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A Critical View

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Fellow and Director of Studies in Modern English
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BERNARD SHAW

A Critical View

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For my mother and father

Preface

Is Bernard Shaw, if not 'better than Shakespeare', the second greatest playwright in the English language? It remains very much a question, even though in the view of many Shavians it ought to be beyond dispute. And on the face of it, it is hard to dispute. Shaw's plays now, more than thirty years after his death, a hundred and thirty years after his birth, continue to be read and played all over the world. If he is not the second greatest playwright in English, who is? There is no other dramatist who has produced such an enduring canon of major plays, or so many playable minor ones; no one but Shakespeare can match him in the sheer range of stage characters created. A recent critic has shown that, in England at least, Shaw is by far the most frequently performed dramatist after Shakespeare.[1] And yet a remarkable number of educated and literate people, even people with a special interest in the drama, would receive with astonishment or dismiss with contempt the claim that Shaw was Shakespeare's nearest rival. For years it was commonplace to deny that he was a playwright at all, and still there remains a widespread feeling that his characters are little more than walking ideas manipulated by a preacher/propagandist. His reputation in university departments of English or drama is extremely limited; his name appears very infrequently on course syllabuses and few academics would place him as one of the great writers of the twentieth century. While the standing of Joyce, Lawrence, Yeats and Eliot becomes more assured with every year, Shaw continues to suffer from a disabling association with cranks and enthusiasts, a general aura of vegetarianism and all-wool clothing, outmoded Fabian socialism and even more outmoded Creative Evolutionism.

Shaw has not wanted for able and devoted disciples who have made it their business to try to combat these prejudices. Scholars such as Dan Laurence and Stanley Weintraub have given their best energies to the serious work of chronicling and documenting his achievement. Critics from Eric Bentley on have tried to demonstrate the substance and significance of his work either by

analysis of his skills as a playwright or by the exposition of his ideas or both. Many of them have added measurably to our understanding and respect for Shaw – one thinks, for instance, of Martin Meisel's excellent book on Shaw and nineteenth-century theatre.[2] And yet modern Shaw criticism on the whole has tended to suffer from its defensiveness, its need to demonstrate the value of his work in the face of disparagement and neglect. Again and again we find Shaw critics making what amount to professions of faith: a defiant introduction 'on taking Shaw seriously', a solemn commitment to the belief in Shaw's greatness, a self-conscious claim for Shaw's status as a great world teacher.[3] 'The time has not yet come', wrote Eric Bentley in 1947, 'to write unpolemically about Shaw.'[4] Surely by now that time has come, and we can afford to look critically at Shaw's limitations without feeling that we are selling out to his detractors.

It is as such an unpolemic, unapologetic critical study that this book is intended. I am not a professed card-carrying Shavian. I write out of mixed feelings about Shaw: admiration and annoyance, enjoyment and dissatisfaction, fascination and dislike. But I think that mixed feelings of this kind are more representative of reader and audience reaction to Shaw than the unreserved appreciation of more committed critics, who often appear to be preaching to the converted. Shaw is a playwright of quite extraordinary gifts – nothing in my view could be more mistaken than the old charge that he is not really a dramatist. And yet with all these gifts, why does he so often seem less than fully satisfying, even at his best? What sort of dramatic reality is represented by his distinctive form of comedy of ideas? Why do his slighter and less ambitious plays – *Arms and the Man*, say, or *Pygmalion* – sometimes seem more assured in their success than his major works? To what extent did he develop a real tragic vision in later plays such as *Heartbreak House* and *Saint Joan*? The book that follows is an attempt to articulate answers to these questions, to redefine the nature of Shaw's dramatic achievement by a critical analysis of both his strengths and limitations.

Acknowledgements

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The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with Their Prefaces (London, 1970–4), 7 vol [CP, I–VII].
Collected Letters, 1874–1897, edited by Dan H. Laurence (London, 1965) [CL, I].
Collected Letters, 1898–1910, edited by Dan H. Laurence (London, 1972) [CL, II].

All other references are given in full in the notes.

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N.G.

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1 Two Models: Wilde and Ibsen

Without the contribution of Irishmen there would scarcely be a single major comedy in English between 1700 and 1900. Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde – the Irish monopoly on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century comedy is remarkable. What is more, these Irish-English comedies have much in common. Each of the comedians was skilled at giving the London audience what they wanted, to some extent even what they expected, but with a cynical stylishness or a cut of satire which made their plays look strikingly original, and differentiated them from their blander English contemporaries. Aimwell in *The Beaux' Stratagem*, for instance, fulfils the ideal of early eighteenth-century tastes in his conversion to marriage for love; but his co-conspirator Archer remains faithful to the tougher ethics of the rake, and the 'happy divorce' of the Sullens, balancing the happy marriage of Aimwell at the end, lends piquancy to the play as a whole. Sheridan, on the other hand, professed to run counter to the tastes of his time in sending up the hypocrisies of sentimentalism in *The School for Scandal*. Yet the ending, with the revelation of Sir Peter's heart of gold reforming an only mildly erring Lady Teazle, is as properly sentimental as can be. Wilde, the last of the line, could produce 'woman with a past' plots of unimpeachable Victorian conventionality, and yet lace them with a series of epigrams which imply a totally cynical disbelief in the values the plots appear to endorse.

It is tempting to define this common quality of creative double-thinking as characteristically Irish. Farquhar, Sheridan, Goldsmith and Wilde may be seen as Irishmen in London out to make their way – aware of their provinciality, eager to succeed in metropolitan terms, but using their sense of distance and self-possession to cultivate a non-English audacity of style.[1] Such generalisations about nationality must not be pressed too hard, if only because of the obvious exceptions. Steele, as Irish as the others, produced plays

utterly unambiguous in their humourless sentimentality. Sheridan was an orator and entrepreneur in an age of orators and entrepreneurs, and we should not lean too heavily on the idea of him as a fluent Irish talker winning his way to the managership of Drury Lane. However, the concept of the Irishman playing to a foreign market, what Joyce called the role of 'court jester to the English',[2] is genuinely there in the work of all the major Anglo-Irish comedians.

Shaw in many ways fits easily on to the end of this series – Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde. Like the rest of them, he came to London from an Anglo-Irish Protestant background, though lower down the social scale than some of the others. Like Wilde, in particular, he made his name as a personality long before he became a playwright. Indeed like so many of his Anglo-Irish comic predecessors, he turned to the writing of plays not as a full-time career, but as the occasional employment of an otherwise busy man. The style, the paradoxes, the wit relate him very obviously to Wilde. And yet his own feelings about Wilde and this whole Irish comic tradition are ambivalent. In some ways if there was one thing of which Shaw was certain at the outset of his career as a dramatist, it was that he would not be another mere Irish jester. He might use his Irish persona, his reputation for cynical iconoclasm, but he would use it to more pointed purpose than the Farquhars, Sheridans and Wildes. Shaw was not just out to conquer London, but to change London. And in this he took as precedent not the part of the Irish jester but that of the Scandinavian prophet. One way of approaching Shaw is by looking at two possible models for his work, the two most significant figures on the theatre scene in the 1890s when he was a reviewer and began writing plays: Wilde and Ibsen.

In a self-drafted interview in the *Star* in 1892, Shaw made clear both his sense of affinity with Wilde and his sense of difference. The interviewer was made to ask whether the public could expect any of Shaw's celebrated humour in *Widowers' Houses*, then about to be produced by the Independent Theatre:

> "Certainly not. I have removed with the greatest care every line that could possibly provoke a smile. I have been greatly misunderstood in this matter. Being an Irishman, I do not always see things exactly as an Englishman would: consequently my most serious and blunt statements sometimes raise a laugh and create an impression that I am intentionally jesting. I admit that some Irishmen do take advantage of the public in this way.

> Wilde, unquestionably the ablest of our dramatists, has done so in 'Lady Windermere's Fan'. There are lines in that play which were put in for no other purpose than to make the audience laugh."
>
> "'Widowers' Houses' will be quite free from that sort of thing, then?"
>
> "Absolutely. However, I do not blame Wilde. He wrote for the stage as an artist. I am simply a propagandist."
>
> (CP, I, 126–7)

A piece of Shaw's deadpan clowning like this has to be recognised for what it is. Naming Wilde as 'unquestionably the ablest of our dramatists', at that stage on the strength of *Lady Windermere's Fan* only, was no doubt intended to outrage and startle. It would be ludicrous to take literally Shaw's distinction between Wilde as artist and himself as propagandist. But from the (nearly simultaneous) beginning of their playwriting careers Shaw stressed the common distinctiveness of their Irish alienation and claimed for himself a greater responsibility in its use.

Shaw was clearly delighted with the subversion of seriousness which he found in *An Ideal Husband*, as we can see from his review of the first production in 1895.

> 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. Such a feat scandalises the Englishman, who can no more play with wit and philosophy than he can with a football or cricket bat.

Shaw congratulates Wilde on the 'subtle and pervading levity' of *An Ideal Husband* because it annoys the English. There is no mistaking the tone of self-identification in his praise for Wilde here:

> to the Irishman (and Mr Wilde is almost as acutely Irish an Irishman as the Iron Duke of Wellington) there is nothing in the world quite so exquisitely comic as an Englishman's seriousness. It becomes tragic, perhaps, when the Englishman acts on it; but that occurs too seldom to be taken into account, a fact which intensifies the humor of the situation, the total result being the Englishman utterly unconscious of his real self, Mr Wilde keenly

> observant of it and playing on the self-unconsciousness with irresistible humour, and finally, of course, the Englishman annoyed with himself for being amused at his own expense, and for being unable to convict Mr Wilde of what seems an obvious misunderstanding of human nature.[3]

Shaw's claim for the Irish comedian, for both Wilde and himself, is that they are capable of seeing the truth of English behaviour as the Englishman cannot, that their comedy derives from the tongue-in-cheek observation of the absurdities of the English social scene.

Yet, remarkably, in view of his eloquent review of *An Ideal Husband*, Shaw was disappointed in Wilde's final comic achievement, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Of course, as always with Shaw's reviewing, we need to allow for an element of perversity. His contention that *The Importance* was an early play – 'it must certainly have been written before Lady Windermere's Fan' – is an attempt to make fools of the critics who declared that 'The Importance of Being Earnest is a strained effort of Mr Wilde's at ultra-modernity, and that it could never have been written but for the opening up of entirely new paths in drama last year by Arms and the Man'.[4] But his refusal to join in the chorus of praise for *The Importance* was not just an affectation of singularity. He did not like the play – he was to dislike it all his life – and the reasons why are significant:

> I cannot say that I greatly cared for The Importance of Being Earnest. It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or bustled into it; and that is why, though I laugh as much as anybody at a farcical comedy, I am out of spirits before the end of the second act, and out of temper before the end of the third, my miserable mechanical laughter intensifying these symptoms at every outburst.[5]

It is curious to find Shaw, so often accused of heartless comedy himself, complaining of want of feeling in Wilde. It was Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, produced in 1894, which provoked Yeats's famous dream of the sewing-machine that smiled. But Shaw's belief that comedy should 'move to laughter' is basic to his work. For most modern critics *The Importance* is Wilde's most perfect play, where he finally liberated himself from the need to produce the convention-

ally sentimental plot to house his farcical vision of the absurd. To Shaw, the complete removal of an emotional strand from comedy, however conventional that emotion might have been, represented a step backwards towards the merely mechanical and unreal.

Shaw and Wilde never became friends. When recalling his memories of Wilde for the benefit of Frank Harris in 1916, Shaw could remember no more than half a dozen occasions on which they met. There was a social dimension to their mutual uneasiness, as Shaw told Harris:

> I was in no way predisposed to like him: he was my fellow-townsman, and a very prime specimen of the sort of fellow-townsman I most loathed: to wit, the Dublin snob. His Irish charm, potent with Englishmen, did not exist for me; and on the whole it may be claimed for him that he got no regard from me that he did not earn.[6]

It may be that Shaw was hurt by Wilde's famous epigram about him; at least he answered it with dignity in a letter to Ellen Terry: 'Oscar Wilde said of me "An excellent man: he has no enemies; and none of his friends like him." And that's quite true: they don't like me; but they are my friends, and some of them love me' (CL, I, 668). The lack of a close relationship between them did not stop Shaw from supporting Wilde loyally during and after his imprisonment, and his one substantial essay on Wilde, published in German in the *Neue Freie Presse* in 1905, accords him generous praise. Yet in that essay it is clear what he saw as their essential differences and ultimately Wilde's limitation:

> On the whole, Wilde's tastes were basically different from mine. He loved luxury, and the salon and the *atelier* were his domain; while I was a man of the street, an agitator, a vegetarian, a teetotaler, incapable of enjoying the life of the drawing-room and the chatter of the studio.[7]

Shaw concludes that 'his originality lay in his superiority to the delusive morality of our time' but that 'he had not, as Nietzsche had, thought through his own situation sufficiently to understand himself. Without a precisely mapped-out program of life it is impossible, if not useless, to discard moral concepts.'[8]

Shaw's admiration for Wilde was qualified by his view of him as

essentially an unmodern writer: 'it is difficult to believe that the author of An Ideal Husband was a contemporary of Ibsen, Strindberg, Wagner, Tolstoi, or myself.'[9] In his section on 'Evolution in the Theatre' in the Preface to *Back to Methusaleh*, Shaw names Wilde as the last of a comic tradition which began in the seventeenth century:

> From Molière to Oscar Wilde we had a line of comedic playwrights who, if they had nothing fundamentally positive to say, were at least in revolt against falsehood and imposture, and were not only, as they claimed, 'chastening morals by ridicule', but, in Johnson's phrase, clearing our minds of cant, and thereby shewing an uneasiness in the presence of error which is the surest symptom of intellectual vitality. (CP, v, 335)

But these negative virtues were not enough:

> Ever since Shakespear, playwrights have been struggling with their lack of positive religion. Many of them were forced to become mere pandars and sensation-mongers because, though they had higher ambitions, they could find no better subject matter. From Congreve to Sheridan they were so sterile in spite of their wit that they did not achieve between them the output of Molière's single lifetime; and they were all (not without reason) ashamed of their profession, and preferred to be regarded as mere men of fashion with a rakish hobby. (CP, v, 336)

In a passage like this we see expressed the full Puritanism of Shaw which ultimately differentiated him from Wilde, or indeed most other comedians. For all his clowning, he believed that plays and playwrights had to take themselves seriously, that they had to have something positive to say. This was not necessarily to claim that all plays should have a direct social or moral purpose, but that the dramatist should feel himself committed to his work, not a 'mere man of fashion with a rakish hobby'. It is this which made Shaw reject Wilde's dandy-like aestheticism, and it is this which makes all his own plays in some sense plays for Puritans.

The influence of Ibsen on Shaw is well known, and has by now been often and thoroughly discussed.[10] J. L. Wisenthal has collected all of Shaw's writings on Ibsen, including *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, and has shown in his introductory essay how much more

complex Shaw's response was than has generally been imagined.[11] Shaw did not butcher Ibsen to make a Fabian holiday; though *The Quintessence* was avowedly written to show what Ibsen had to offer socialists, it does not mean that it was all Shaw thought Ibsen had to offer. What Shaw rightly detected in Ibsen, and was most crucial for him, was a radical belief in artistic truth-telling that went far beyond any party-political platform. Ibsen spent most of his life avoiding identification with any political group and was particularly scornful of so-called progressive parties. His iconoclasm was not to be put to the service of a given set of social objectives. But that it was iconoclasm, and that Shaw was more nearly right about Ibsen than is normally supposed, is evident, for example, from Ibsen's comment in a letter about *Ghosts* before it was published: '*Ghosts* will probably cause alarm in some circles; but there is nothing to be done about it. If it didn't do that, there would have been no need to write it.'[12] Ibsen saw his own work, as Shaw saw it, as a contribution to a forward struggle to give people new images of truth, images which at first they would inevitably be unable to accept.

For Shaw Ibsen was the realist who at last enabled the theatre to escape from the vapid and meaningless ideals which had dominated it for so long. In *The Quintessence* he explains the unorthodox use he makes of the terms realist and idealist. The idealist is the man who creates self-deceiving myths to make tolerable the reality of a life which he could not otherwise endure. The realist insists on the liberation of the human will from the artificial constraints of idealism which he rejects as deadening and unreal. He is prepared to face life objectively without the narcotics of the ideal. It can be fairly objected that this view of Ibsen as realist suits some plays more than others, and does not take into account Ibsen's deeply ambiguous attitude towards idealistic self-sacrifice. But it explains why Shaw so constantly stressed the modernity of Ibsen, and saw him as a crucial revolutionary writer along with Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. In Shaw's evolutionary concept of human culture Ibsen is one of the 'pioneers of the march to the plains of heaven', moving forward the ideas of the race by destroying outmoded pieties and beliefs. It is in this spirit that Shaw celebrated Ibsen's 'plays of nineteenth-century life with which he overcame Europe, and broke the dusty windows of every dry-rotten theatre in it from Moscow to Manchester' (CP, v, 336).

If Ibsen is to be seen as a pioneer, a progressive in this supra-political sense, then the structure of his plays involves a dialectic of