well-made play and that a Bernard Shaw is throwing a monkey wrench into it—the monkey wrench of character. That is how it must seem from the Scribean viewpoint. From the viewpoint of dramatic art, however, one would say that this particular engine had been revolving all too fast and uselessly; only when a Shaw slips in the clutch can the gear engage and the vehicle prove itself a vehicle by moving.

"My procedure is to imagine characters and let them rip. . . ." The pertinence of this remark may by now be clearer: if the young man has been "imagined," the dramatist can find the decision he would make as to the young lady's money. But at this point, we realize that Shaw's words leave out of account the fact that the situation confronting the young man had been established in advance of the imagining of his character. It had been established by Augier and Archer and by Shaw's own decision to use their work. Hence, Shaw's own interpretation is both helpful and misleading—or, perhaps, is helpful only if those who are helped do a lot of work on their own.

Shaw put *Widowers' Houses* together—how? He took from certain predecessors not only a situation but a story, and not only a story but that clever, orderly, and theatrical ar-

rangement of a story which we call a plot. Then he changed the plot—or as he would have said, let the characters change it for him. Now, had he retained Augier's characters, they could only have caused him to break off the action one scene earlier than Augier did: instead of the happy ending created by a national emergency, we would get the unhappy ending which the emergency reversed.

Characters in a well-made play are "conventional"—that is, they behave, not according to laws of psychology but according to the expectations of an audience in a theater. A type of drama in which the plot is given a free hand cannot afford any less passive or more obtrusive *personae*. Conversely, if a playwright abandons the plot-determined play, he will have to be more inventive as to character. To assume the initiative, his characters will have to be capable of it. So Shaw's first contribution to the drama was: more active characters. They were more active, first of all, in the most obvious fashion: they were violent. More important, they made decisions which affected the course of events, and they made them on the basis of their own nature, not of the spectator's. And so these characters were surprising. For a number of years, they were too surprising to be acceptable. Like all surprising art, Shaw's dramaturgy was damned as non-art. The critics' formula was: Not a Play.

Augier's hero could not consider being the husband of a woman with a tainted dowry. Shaw creates a hero who has the effrontery to ask the heroine to throw up her dowry for his sake. But the Shavian joke—the Shavian reversal—is already what it would characteristically be in the future: a double one. To this demanding hero he adds an even more demanding heroine: she simply refuses to be poor to preserve her innocence. That is the nub of the first Shaw comedy. Then Shaw works his way out of the apparent deadlock, not by having the heroine weaken (that is, "improve"), but by having the hero renew his strength (that is, "deteriorate"). This the latter does by way of recovering from a shock. The shock comes from without and might be called an accident (like Augier's outbreak of war), except that it belongs to the logic of the situation. It turns out that the source of the hero's own unearned income is the same as that of his girl's father. End of Act Two. In the third and last act, our hero comes around and gets the girl by accepting the nature of capitalism. Socialist propaganda? Precisely. Shaw boasted

of it. But he boasted with equal reason that he was writing comedy in the most traditional sense.

"Take what would be done by Scribe, Sardou, Dumas fils, or Augier and do the opposite." Is that the Shavian formula? It is certain that Shavian comedy is parodistic in a way, or to an extent, that Plautus, Jonson, and Molière were not. These others, one would judge, took a convention they respected and brought it to the realization of its best possibilities. Shaw took conventions in which he saw no possibilities—except insofar as he would expose their bankruptcy. The injunction "Do the opposite" was not whimsical. Shaw decided to "do the opposite" of Scribe in much the way Marx decided to do the opposite of Hegel—not to stand everything on its head (Hegel, he held, had done this) but to set everything back on its feet again. That was revolutionary thinking, and Shaw's art, for all the polite and charming trappings, was revolutionary art. The usual relations were reversed.

Such reversals as we see in the ending of *Widowers' Houses* are relatively simple. Shaw's weakest plays are those in which he has done little more than turn the ending around: the price you pay for the brilliant ending of *The Devil's Disciple* is that of a rather dull, and decidedly conventional, first act. His best plays are those in which the principle of reversal has pervaded the whole. Such a play is *Arms and the Man*.

The idea of taking two couples and causing them to exchange partners is hardly novel and, as I have said, the little tale of the coat and the portrait is Scribean in pattern. But Shaw can justifiably plead that this is no well-made play because the artifices of the plot are not what ultimately achieve the result. Here is one of the decisive turns in the action:

BLUNTSCHLI. When you get into that noble attitude and speak in that thrilling voice, I admire you; but I find it impossible to believe a single word you say.

RAINA. Captain Bluntschli!

BLUNTSCHLI. Yes?

RAINA. Do you mean what you said just now? Do you *know* what you said just now?

BLUNTSCHLI. I do.

RAINA. II!!! How did you find me out?



With this last query, Raina passes over forever from Sergius's world to Bluntschli's: as a result of nothing in the Scribean arrangement of incidents, but of words, words, words. It is here that, to many, the Shavian drama seems vulnerable. In drama, actions are supposed to speak louder than words. Writers on the subject invariably know their etymology—"drama" derives from a Greek verb meaning "to do"—and use it as a cudgel. Their error is a vulgar one: action need not be external. It can often be carried by words alone. Shaw used to remark that his plays were all words just as Raphael's paintings were all paint.

There is a degree of legerdemain in that remark, for Scribe, too, put down his plays in words. What was confusing to Shaw's readers and spectators half a century ago was that after indicating unmistakably that he was playing Scribe's game, Shaw proceeded to break the rules. The fact that Bluntschli conquers by words gains its peculiar force from a context in which the opposite was to be expected. To look over *Arms and the Man* with an eye to technique would be to conclude that what we have here is Scribe most subtly interwoven with Shaw. Yet this formulation is inadequate, for who did the interweaving? There was a Scribe in Shaw, and there was a counter-Scribe in Shaw; what makes his works dramatic is the interaction of the two.

The passion and preoccupation of Scribe was the idea of climax: to the Big Scene at the end—or, rather, a little before the end—all his arts are dedicated. In Bernard Shaw there was almost as great a predilection for anticlimax. It is the Shavian "effect" par excellence; no other playwright has come near finding so many possibilities in it. The bit I have quoted from Bluntschli and Raina is an apt example. *Arms and the Man* contains a corresponding scene between Sergius and Louka. Where, in a well-made play, Bluntschli and Louka would have to soar to the heights of Raina and Sergius, in the Shaw play Raina and Sergius drop with a bump to the level of Bluntschli and Louka. Such is resolution by anticlimax. It is dramaturgically effective, and it enforces the author's theme. But this is not all of Shaw: it is only the counter-Scribe.

The dual anticlimaxes do not round off *Arms and the Man*. What does? Not the disenchantment of Raina and Sergius but the discovery that Bluntschli the realist is actually an enchanted soul whom nothing will disenchant. He has destroyed their



romanticism but is himself "incurably romantic." This is another point that is made in "mere words"—"mere words stuck on at the end," if you wish—and yet stuck on very well, for they are firmly attached to that little tale of the coat and the photograph which gives the work its continuity and shape:

BLUNTSCHLI. Yes: that's the coat I mean. . . . Do you suppose I am the sort of fellow a young girl falls in love with? Why, look at our ages! I'm thirty-four: I don't suppose the young lady is much over seventeen. All that adventure which was life or death to me was only a school-girl's game to her . . . would a woman who took the affair seriously have sent me this and written on it: "Raina, to her chocolate cream soldier—a souvenir"?

PETKOFF. That's what I was looking for. How the deuce did it get there?

BLUNTSCHLI. I have put everything right, I hope, gracious young lady.

RAINA. I quite agree with your account of yourself. You are a romantic idiot. Next time I hope you will know the difference between a schoolgirl of seventeen and a woman of twenty-three.

In this scene, plot and theme reach completion together, and the play of thesis and antithesis ends in synthesis.

The supreme triumph of Shaw's dramaturgical dialectics is to be found in *Man and Superman*, and, for all the blarney in the preface about the medieval *Everyman* and the eighteenth-century *Don Giovanni*, the method is the conversion of old materials into nineteenth-century terms, both thematic and technical. Shaw's claim to be returning to a pristine Don Juan is valid to the extent that the theme had originally been less of psychological than of philosophical, indeed theological, interest. It is also true that Don Juan had run away from his women. However, he had run away from them only after possessing them. In Shaw's play, he runs away to prevent *them* from possessing *him*. It is a comic parody of the old motif, embodying Shaw's standard new motif: the courting of the man by the woman. And where the old dramatists and librettists had used the old, "open" type of plot (or nonplot), Shaw substitutes an utterly Scribean "closed" structure.

This very "modern" and "twentieth-century" play is made up of narrative materials familiar to every Victorian

theatergoer. We have a hero who spends the entire evening hotly pursued by his foes; a clandestine marriage celebrated in defiance of a hostile father; a lovelorn hero who sacrifices himself so that the girl will go to his rival; a villain whose function is to constitute for a while the barrier to denouement and happy ending. The subplot about the Malone family rests upon two separate uses of the "secret skillfully withheld," then skillfully released. Traditional farcical coincidence binds together Straker and Mendoza. The play bears every sign of careful workmanship—all of it School of Scribe.

But as with *Arms and the Man*, as soon as we examine particulars, we find, interwoven with the Scribean elements, those typically Shavian verbal exchanges which constitute further action. Violet's marriage could have been made a secret of in any Scribe play, and Scribe could have been relied on to choose an effective moment for the release of the secret. In Shaw, what creates both the fun and the point of the news release is not the organization of the incidents but their relation to theme:

TANNER. I know, and the whole world really knows, though it dare not say so, that you were right to follow your instinct; that vitality and bravery are the greatest qualities a woman can have, and motherhood her solemn initiation into womanhood; and that the fact of your not being legally married matters not one scrap either to your own worth or to our real regard for you.

VIOLET. Oh! You think me a wicked woman, like the rest. . . . I won't bear such a horrible insult as to be complimented by Jack on being one of the wretches of whom he approves. I have kept my marriage a secret for my husband's sake.

An incident which Tanner wishes to use to illustrate his "modern" philosophy thus comes to illustrate a contrasting thesis: that Violet lives by a nonmodern philosophy.

Simple? Yes, but closely linked to a point that is unsimple enough to have generally been missed: Tanner is a windbag. Indeed, the mere fact of the woman courting the man would probably not yield comedy at all were it not for a further and more dynamic reversal: the woman, who makes no great claims for herself, has all the shrewdness, the real *Lebensweisheit*, while the man, who knows everything