

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S PLAYS



SELECTED AND EDITED BY
SANDIE BYRNE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION
SECOND EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

GEORGE BERNARD
SHAW'S PLAYS



MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION • PYGMALION •
MAN AND SUPERMAN • MAJOR BARBARA

Contexts and Criticism

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

SANDIE BYRNE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY

First Edition edited by

WARREN SYLVESTER SMITH
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY



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The Editor

SANDIE BYRNE is Fellow and Tutor in English at Balliol College, Oxford University. She is the author of *Tony Harrison: Loiner, H, v, & O: The Poetry of Tony Harrison*, the *Icon Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Ted Hughes*, and the *Icon Reader's Guide to Mansfield Park*.

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Preface

Jane Austen has Janeites, George Bernard Shaw has Shavians. The latter, like the rest of the literate and/or play-going world, are in one sense better served, since Shaw left them a far larger and more diverse body of work: over fifty plays; novels; essays; tracts; and reviews. He also left behind far more evidence that he was ever here, and far more clues to his opinions, lifestyle, personality, and personal history: his house; his clothes; his enormous correspondence; authorized biography; interviews; even some autobiographical writing. The latter writing, however, is less revealing than we might expect, and less easily distinguishable from the former, since Shaw was not only mischievous, but manipulative and secretive, so that behind the apparently candid memoirs lie characters every bit as constructed as any of his *dramatis personae*, and behind the ostensible authors of interviews and articles about the great man often lies Shaw himself.

Who was George Bernard Shaw? He hated the name "George," and often signed himself "GBS." He was born in Dublin, and spoke an Irish-inflected English, but left the country when he was twenty, and refused to return for many years. He left school at fifteen, but educated himself through voracious reading. He was an inarticulate young man who turned himself into a brilliant public speaker. Like Oscar Wilde, as much famous as a personality and Great Man as for his publications, Shaw began his writing career as a ghost, producing music criticism for George J. Vandeleur Lee, a man who may have been a Svengali figure to Shaw's mother. Remembered now for his original writing, until the 1890s he earned his living largely as a music journalist (publishing under the name "Corno di Bassetto") and, later, drama critic. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1925, but endured widespread opprobrium during the war years for his pacifism, and vilification following the allegedly shocking language of *Pygmalion* (1914) and subject matter of *Man and Superman*. His earliest play, *Widowers' Houses*, was considered too controversial to be passed by the censors, and was initially performed in private.

Shaw conducted lengthy correspondence with some of the most beautiful actresses of the day (such as Ellen Terry, Stella [Mrs. Patrick] Campbell, and Molly Tomkins), yet had intimate relationships

with very few of them, and for very short periods. He pursued a number of women, bombarding them with amatory correspondence, yet characteristically shied away once they showed reciprocal interest. He married in 1898, but appears to have had only a companionable relationship with his wife, Charlotte Payne-Townshend. He was much loved and revered by those who worked with and for him, but could be ferocious, self-centered, and demanding. Of one thing we can be sure: he was a man of strong opinions, which he articulated vociferously. He was a supporter of electoral reform and of equal rights and equal pay for women; he campaigned for reformation of (British) English spelling and punctuation, and for the abolition of the English alphabet in favor of a more logical and simpler system. He was a Fabian and an advocate of the abolition of private property; he condemned imprisonment as inhumane and pointless, yet advocated painless euthanasia of hopeless cases. He was a teetotal vegetarian who never drank tea or coffee; wore woolen undergarments and a famous all-wool Jaeger suit, to allow the skin to breathe; and was obsessively clean in his personal habits, yet who delighted in driving recklessly and (for the time) fast in a series of motor-cars. He lived to be 94, finally dying from complications following a fall in his garden. The paradoxes he loved to dramatize in his work seem equally engraved on the story of his life.

Fast pacing, rapid-fire dialogue, and Shavian wit keep Shaw's works from being mere vehicles for his ideas, but critics and the book-buying and theater-going public took some time to appreciate the author's genius. Shaw's first five novels were unsuccessful, and success on the London stage did not come until he was 48, in 1904, when Harley Granville-Barker and J. E. Vedrenne organized performances of *John Bull's Other Island* at the London Royal Court Theatre. This was followed in rapid succession by *How He Lied to Her Husband*, *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, and *The Doctor's Dilemma*. Shaw remained a prolific writer and active social commentator until his death. His plays, like the social problems they debate, are still much with us in the twenty-first century.

Mrs Warren's Profession

Just as *Widowers' Houses* was a didactic play which instructed the late-nineteenth century about the realities of capitalism, so *Mrs Warren's Profession*, in the person of the brothel-keeper Mrs. Warren, taught society about the economic determination and perpetuation of the prostitution which it ostensibly outlawed.

This was Shaw's first "Unpleasant" play, written in 1894 and published in the two-volume *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* in 1898. Public performance having been prohibited by the Lord Chamber-

lain's Examiner, who deemed it immoral, it was first performed by the Stage Society, which was technically a private club, in 1902. The first public performance was in the United States, on October 27, 1905, at the Hyperion Theater in New Haven, Connecticut. After one performance, the police moved in to close the play. It was moved to the Garrick Theater in New York, but after the October 30 performance, the entire cast was arrested on a charge of disorderly conduct. They were released on bail, and later acquitted.

A notice in the *New York Herald* on the day after the Garrick performance asserted that the play had reached the limit of stage indecency, and was "morally rotten"; its characters "wholly immoral and degenerate."¹ Even the quality of the acting was made matter for recrimination, since "the better it was acted the more the impurity and degeneracy of the characters, the situations and the lines were made apparent." More culpable than the play's supposed glorification of debauchery and "besmirching" of a clergyman's calling, was, allegedly, its flippant discussion of the marriage of brother and sister and the declaration by Mrs. Warren's daughter that "choice of shame instead of poverty is eminently right." Shaw's "Author's Apology" for the play was added in a riposte to such critical opinion.

Shaw was to expose the hypocrisy enshrined in contemporary society's treatment of prostitutes and their customers in his journalism, and was involved in the infamous case of the young girl purchased for three guineas by the campaigning investigative journalist, William Stead.

Man and Superman

Man and Superman was the first of a group of three plays on which Shaw's reputation as a serious dramatist was first established. The other two were *Major Barbara* and *John Bull's Other Island*. It is possible to read autobiographical elements in the play, in particular the character of Don Juan, who overcomes his aversion to marriage only after protracted negotiation. Shaw had remained a bachelor into middle age, and in spite of a number of passionate attachments, often conducted largely through correspondence, was practically celibate. He met Charlotte Payne-Townshend through Beatrice and Sidney Webb in 1895, and debated long and hard the pros and cons of entering into marriage with her. Among the pros was her large fortune. After a series of ailments and mishaps, he finally found, or so he said, that his objection to his own marriage had ceased with his objection to his own death, and subject to certain grounds (including non-consummation), agreed to the marriage. On his

1. *New York Herald*, October 31, 1905, 49; reprt. T. F. Evans, ed., *George Bernard Shaw, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 139.

recovery, he wrote a sketch, "The Superman, or Don Juan's great grandson's grandson," which he later developed into the dream sequence of *Man and Superman*.

Acts I, II, and IV were performed as a whole and Act III separately at the Court Theatre in 1905 and 1907, but the full version of the play was first staged by Esme Percy at the Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, on June 11, 1915. When Percy had asked permission for his company to perform the work in its entirety, Shaw professed to be shocked; he had never conceived the possibility of its being staged in one evening; no one would come, and if they did, no one would stay the full five hours (which was further increased by Percy's commission of a lengthy prelude to the third act). In a letter of 1900, Shaw had predicted that his next play would be "immense" but not for the stage of the current generation. Permission was granted, however, and the play opened to a full house. The prelude to the Hell scene was declaimed from the orchestra pit by an actor dressed as the ghost of Shakespeare.

With this work Shaw enters into his own as a dramatist. Its impetus is not conventional dramatic structure and plot, but ideas, and its dialectic is given force by the balance between male and female characters, principally Ann and Tanner.

Major Barbara

Shaw said that this play might equally have been called *Andrew Undershaft's Profession*, and Undershaft is the characteristically Shavian devil's advocate. Shaw also remarked that even his "cleverest friends confessed that the third act beat them; that their brains simply gave way under it," and the finale can seem something of an anticlimax after the masterful dramatic structure of the second act. It gave GBS some trouble; having completed the rest of the play during the summer, he had to rewrite the last act completely during October 1905, just before rehearsals began. The play was performed first in six matinées at the Royal Court Theatre, then under the management of the famous Vedrenne-Barker partnership, beginning on November 28, 1905. A notice in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of November 29, 1905, acknowledged that the play was witty, and contained a "medley of 'high explosive' characters," but found one line irreverent and even blasphemous.² "In the midst of a play largely made up of gibes and pranks, came the words, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'" The reviewer found Shaw's use of these words, "perhaps the most awful in the world," a betrayal of the playwright's "utter want of religious sense."

2. November 29, 1905, vol. 81, 12683, 9; Evans, 142.

Even Shaw's friend and fellow Fabian, Beatrice Webb, was disturbed by the play. A diary entry describes the play as a "dance of devils—amazingly clever, grimly powerful in the second act—but ending, as all his plays [. . .] in an intellectual and moral morass."³ A few days later, Webb records calling on GBS and finding him perturbed more by the bad acting of Undershaft and all of the cast in the last scene than by the press notices. Webb "found it difficult to sympathize" with Shaw's cogent and earnest argument in defense of the play's message. She could, however, sympathize with Shaw's irritation at the suggested intervention of the censor—"not on account of the upshot of the play, but because Barbara in her despair at the end of the second act utters the cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.' A wonderful and quite rational climax to the true tragedy of the scene of the Salvation Army Shelter."⁴

Critics have found an imbalance in the dialectic of the third act created by Shaw's fondness for Undershaft, and his unwillingness to give him any really unpleasant or diabolic traits. Cusins' providential fulfillment of the founding requirement and his financial haggling may seem farcical, and Barbara's movement from despair to resolve and optimism implausibly rapid, but though the play is realistic in mode, it is also an interplay of character types, embodiments of the sides of the political and ethical debate, drawn large for effect.

Lady Britomart is said to have been modeled on the Countess of Carlisle, and to reflect the libertarian Whig principles and personal despotism of her original. The Countess was the mother-in-law of the classicist Gilbert Murray, on whom Adolphus Cusins was modeled, whom Shaw consulted extensively in creating the character and his speeches, and from whose 1902 translation of the *Bacchae* he quotes.

Pygmalion

In his Preface, Shaw playfully suggested that *Pygmalion* was dry and didactic, its subject phonetics rather than the Cinderella transformation of flower-girl to society lady and romantic heroine. It is of course concerned with language, particularly speech as social marker, and of the interaction among language, money, and class.

The play opened at His Majesty's Theatre, London, on April 11, 1914, after a tempestuous rehearsal period characterized by violent disagreements among playwright, actor-manager, and leading actress. The *Daily Express* noted that the combined ages of these was 166: Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree was 60, George Bernard Shaw was 57, and Stella Campbell (usually referred to as Mrs. Patrick Camp-

3. November 29, 1905; Evans, 147.

4. December 2, 1905; Evans, 148.

bell), who was playing the 18-year-old Eliza, was 49. Tree was playing Professor Higgins, “a sort of man he had never met and of whom he had no conception,” Shaw was to say.⁵ The playwright complained that Tree “set to work to make this disagreeable and incredible person sympathetic in the character of a lover, for which I had so little room that he was quite baffled.”⁶ Tree enraged Shaw by throwing a bunch of flowers to Eliza at the final curtain, a small but significant piece of stage business which may have precipitated the epilogue to the play, which makes clear that Higgins and Eliza are not destined to become romantically attached. The screenplay to the Gabriel Pascal film version of the play makes this even more explicit: “The producer should bear in mind from the beginning that it is Freddy who captivates and finally carries off Eliza, and that all suggestion of a love interest between Eliza and Higgins should be most carefully avoided.”⁷

During rehearsals, Stella Campbell, with whom Shaw had had a passionate, if unconsummated, affair, played a kind of reverse, lady-like Eliza to Shaw's Higgins, who was trying to coach her into a Cockney accent. When Shaw demanded that she make her posture and gestures more coarse, Mrs. Campbell refused to continue until he had left the theater, later sending word that in future he was to communicate with her through the assistant stage manager. The play was a success, nonetheless, partly through the notoriety of Eliza's: “Not bloody likely!” With ostentatious delicacy reminiscent of the reception of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Ruddigore* (1887), the London newspapers printed the word with strategic asterisks, and many followed the lead of the London *Times* (April 13, 1914), which put to the “greatly daring Mr Shaw” the question: “You will be able to boast that you are the first modern dramatist to use this word on the stage; but really, was it worth while? There is a whole range of forbidden words in the English language. A little more of your courage, and we suppose they will be heard too; and then good-bye to the delights of really intimate conversation.”

5. Stanley Weintraub, *Journey to Heartbreak* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1971), p. 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

7. Bernard F. Dukore, *The Collected Screenplays of Bernard Shaw* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 226.

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The Texts of
THE PLAYS[†]



[†] The texts of the plays are taken from the editions published by Constable in the early 1920s.

Mrs Warren's Profession[†]

The Author's Apology

*Mrs Warren's Profession*¹ has been performed at last, after a delay of only eight years; and I have once more shared with Ibsen the triumphant amusement of startling all but the strongest-headed of the London theatre critics clean out of the practice of their profession. No author who has ever known the exultation of sending the Press into an hysterical tumult of protest, of moral panic, of involuntary and frantic confession of sin, of a horror of conscience in which the power of distinguishing between the work of art on the stage and the real life of the spectator is confused and overwhelmed, will ever care for the stereotyped compliments which every successful farce or melodrama elicits from the newspapers. Give me that critic who rushed from my play to declare furiously that Sir George Crofts ought to be kicked. What a triumph for the actor, thus to reduce a jaded London journalist to the condition of the simple sailor in the Wapping gallery, who shouts execrations at Iago and warnings to Othello not to believe him! * * *

Do not suppose, however, that the consternation of the Press reflects any consternation among the general public. Anybody can upset the theatre critics, in a turn of the wrist, by substituting for the romantic commonplaces of the stage the moral commonplaces of the pulpit, the platform, or the library. Play *Mrs Warren's Profession* to an audience of clerical members of the Christian Social Union and of women well experienced in Rescue, Temperance, and Girls' Club work, and no moral panic will arise: every man and woman present will know that as long as poverty makes virtue hideous and the spare pocket-money of rich bachelordom makes vice dazzling, their daily hand-to-hand fight against prostitution with prayer and persuasion, shelters and scanty alms, will be a losing one. There was a time when they were able to urge that though "the white-lead factory where Anne Jane was poisoned" may be a far more ter-

[†] For consistency, the play has been edited to remove periods from courtesy titles.

1. In a letter of 1893, Shaw suggested that the play blended the plots of *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* with P. B. Shelley's *The Cenci*. There may also be a real-life model for Vivie in Arabella Susan Lawrence, who read Mathematics at Newnham College, Cambridge, and was a suffragist and socialist. Shaw knew her through their mutual political activities.

rible place than Mrs Warren's house, yet hell is still more dreadful. Nowadays they no longer believe in hell; and the girls among whom they are working know that they do not believe in it, and would laugh at them if they did. So well have the rescuers learnt that Mrs Warren's defence of herself and indictment of society is the thing that most needs saying, that those who know me personally reproach me, not for writing this play, but for wasting my energies on "pleasant plays" for the amusement of frivolous people, when I can build up such excellent stage sermons on their own work. *Mrs Warren's Profession* is the one play of mine which I could submit to a censorship without doubt of the result; only, it must not be the censorship of the minor theatre critic, nor of an innocent court official like the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner, much less of people who consciously profit by Mrs Warren's profession, or who personally make use of it, or who hold the widely whispered view that it is an indispensable safety-valve for the protection of domestic virtue, or, above all, who are smitten with a sentimental affection for our fallen sister, and would "take her up tenderly, lift her with care, fashioned so slenderly, young, and so fair." Nor am I prepared to accept the verdict of the medical gentlemen who would compulsorily examine and register Mrs Warren, whilst leaving Mrs Warren's patrons, especially her military patrons, free to destroy her health and anybody else's without fear of reprisals. But I should be quite content to have my play judged by, say, a joint committee of the Central Vigilance Society and the Salvation Army. And the sterner moralists the members of the committee were, the better.

Some of the journalists I have shocked reason so unripely that they will gather nothing from this but a confused notion that I am accusing the National Vigilance Association and the Salvation Army of complicity in my own scandalous immorality. It will seem to them that people who would stand this play would stand anything. They are quite mistaken. Such an audience as I have described would be revolted by many of our fashionable plays. They would leave the theatre convinced that the Plymouth Brother who still regards the playhouse as one of the gates of hell is perhaps the safest adviser on the subject of which he knows so little. If I do not draw the same conclusion, it is not because I am one of those who claim that art is exempt from moral obligations, and deny that the writing or performance of a play is a moral act, to be treated on exactly the same footing as theft or murder if it produces equally mischievous consequences. I am convinced that fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective instrument of moral propaganda in the world, excepting only the example of personal conduct; and I waive even this exception in favor of the art of the stage, because it works by exhibiting examples of personal conduct made intelligible and

moving to crowds of unobservant unreflecting people to whom real life means nothing. I have pointed out again and again that the influence of the theatre in England is growing so great that private conduct, religion, law, science, politics, and morals are becoming more and more theatrical, whilst the theatre itself remains impervious to common sense, religion, science, politics, and morals. That is why I fight the theatre, not with pamphlets and sermons and treatises, but with plays; and so effective do I find the dramatic method that I have no doubt I shall at last persuade even London to take its conscience and its brains with it when it goes to the theatre, instead of leaving them at home with its prayer-book as it does at present. Consequently, I am the last man to deny that if the net effect of performing *Mrs Warren's Profession* were an increase in the number of persons entering that profession or employing it, its performance might well be made an indictable offence.

Now let us consider how such recruiting can be encouraged by the theatre. Nothing is easier. Let the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, backed by the Press, make an unwritten but perfectly well understood regulation that members of Mrs Warren's profession shall be tolerated on the stage only when they are beautiful, exquisitely dressed, and sumptuously lodged and fed; also that they shall, at the end of the play, die of consumption to the sympathetic tears of the whole audience, or step into the next room to commit suicide, or at least be turned out by their protectors and passed on to be "redeemed" by old and faithful lovers who have adored them in spite of all their levities. Naturally the poorer girls in the gallery will believe in the beauty, in the exquisite dresses, and the luxurious living, and will see that there is no real necessity for the consumption, the suicide, or the ejection: mere pious forms, all of them, to save the Censor's face. Even if these purely official catastrophes carried any conviction, the majority of English girls remain so poor, so dependent, so well aware that the drudgeries of such honest work as is within their reach are likely enough to lead them eventually to lung disease, premature death, and domestic desertion or brutality, that they would still see reason to prefer the primrose path to the stony way of virtue, since both, vice at worst and virtue at best, lead to the same end in poverty and overwork. It is true that the Elementary School mistress will tell you that only girls of a certain kind will reason in this way. But alas! that certain kind turns out on inquiry to be simply the pretty, dainty kind: that is, the only kind that gets the chance of acting on such reasoning. Read the first report of the Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes [Bluebook C 4402, 1889]; read the Report on Home Industries (sacred word, Home!) issued by the Women's Industrial Council [Home Industries of Women in London, 1897, 15.]; and ask yourself whether, if the