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Pygmalion and Major Barbara by George Bernard Shaw



With an Introduction by Michael Holroyd



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GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1856–1950) is one of the world's greatest literary figures. Born in Dublin, Ireland, he left school at fourteen and in 1876 went to London, where he began his literary career with a series of unsuccessful novels. In 1884 he became a founder of the Fabian Society, the famous British socialist organization. After becoming a reviewer and drama critic, he published a study of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen in 1891 and became determined to create plays as he felt Ibsen did: to shake audiences out of their moral complacency and to attack social problems. However, Shaw was an irrepressible wit, and his plays are as entertaining as they are socially provocative. Basically shy, Shaw created a public persona for himself: G.B.S., a bearded eccentric, crusading social critic, antivivisectionist, language reformer, strict vegetarian, and renowned public speaker. The author of fifty-three plays, hundreds of essays, reviews, and letters, and several books, Shaw is best known for *Widowers' Houses* (1892), *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901), *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Pygmalion* (1913), *Heartbreak House* (1919), and *Saint Joan* (1923). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925.

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Introduction

Early in his career as a dramatist, Bernard Shaw divided his work for the theatre into two categories: *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*. His unpleasant plays (*Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*) dramatised some of the "unspeakable" social issues of the late nineteenth century—property values versus human values, conjugal rights and wrongs—and treated prostitution as a metaphor for capitalism. In his pleasant plays (*Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *The Man of Destiny*, and *You Never Can Tell*), resolving to "sport with human follies not with crimes," he turned history into comedy and made his audiences laugh rather than feel politically incriminated.

Most of Shaw's subsequent dramas may also be seen as belonging to one or the other of these categories. *Major Barbara* is his most ambitious "unpleasant" play. He wrote it, with much difficulty, between March and September 1905, when he was approaching fifty. He had achieved almost no success in the theatre until his early forties, when *The Devil's Disciple*, his melodrama set in New Hampshire during the American Revolution, had been successfully produced by Richard Mansfield in New York. In Britain he had to wait until the founding of the new repertory experiment at the Court Theatre in London's Sloane Square to get his first taste of success. Between 1904 and 1907 he joined the actor-playwright Harley Granville Barker and the theatre manager J. E. Vedrenne to create a revolution in contemporary English theatre at the Court. This brilliant partnership dispensed with the star system of the famous actor-managers led by Sir Henry

Irving at the Lyceum, and substituted ensemble acting without fame-snobbery. It also gave power to the playwright (Shaw and Granville Barker usually directed their own plays), encouraged contemporary writers such as John Galsworthy, Laurence Housman, John Masefield, Elizabeth Robins, and W. B. Yeats to write for the theatre, and put on the works of foreign playwrights from Euripides to Ibsen.

Above all, the Court established a theatre of ideas in England. These ideas often turned Victorian values upside down, replacing the woman on a pedestal with woman as huntress, inventing the "new man" (the man of technology), taking the heroic romance out of warfare, and advocating the political blasphemy of socialism and the economic independence of women. It was all wonderfully exciting to young people. They treated the Court Theatre almost as if it were a college extension course, going in as late-nineteenth-century aesthetes and emerging as twentieth-century radicals. In the opinion of Leonard Woolf, "There was no living man to whom the generations which came to maturity between 1900 and 1914 owed so much to as Mr. Shaw. . . . Nothing less than a world war could have prevented [him] from winning the minds of succeeding generations . . . ever since [the war] the barbarians have naturally been on top."

Major Barbara fitted perfectly into the imaginative education being offered at the Court Theatre. "Shaw's play was highly amusing and interesting and very brutal," wrote the young poet Rupert Brooke, who saw a performance there early in January 1906. But the brutality offended some of the older and more staid members of the audience. An anonymous theatre critic of the conservative newspaper *The Morning Post*, for example, attacked G.B.S. (the title Shaw chose for his public persona) for his jeering "insincerity," "deliberate perversity," and unforgivable "offences against good taste and good feeling." He questioned whether it should not be a case for official censorship against blasphemy, demonstrating that simplistic reaction to the challenge of the arts with which we are still familiar today.

Part melodrama and part theatrical debate, *Major Barbara* examines the reliance of twentieth-century capitalism on the modern armaments trade. While not disputing that this was an unholy alliance, Shaw did not pretend that the Church could formulate any easy or adequate dismissal of it. In his own lifetime he was to see perhaps only one world leader open to the catholicity of all religions who extracted the political implications of Christianity and used them in a general strategy. This was Mahatma Gandhi, whom Shaw judged to be "a saint . . . the sort of man who occurs once in several centuries." Shaw looked forward to a future where everyone might be the moral equivalent of Gandhi. But Gandhi's assassination in 1948 strengthened Shaw's belief in the danger of being so far ahead of the age in which one lived.

But at the time, the barbarians were largely in command of the world. In *Major Barbara* Shaw tried to steer a course between short-term pragmatism and visionary optimism that was neither defeatist nor sentimental. In the challenge of Undershaft, the armaments manufacturer, to his Salvation Army daughter Barbara, we may hear a prelude to Stalin's famous dismissal of the Catholic Church with the ironic enquiry: "How many divisions has the Pope?"

According to his friend the political sociologist Beatrice Webb, Shaw was gambling very dangerously with ideas and emotions in this play. He had partly used Beatrice as his model for the robust and sensitive Barbara, and another friend, the classical scholar Gilbert Murray, who was to become an active member of the League of Nations, as the model for Barbara's fiancé, Adolphus Cusins. Undershaft himself owes a good deal to several plutocrats in the armaments trade: to Sir Basil Zaharoff, chief salesman of Vickers, who boasted of selling arms to anyone who would buy them and of creating wars so that he could sell to both sides; to Sir William Armstrong, who insisted that the responsibility for these new engines of war lay with those who used them rather than with those who supplied them; to Alfred Krupp, the Prussian "Cannon King," whose welfare conditions for his workers in Essen resem-

bled those provided by Undershaft at the model town of Perivale St. Andrews; and to Alfred Nobel, who patented dynamite in 1867, claimed that his factories might end war sooner than other people's peace conferences, and used his profits to found the Nobel Peace Prize. "I can forgive Alfred Nobel for having invented dynamite," Shaw was to say after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925. "But only a fiend in human form could have invented the Nobel Prize."

Zaharoff, Armstrong, Krupp, and Nobel all could have subscribed unashamedly to "the true faith of the Armorer" as expressed by Undershaft:

To give arms to all men who offer an honest price for them, without respect of persons or principles: to aristocrat and republican, to Nihilist and Tsar, to Capitalist and Socialist, to Protestant and Catholic, to burglar and policeman, to black man, white man and yellow man, to all sorts and conditions, all nationalities, all faiths, all follies, all causes and all crimes.

Major Barbara demonstrates, perhaps more powerfully than any of his other plays, the way in which Shaw's knowledge of contemporary politics was linked to a prophetic understanding of what political themes would still be troubling us at the end of the twentieth century. No military dictator in 1990 would have had difficulty in recognising Undershaft's successors at the Pentagon or the Kremlin. No reader of Anthony Sampson's recent book *The Arms Bazaar* could doubt that Undershaft's army of orphans was still in business. Barbara's opposing forces are still familiar to us also in some of the international relief organisations and the ministrations of remarkable individuals such as Mother Teresa. The Salvation Army, in which Barbara holds the rank of major, had been founded in 1878 by William Booth, who calculated that one Londoner in ten lived "below the standard of the London cab horse." By 1905, when Shaw was writing his play, there were 150,000 paupers in London who spent

their nights either in the streets or the workhouse casual wards. Over eighty years later a "cardboard city" had arisen in London for such vagrants, and the casual wards of the workhouses were renamed "government reception centres."

If Barbara represents evangelical Christianity and spiritual passion, then Cusins, the academic, may be said to stand for intellectual passion, while Undershaft embodies material strength and the power of money. The problem Shaw set himself in the final long disquisitory scene was to find a convincing synthesis of those opposing interests. It was a problem that, in various forms, had been obsessing him since the beginning of our century. *Major Barbara* was to be the last of the "big three" dramas of Shaw's middle period. In the dream sequence of *Man and Superman* he had set optimism against pessimism as part of the great Socratic debate between Don Juan and the Devil. In *John Bull's Other Island*, where the defrocked Irish priest, Father Keegan, opposes the philistine English materialist, Tom Broadbent, Shaw had attempted to focus the optimism of his dreams upon waking life. "Live in contact with dreams and you will get something of their charm," he wrote in that play: "live in contact with facts and you will get something of their brutality. I wish I could find a country to live in where the facts were not brutal and the dreams not unreal."

Undershaft's "death and devastation factory" seems an unlikely capital for such an ideal country. For here, surely, is the devil's palace remodelled by the civil engineer Tom Broadbent into a shining garden city. Yet this is where Shaw sets "the real tug-of-war" between the millionaire, the poet, and the saviour of souls. What emerges most potently from this confrontation is Undershaft's religion of money and gunpowder. The audience has already been convinced that "money governs England" and that Undershaft is one of the people who governs the country. He has demonstrated before Barbara that "all religious organizations exist by selling themselves to the rich" and persuaded Cusins that "you must first acquire money

enough for a decent life, and power enough to be your own master." In his vocabulary, money means freedom and gunpowder is power. Here, in its purest form, is the philosophy of the marketplace against which Barbara's "larger loves and diviner dreams" seem little more than the sentimentalities of a modern television evangelist. She is indeed "hypnotised" by her father's display of power which also drives Cusins to act against his benevolent temperament and high conscience. "Come and make explosives with me," Undershaft invites them. "Whatever can blow men up can blow society up. The history of the world is the history of those who had courage enough to embrace this truth. Have you the courage to embrace it . . . ?"

Shaw's problem is how to conjure the politics of death into the mystical operations of the Life Force. To solve the problem he uses the philosophy of William Blake. "There is no wicked side: life is all one," Barbara says to Cusins, who asks her: "Then the way of life lies through the factory of death?" To which she answers: "Yes, through the raising of hell to heaven and of man to God, through the unveiling of an eternal light in the Valley of the Shadow." Shaw wanted to see the poet, the intellectual, men and women of vision and unbribable integrity become involved in the muddy business of politics. He would have welcomed in our own time the election of a philosopher, Zhelyu Zhelev, as president of Bulgaria, and a dramatist, Vaclav Havel, as president of Czechoslovakia. Like Plato, he believed that "society cannot be saved until either the Professors of Greek take to making gunpowder, or else the makers of gunpower become Professors of Greek."

In Undershaft's powerful speech against the crime of poverty, he accuses Barbara of failing the "half-starved ruffian" who had come to the Salvation Army shelter. "I will drag his soul back again to salvation for you," he promises her.

Not by words and dreams; but by thirty-eight shillings a week, a sound house in a handsome street, and a permanent job. In three weeks he will have a fancy

waistcoat; in three months a tall hat and a chapel sitting; before the end of the year he will shake hands with a duchess at the Primrose League meeting, and join the Conservative Party.

This is a similar transformation to that performed by Professor Henry Higgins on Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*, the most "pleasant" of all Shaw's plays: Shaw was a natural writer of social and romantic comedies. He described *Pygmalion*, which he composed between March and June 1912 at the age of fifty-five, as "A Romance in Five Acts." It was, he liked to say, comparable to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which was to say, the public liked it. "There must be something radically wrong with the play if it pleases everybody," he admitted, "but at the moment I cannot find what it is."

He liked to speak of *Pygmalion* as a didactic entertainment in which he demonstrated how the science of phonetics could be used to subvert an antiquated British class system. By teaching the unkempt cockney flower girl a new speech and culture, the dedicated phonetician changes her into a completely different person with new expectations. Shaw had taken his title from Greek mythology: Pygmalion, king of Cyprus, made an ivory statue of a girl which was so beautiful that he fell in love with it and prayed to Aphrodite to give the statue life. His wish was granted and he married her. Shaw had already adapted this metaphor in one of his early novels, *Love Among the Artists*, as had Tobias Smollett in *Peregrine Pickle*, and W. S. Gilbert in *Pygmalion and Galatea*. Shaw may well have also been aware of the similarity of his theme to Swift's poem "Cadenus and Vanessa," which describes the tutorial-erotic relationship between a passionate young woman and a self-protective older pedagogue.

But the real source for Shaw's *Pygmalion* lay in his own adolescence and the revival of adolescent feelings for Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the celebrated actress whom he wanted to play Eliza Doolittle. He intended to use this theatrical romance for the feminist purpose of conceiving

a Shavian new woman—an educated woman able to earn her own living in a male-dominated society. But behind the new woman of his invention lay the dominating woman behind his life: his mother.

The good news is that Shaw loved his mother; the bad news is that she did not love him. Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw, nicknamed Bessie, was a ladylike lapsed Protestant who had married a redundant civil servant, George Carr Shaw, who she discovered was a failed if ardent teetotaler. She came to despise her husband and seems to have felt that their son, George, was tainted with the same male ineffectualness. Indeed, she appears to have been contemptuous of all men except one, a musician called George Vandeleur Lee, who later became a model for George du Maurier's Svengali. Lee, who invited the Protestant Shaws to share his much smarter house in Dublin, was a Catholic. So it was a doubly unconventional ménage in which the child grew up. Lee was the centre of their household. Mrs. Shaw sang for him and became the right-hand woman of his prosperous Amateur Musical Society in Dublin. But early in 1873, after running into difficulties, Lee somewhat hurriedly left Ireland to seek his fortune in London. A fortnight later, on her twenty-first wedding anniversary, Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw followed him. Over the next months she took her two daughters to join her, but left her son, the youngest of her children, in Dublin with his father.

Shaw was sixteen, and the effect on him was devastating. He questioned his own legitimacy—had he been named after George Carr Shaw or George Vandeleur Lee? What seemed certain was that Lee was the sort of man his mother admired. Later he dropped the name George, the symbol of unhappy ambiguity, and created a public personality known as G.B.S., largely influenced by Lee. This famous and feted figure was to take the place of the neglected child.

When looking back at his childhood, Shaw wrote that he had the choice of making it into either "a family tragedy or a family joke." *Pygmalion* is the most imaginative

of his jokes deriving from this background. He re-creates Vandeleur Lee, the teacher of singing, as Henry Higgins, the teacher of speech, and transforms his pupil from Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw into Eliza Doolittle. But there was a double transposition at work in this creative process. As G.B.S. had fashioned his public image on Lee, so Higgins grew into a self-portrait of the playwright himself. And as he fell in love with Mrs. Patrick Campbell, so an aura of traditional romance enveloped the figure of Eliza.

Shaw had often seen Mrs. Pat on stage when he had been a dramatic critic in the 1890s. He saw that she cast an extraordinary aura of glamour over the late-Victorian theatre, and he wanted her for his own play-world. He had written his *Caesar and Cleopatra* for her, though she never became his Cleopatra. The dazzled Caesar who nevertheless retains his full self-possession is G.B.S., the professional critic who watches her from the safety of the stalls. By autumn 1897 everything else had been driven out of his head by a play he wished to write in which she could act an East End girl "in an apron and three orange and red feathers," playing opposite a West End gentleman. It was not until fifteen years later that he wrote this play and persuaded Mrs. Pat, whom he now called Stella, to act in it.

The late-Victorian and Edwardian theatre had very few good roles for actresses. Shaw, who believed in the equality of women and men in the theatre, was a playwright Stella Campbell needed to write for her. She could see that *Pygmalion* was a most fruitful product of their relationship. His play made her laugh, but she underrated the emotional fires she had lit in him.

Shaw had been born with an instinct to show off, which his mother, feeling no pride in his tricks, had stifled. His hunger for love fed on his imagination. Stella fulfilled an important adolescent need in him. "You are a figure from the dreams of my childhood," he told her in 1912. But Stella was planning to marry George Cornwallis-West after he divorced his then-present wife, the mother of Winston Churchill, and she did not want to imperil this arrangement

by an affair with Shaw. So she rejected him and married Cornwallis-West during the rehearsals of *Pygmalion*. This rejection deeply distressed Shaw. Of his fifty-seven years, he wrote to Stella, "I have suffered twenty and worked thirty-seven. Then I had a moment's happiness: I almost condescended to romance. I risked the breaking of deep roots and sanctified ties . . . what have I shrunk into?"

"I call it a romance," Shaw told a journalist who had asked him about *Pygmalion*, "because it is the story of a poor girl who meets a gentleman at a church door and is transformed by him into a beautiful lady. That is what I call a romance. It is also what everybody else calls a romance, so for once we are all agreed." But the public's idea of a romance was not Shaw's. They wanted to change Professor Higgins from a Miltonic bachelor into Eliza's lover. There was much in the stage directions and the subtext of the play to support these wishes. Even Higgins's mother believes that her son "must be perfectly cracked" about his flower girl. But Higgins himself resists every innuendo. In the second act Eliza complains to Higgins, "One would think you was my father." He replies, "If I decide to teach you, I'll be worse than two fathers to you." Near the end of the play he suggests to her, "I'll adopt you as my daughter and settle money on you if you like." What seems clear is that Higgins can assume almost any family relationship with Eliza except that of husband. "I've never been able to feel really grown-up and tremendous, like other chaps," he tells Colonel Pickering. He explains the reason for this to his mother. "My idea of a lovable woman is somebody as like you as possible . . . some habits lie too deep to be changed." Eliza has changed, but Higgins admits that "I can't change my nature." "I only want to be natural," Eliza says. But can Higgins be natural? The original ending of the play is carefully ambiguous, reflecting Shaw's uncertainties over his romance with Stella. He could not have married her and she could not have remained his pupil as an actress learning from his theatrical direction. But might they have become lovers? The question is left open to our imagination.

The history of *Pygmalion* was to develop into a battle over its ending. Responding to what was suppressed in Shaw's life and lay in the subtext of his play, the public demanded a love affair. "This is unbearable," Shaw cried out. He had dramatised the relationship between Vandeleur Lee and his mother which, he insisted, had always been professional. His very legitimacy seemed to depend on it. And then there was his own affair with Stella Campbell; he could not bear to speculate on what might have been. "Eliza married Freddy [Eynsford-Hill]" he explained; "and the notion of her marrying Higgins is disgusting." In other words, she married a double-barrelled, well-connected nobody like George Cornwallis-West.

In later versions of *Pygmalion*, Shaw tried to remove "virtually every suggestion of Higgins's possible romantic interest in Eliza" and strengthen the role of Freddy Eynsford-Hill. But actors, directors, and audiences conspired to get around these changes. There was one humiliation, however, Shaw was determined to avoid. Oscar Straus had made a sentimental operetta called *The Chocolate Soldier* from his pleasant play *Arms and the Man*. The same thing would not be allowed to happen to *Pygmalion*. When Franz Lehár, creator of *The Merry Widow*, wanted to make a musical of *Pygmalion*, Shaw was adamant that it should not happen. "I have no intention of allowing the history of the Chocolate Soldier to be repeated," he wrote. For the rest of his life he resisted every pressure to "down-grade" his play into a musical. "I absolutely forbid any such outrage," he said when in his ninety-second year. This was one battle with the public he believed he had won.

Composed half a dozen years after Shaw's death, the musical *My Fair Lady* was based on the film version of *Pygmalion*, for which he had written the original script. At a press show only two days before the film's opening, however, Shaw discovered that other screenwriters had been brought in to provide a more sentimental ending to the story. The premieres in London and New York were hugely successful and, less than a year before the beginning of the Second World War, were seen as a timely

gesture towards removing the power for change from fighting men to artists and writers, men and women of vision and imagination. But, as Leonard Woolf had written, the barbarians were on top. After the war started, Shaw chose *Major Barbara* as his second film. It struck many people as dramatically topical in 1941. "The house was packed," H. G. Wells wrote to Shaw, "... and you could not have had a more responsive audience. They laughed at all the right places. Most young people in uniform they were."

Shaw made a special prologue to this film for the United States which was regarded by many Americans as an invitation for them to join the fight against Hitler. When he was a little boy, he said, the Dublin newspapers reported how America had abolished black slavery. When he grew up, he continued, "I determined to devote my life as far as I could to the abolition of white slavery," the sort of slavery to economic dictatorship that had erupted in the war. Then he lifted one trembling hand to his forehead and held it in a salute. "When my mere bodily stuff is gone, I should like to imagine that you are still working with me . . . at that particular job . . . farewell!"

—MICHAEL HOLROYD