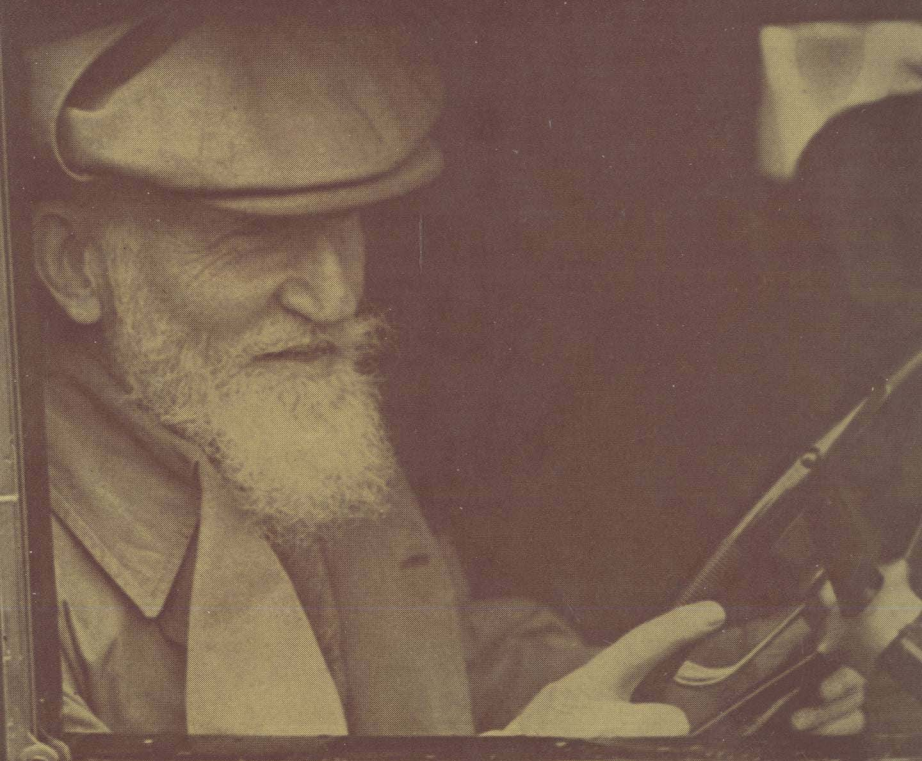


# SHAW

## THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by T F Evans



The Critical Heritage  
Series

# SHAW

## *THE CRITICAL HERITAGE*

*Edited by*

T. F. EVANS

*Deputy Director*

*University of London*

*Department of Extra-Mural Studies*

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ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL  
LONDON, HENLEY AND BOSTON

*First published in 1976  
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd  
76 Carter Lane,  
London EC4V 5EL  
Reading Road,  
Henley-on-Thames,  
Oxon RG9 1EN and  
9 Park Street,  
Boston, Mass. 02108, USA  
Set in Monotype Bembo  
and printed in Great Britain by  
Butler & Tanner Ltd, Frome and London  
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*ISBN 0 7100 8280 0*

## General Editor's Preface

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The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

## Preface

---

Bernard Shaw wrote an immense amount and an immense amount was written about him and his work. He wrote novels, criticisms and many essays and articles on politics and other subjects as well as the plays by which he is best known and which, during his lifetime and since his death, constitute his greatest claim to our interest. With regret, therefore, I have turned away from Shaw the man or the politician or any other aspect of his many-sided personality, and, for the purpose of this volume, I have concentrated on the response to his plays. I have tried to illustrate the contemporary reaction to the plays as they appeared and I have given most space to notices and reviews in newspapers and other periodicals. I am conscious that my selection is a personal one. From the very large body of material that I have read, I have chosen those items that give a continuing picture of the changing and developing reaction to Shaw's dramatic work. Another editor might well have presented a different picture. If space permitted, it would be valuable to include more items from foreign sources, but I hope that those that are included and the information given in the Introduction will help any reader who wishes to repair the omissions.

The material is arranged in chronological order as far as possible or convenient. The work of a dramatist presents a special problem in this respect. Several of Shaw's plays were not produced until some years after they were written and it seems preferable to print the comment in chronological order rather than to adhere rigidly to the date of composition. Thus, for example, although *Caesar and Cleopatra* was written in 1898, I have deferred comments until 1907, the year of the first London production. Although tempted, I have thought it best to concentrate on the first productions of plays and to leave out comment on revivals. I have tried to make it clear in the headnotes whether it is the play in performance or the printed text that is being discussed. The word 'notice' is used for criticism of a performance and 'review' for comment on the text.

## Acknowledgments

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I am indebted to the following for permission to reprint copyright material: the *Daily Telegraph* for Nos 1, 3, 37, 46, 53, 74 and 109; Associated Newspapers Group Ltd for Nos 2, 8, 21, 24, 30, 52, 64, 67 and 75; the Trustees of the estate of William Archer for Nos 4, 9, 18, 26, 31, 40 and 94; the *Illustrated London News* for No. 5; the *New Statesman and Nation* for Nos 6, 10, 15, 23, 33, 47, 49, 65, 69, 71, 73, 78, 81, 107, 110, 128, 131 and 133; the *Aberdeen Journal* for No. 11; the *Guardian* for Nos 12, 99 and 130; Mrs D. M. Maxse for No. 13; Sir Rupert Hart-Davis for Nos 14, 22, 32, 42 and 60; for Nos 16, 25, 29, 51, 72, 88, 104, 114, 126 and 129, which are reproduced from *The Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement*; *Blackwood's Magazine* for No. 17; the estate of Arnold Bennett for No. 19; George Allen & Unwin Ltd and Little Brown for No. 27; M. B. Yeats and Miss Anne Yeats for No. 28; M. B. Yeats, Miss Anne Yeats and Hart-Davis MacGibbon Ltd for No. 101; Longmans for No. 34; the *New York Herald* for No. 35; the *Evening Standard* for No. 36; the London School of Economics and Political Science for No. 38; Times Newspapers Ltd for Nos 39, 77, 83, 89 and 118; the Society of Authors as the literary representative for the Estate of John Galsworthy for No. 45; the *Yorkshire Post* for No. 50; Oxford University Press for No. 54, an extract from *The Life of Tolstoy* by Aylmer Maude; the Estate of H. G. Wells for Nos 55, 112 and 121; the Society of Authors on behalf of the Bernard Shaw Estate for No. 56; I.P.C. Newspapers Ltd for No. 57; Faber & Faber Ltd for No. 59, reprinted from *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, and for No. 91; the Trustees of the Estate of H. L. Mencken and Cornell University Press for No. 60; Oxford University Press for No. 62, reprinted from *English Literature 1450-1900*; *Harper's Weekly* for No. 63; the Trustees of the Estate of John Palmer for No. 70; Colin Smythe Ltd as publishers of the Coole Edition of Lady Gregory's Writings for No. 79; the *Observer* for Nos 80, 90 and 102; the *Birmingham Post* for No. 82; Ashley Dukes and Ernest Benn Ltd for No. 84; the Trustees of the Estate of Alexander Woolcott for No. 85; the *Stage* for No. 86; the New York Times Company for Nos 87 and 117; *Le Figaro* for No. 92; Dame Rebecca

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

West and the *Saturday Review-World* for No. 93; the Trustees of the Estate of Émile Cammaerts for No. 96; the Letters Trust for T. E. Lawrence and the editor, David Garnett, for No. 97; Macmillan and the Estate of Sir Winston Churchill for No. 98; the *Socialist Leader* for No. 100; the *Listener* for Nos 103, 119, 124, 127 and 134; the *Spectator* for Nos 105, 113 and 116; Mrs Sonia Brownell Orwell and Secker & Warburg and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. for No. 106; the Trustees of the Estate of Lady Keeble for No. 108; the *Irish Times* for No. 111; the *Atlantic Monthly* for No. 115; Hutchinsons for Nos 120, 122 and 123; *Die Neue Zürcher Zeitung* for No. 125, Mrs Olga Miller for No. 132, Frau Katia Mann for No. 134, and Dr Eric Bentley for No. 135.

It has proved difficult in certain cases to locate the proprietors of copyright material. However, all possible care has been taken to trace ownership of the selections included, and to make full acknowledgment for their use.

Of the many libraries where it has been necessary to spend long hours of fascinating exploration, I owe the greatest debts to the Newspaper Library of the British Library and the periodicals library of the University of London: I am deeply grateful to the Directors and staff for all their willing assistance. Miss Marion Fleisher of the *New Statesman* has been particularly helpful in the identification of unsigned material.

Of many friends and colleagues, without whose help, advice and guidance the work would have taken even longer than it did, I must mention first Stanley Weintraub of the State University of Pennsylvania. Himself one of the leading Shaw scholars in the world, he has never failed to answer without delay any call I have made upon his apparently limitless generosity. Frederick W. P. MacDowell of the University of Iowa and Jürgen Seefeld of the University of Zürich have directed me to material that I might otherwise have missed. In my own Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of London, past and present colleagues have been most generous in various ways: they include Werner Burmeister, Frances Glendenning, Susan Liddell, Ronald Mason, Elizabeth Monkhouse, Susan Whitehead and Nina Young.

Finally, my wife and four sons have performed various invaluable tasks, ranging from the secretarial to the menial. Their subtle blend of tolerance and occasional exasperation has been a source of great encouragement and also an ever-present warning against the dangers of allowing a consuming interest to become an obsession.

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## Introduction

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Bernard Shaw's first play was produced in 1892 and his last in 1950,<sup>1</sup> two months before his death at the age of ninety-four. For nearly sixty years he was a prominent figure in the world of the theatre. The pattern of contemporary response to his work may be summed up as a progress from gradual recognition as an interesting eccentric to acceptance as a member of the dramatic 'establishment', but the progress was by no means smooth. His reputation grew steadily after a successful series of productions under the management of Harley Granville Barker and J. E. Vedrenne at the Royal Court Theatre, London, between 1904 and 1907. Despite setbacks during and after the First World War, he became a dramatist of undoubted world stature with the production of *Saint Joan* in London in 1924. In the later years of his life his powers declined. Nevertheless, at his death, he was unchallenged as the leading English dramatist of the century, and a master of prose style. Since his death, there has been no substantial change in this estimate.

As Shaw put it, 'the best authority on Shaw is Shaw'.<sup>2</sup> The development of the critical response to his work was the subject of continuing comment by the author himself in his voluminous correspondence. His attitude to the criticisms of his plays may be seen in the Prefaces to the published editions. He was rarely resentful, even when he thought that his plays had been unjustly treated, but wrote from a lofty standpoint suggesting that, if anyone failed to recognise genius, the fault did not lie with the author.

The fact that Shaw was a dramatist gave a peculiar flavour to the critical response to his work. The majority of the notices of the plays were written within a few hours of the production or, at the most, within a few days. This may account for some unevenness, lack of polish and a hit-or-miss quality in many of the judgments. It also means that the opinions have a valuable spontaneity and are genuine first impressions. In addition, Shaw began writing for the theatre when he had already established a reputation as a journalist on political and similar topics, as well as in music and art criticism. Consequently, many critics found it difficult to judge his plays solely as plays in the

## INTRODUCTION

orthodox sense and not as dramatised arguments. For this, Shaw was himself largely responsible. At the end of the preface to the first published version of his first play, *Widowers' Houses*, which appeared in book form in 1893, he asked expressly for the play to be judged 'not as a pamphlet in disguise, but as in intention a work of art, as much as any comedy of Molière's is a work of art, and as pretending to be a better play for actual use and long wear on the boards than anything that has yet been turned out by the patent constructive machinery'. He then went on to declare, half in earnest, but half in jest, that 'its value in both respects is enhanced by the fact that it deals with a burning social question, and is deliberately intended to induce people to vote on the Progressive side at the next County Council election in London'. Many readers and members of his audiences have always tended to take seriously the second part of this advice, while ignoring or forgetting the claims made in the first. Further features of Shaw's personality and writing that called forth a particular type of response were his humour and irony. These tones were closely connected with his belief that, because he was an Irishman, he looked at English life and habits with a specially clear vision that, in turn, enabled him to understand and present underlying truths with much sharper perception than mere natives could command.

## PUBLICATION OF SHAW'S PLAYS

It is difficult to obtain full and accurate information about the publication of Shaw's plays. Constable & Co. Ltd of London, who were his publishers for many years, lost their records in the bombing during the war and neither they nor the Society of Authors, the trustees of the Shaw Estate, have been able to help. Some information is to be found in Shaw's letters.

The first play, *Widowers' Houses*, was published by Henry & Co. in 1893, as the first in a series of Independent Theatre Plays, edited by J. T. Grein. According to Shaw, in a letter of 16 April 1894 to John Lane, it was not advertised and only 150 copies were sold (Laurence, vol. I, p. 423). *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* were published in two volumes by Grant Richards in April 1898. Again according to Shaw, 1,240 copies of each volume were printed. The plays were published at the same time in Chicago by Herbert S. Stone, and Shaw was optimistic in thinking that sales would be greater in the USA. In fact, only 734 copies of each volume were sold. Shaw had much to say to

Grant Richards on the physical appearance of the books, the type, the binding, the advertisements, the sales policy and the author's royalties. *Three Plays for Puritans* were published in 1901, and 2,500 copies were printed. Shaw wrote savagely to Grant Richards that, in the first six months, 1,204 copies were sold, in the next six months 137, and in the third six months 80. Shortly afterwards, the publisher became bankrupt and Shaw's letters to him were at the same time sympathetic, scathing and amusing.

Shaw's long association with Constable began in 1903 with the publication of *Man and Superman*. Shaw was, in fact, his own publisher, making use of the commercial firm for office work and distribution. As is abundantly clear from his letters, he took the closest interest in every detail of the printing and marketing. *Man and Superman* sold 2,707 copies by the end of 1903. Shaw had great difficulty in finding an American publisher and, writing to the Macmillan Company in June 1903 (Laurence, vol. II, p. 333), he said that he 'should probably never attain a large popular circulation'. He went on to doubt whether 'from the purely business side' he was worth dealing with, as 'the necessary capital could always be invested in a book that would bring a larger return'.

In spite of these apprehensions, Shaw's plays appeared regularly and the sales were steady, if not immense. A limited Collected Edition of 1,000 sets was started in 1931 and in the same year there began also the publication of the Standard Edition, which gradually expanded to include, not simply the great majority of the plays, but much other work such as the music and drama criticism and the political and economic writings. The *Complete Plays* were issued in one volume by Constable in 1931 and the *Complete Prefaces* followed in 1934. Later, enlarged editions of each volume were published and both were issued at cheap prices by Odham's Press in association with a newspaper subscription scheme. Shaw contributed a special preface, in which he said that it was the first time that he had ever attached any condition to the perusal of his books except 'the simple ceremony of walking into a bookshop and paying for them'. His readers were now

in a position at once privileged and restricted. Privileged because you can read my plays at less expense than the readers of *The Times*. Restricted because you must begin the day or end the week by reading your favorite paper.

In July 1946, to mark Shaw's ninetieth birthday, Penguin Books issued a uniform set of ten volumes, nine of which were of plays. Of



## INTRODUCTION

each volume 100,000 copies were printed and, in an unsigned review on 9 August 1946, the *Spectator* referred to the enterprise as 'unprecedented' and said that it 'ought to increase immensely the number of Mr Shaw's readers'. It added that 'in these books we have the foundations of the twentieth century'.

## EARLY PLAYS

Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses*, was presented at the Royalty Theatre, London, on 9 December 1892. On 29 November 1892, the *Star* had published an 'interview'<sup>3</sup> drafted by Shaw, in which he purported to talk to a journalist about the play. The article was the first of many in which Shaw was to try to prepare the public for the novelty of his plays. The general tone of the article was flippant, and Shaw insisted that his play was 'nothing else than didactic'. On the playbill for the production it was described as an 'Original, Realistic, Didactic Play'. The Independent Theatre, which presented the play, could afford two performances only, and the production was not a financial success. Yet it aroused great interest and many of the critics rose to the bait, as they were clearly intended to do. Thus, the reviewer in the *Morning Post*<sup>4</sup> declared that 'original it is beyond all question, as we recall nothing like it in a long experience. It is also didactic and certainly realistic.' Some critics dismissed Shaw as a mere imitator of Ibsen with a gift for dramatising extracts from blue-books. An anonymous critic wrote in the *Athenaeum* (17 December 1892) that 'Ibsen has justly been charged with the greyness of his tints, and against the Scandinavian dramatists generally it may be urged that in reckoning up the ills of life they lose sight of the influence of hope; yet gloom so unbroken and hopeless as Mr Shaw depicts in his *Widowers' Houses* has not previously been exhibited on the stage.' William Archer, who had collaborated with Shaw in the original idea that later became *Widowers' Houses*, included in his notice of the play (No. 4) a full account of the genesis of the work, but concluded by saying that his friend had no gifts for the type of play that he had written. Shaw replied by emphasising his own knowledge of the economic situation and his amorous experiences, and he called Archer a 'sentimental Sweet Lavendery recluse'. In the *Speaker* (No. 6) A. B. Walkley said, as he was to do often in the future, that there were many merits in Shaw, but they were not the merits of the dramatist. In one of the shrewdest and most discriminating notices, H. W. Massingham wrote in the *Illus-*