

The Utopian Potential of Aging and Longevity in Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* (1921)

George Bernard Shaw's five-part play cycle Back to Methuselah (1921) has not been fully appreciated for its utopian criticality, a criticality that offers a profound reframing of longevity and old age. That it is a utopia in dramatic (rather than prose) form, deploys an unusual mix of largely comic genres and styles, pursues eccentric ideas of Creative Evolution, and is exceptionally long and unwieldy in production has led to a mostly limited and perplexed scholarly reception from within both Utopian and Shaw Studies. Against this context, this article unearths the utopian potential of Back to Methuselah, where aging and longevity serve to make possible the emergence of superior human capacity, which is uniquely able to establish and sustain a better world because of the qualities acquired through extended life. In particular, it argues that taking account of the play as a utopian text – with its radical representation of old age as cumulative value – expands to include age in addition to existing progressive narratives familiar from utopian literature since Thomas More's Utopia (1516), which fundamentally rethink identities of class, gender, race and sexuality.

Given Bernard Shaw's well-known commitment to advancing philosophical, political and aesthetic critiques of capitalism, it is not surprising that he pursued utopian themes in several of his plays or wrote full utopias.¹ Yet, it is striking that these plays emerge *after* the heyday of bold socialist experimentation in the utopian novel as exemplified by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) and H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Shaw's utopian plays are conspicuous because of their appearance

during what Gregory Claeys has termed the second “dystopian turn” (111) (the first, he suggests, is the Enlightenment satire), which was one expression of *fin-de-siècle* pessimism – a pessimism borne of disillusionment with an Enlightenment dependence on reason and scientific positivism. This pessimism, in turn, was only strengthened in the early twentieth century, with an increasingly pervasive sense of fear, anxiety and political uncertainty in the context of mass slaughter of the first world war and the subsequent emergence of fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain, and Stalinism in the Soviet bloc. Domination of the utopian genre by the anti-utopian and dystopian novel was vividly expressed in several popular and enduring works, including H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895), Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908), Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937), and George Orwell’s *1984* (1948).

In this context, Shaw’s plays stand out as rare proposals for “world betterment” to use his term.² Yet, the challenges faced by capitalist democracies – such as the imperialist game playing of WW1, the Russian revolutions and revolutionary activism in Germany, Italy and Spain, campaigns for full franchise, and an upsurge in industrial militancy leading to the 1926 general strike – were simultaneously opportunities for socialists to build and agitate. While the British left suffered from splits over the question of whether to oppose the war, it was simultaneously galvanized by October 1917; in Walter Kendall’s words: “Bolshevism had provided a recipe for revolution” (x). Shaw was inspired by reading Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* (in French) in 1883 (Holroyd 79), but his politics were not revolutionary Marxism; along with well-known figures such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Emmeline Pankhurst, H.G. Wells and Annie Besant – Shaw was an early member of the Fabian Society (established in 1884), and hence committed to a gradualist approach to socialism. However, as Stanley Weintraub observes, by the end of the first world war, Shaw “was disillusioned about the effectiveness of Fabian permeation of political parties” and increasingly impatient

with the inability of liberal democracy to facilitate justice, fairness and fulfilment of material needs, yet alone provide a social structure that promoted full human potential (*TLS.co.uk*). Nevertheless, despite this disillusionment, he remained a member of the Fabian Society and accepted the labels “Fabian Communist and Creative Evolutionist” until the end of his life (Shaw, “Preface” 413).

For Shaw, a commitment to the potential of human agency to transform social relations was interwoven with a subscription to the possibility of the power of Creative Evolution to enhance the human subject. Against the apparently senseless accidents of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection in human evolution, supporters of Creative Evolution introduced agency as a mediator of biological progress: in this perspective, the human will possessed the ability to harness the Life Force and improve the human subject. While Shaw viewed Darwin’s theory of natural selection as reflective of the practice of capitalist competition, he considered Creative Evolution as more in line with a socialist subscription to political agency and will (see Hummert). A key contribution to the development of Creative Evolution as a scientific-philosophical-religious theory was Samuel Butler’s vehement anti-Darwinian tract, *Luck, or Cunning?* (1887), where he proposed an opposition between the “apostles of luck” who supported random variation (Darwin, Herbert Spencer and George Romanes) and those adherents of “cunning” (Erasmus Darwin, Comte de Buffon and Butler himself); for the latter, some form of design or agency was a key determiner of evolutionary progress. Influenced by Lamarck, Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1907) properly developed and established the concept – identifying *élan vital* as crucial to evolutionary development – which proved popular in the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, also influenced by Lamarck, but apparently not conversant with Bergson’s work until 1911, Shaw was developing similar ideas of Creative Evolution in parallel, the fullest representation of which appeared in *Back to Methuselah* and its lengthy

preface that was published at the same time, these ideas revisited 30 years later in his last play, also a utopia, *Farfetched Fables* (see Pharand). A socialist interest in the power of eugenics to imbue the human subject with greater capacity as a means of establishing a better society was undoubtedly central to Shaw's utopian imagination. A Marxist figuration of human consciousness arising from material relations, common to the utopias of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gave way, in Shaw's work, to a more Hegelian focus on the determining power of human consciousness, intellect and spirit, combined with a Nietzschean interest in the will.

Unfortunately, Shaw's utopian plays, along with their rather unorthodox contribution to utopian thinking, have been largely overlooked.³ Furthermore, given that Shaw wrote well into late life and expressed interest in ageing and longevity in several of his works, it is notable that this topic has been historically neglected within Shaw scholarship and has only been attended to in a handful of journal articles (see Lipscomb; Lenker and Lipscomb; Clifton; and Hartung). Furthermore, as Mark R. Brand has recently observed in a rare study of the intersection of old age and utopia (in this case figurations of old age in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American utopian fictions), "historically age studies and utopian studies have had little to do with one another" (2). What follows in this article is an unearthing of the value of Shaw's most substantial utopian play *Back to Methuselah* to utopian thinking by seeking to understand the implications of the utopian depictions alongside the critiques they offer of the particular moment of their production. One of the most striking contributions of this play is the exploration it undertakes of aging and longevity: it provides a new and fertile evaluation of the capacities of the very old. For Shaw, the Life Force gained in strength and profundity in old age. His vision of very old age as having the requisite maturity to engage successfully with the complexities of the modern world, brings with it some fascinating and radical insights to the identity politics of age.

The Aging Question

In common with dominant narratives of aging across historical periods, youth or youthfulness – of the body, intellect and temperament – has most often been the ideal age phase in utopian representations. As part of this attachment to youthfulness, the experience of aging – and interest in older utopian citizens specifically – has often been neglected. There are very few references to old age in Tommaso Campanella’s “City of the Sun” (1602) or Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) for example, and old people are not present in the Arcadian romances of Torquato Tasso’s *Aminta* (1573) or Miguel de Cervantes’ *Galatea* (1585). In fact, the occasional appearance of an old character has tended to take the form of a grumbling dissenter bitterly complaining about the new progressive utopian society. Examples include Clara’s grandfather, a “grumbler,” who yearns for the pre-utopian days of “unlimited competition” (173) in Morris’s *News from Nowhere* or Severan-Severan (described as “the oldest reactionary in the world” [56]) by his fellow utopians in Howard Brenton’s *Greenland* (1988), their advanced years apparently explicative of a reactionary nostalgia: itself proof that the older person is an ideological, as well as physiological, anachronism. Several modern dystopias evince anxiety over modernity’s dislike of old people, by imagining their total removal through dystopian critique – think of Huxley’s *Brave New World* (where time is up at sixty) or William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson’s novel *Logan’s Run* (1967), and its film adaptation (directed by Michael Anderson in 1976), where you are no longer acceptable at twenty-one or thirty respectively.

Yet, significantly, in the foundational utopian texts, old age was depicted as a stage in the life course deserving of sympathetic attention or high social status. In Plato’s *Republic*,

the old have intellectual, social and political power: “it is obvious that the elder must govern, and the younger be governed” (119). In More’s *Utopia* older utopians are respected and have social authority: the reader is informed that in the countryside, each agricultural house: “accommodates at least forty adults, plus two slaves who are permanently attached to it, and is run by a reliable, elderly married couple” (50). In the towns, the oldest male relative is in control of the household. In the communal dining hall, at the place of honor (the high table) sit “the Styward and his wife, with two of the oldest residents” and in fours older and younger people alternate in seating. Old utopians are provided with the biggest and best portions and there are some special opportunities for old women: “[...] there's nothing to stop a woman from becoming a priest, although women aren't often chosen for the job, and only elderly widows are eligible” (105). It is striking that while much utopian literature repeats dominant age prejudices either explicitly or covertly, the vortex of the utopian canon – More’s *Utopia* and its precursor, Plato’s *Republic* – challenge orthodoxy by reconsidering the value of the older person and bestowing respect and worth upon older utopian citizens.

Although it is difficult to identify a coherent narrative of perceptions of old age in the early twentieth century, it is instructive to note, as Karen Chase does, that the “elderly subject” (6) emerges as a category of (social) science at the end of the nineteenth century, due to the development of the discipline of gerontology. Chase writes:

Like claims of class throughout the nineteenth century, generational necessities are typically expressed as some form of ‘need,’ pressed on a society in which resources are held to be scarce. Under these conditions, the wants of the elderly appear as excessive demand, monstrous desire, or hopeless and inconceivable fantasy that should be contained through social regulation at home or through (forced or voluntary) emigration abroad. (151)

The identification of aging as a resource burden, is supplemented by gerontologist, Thomas R. Cole, who identifies “[t]he primary virtues of Victorian morality – independence, health, success” as requiring “constant control over one’s body and physical energies”. Cole concludes with the observation that “[t]he decaying body in old age, a constant reminder of the limits of physical self-control, came to signify precisely what bourgeois culture hoped to avoid: dependence, disease, failure, and sin” (“The ‘Enlightened’ View of Aging,” 121). This is in the context of a culture dependent on material growth and economic productivity, the corollaries of which exclude attributing value to bodily decay and decline. A functioning anti-aging discourse was thus gathering strength in the late nineteenth century, and Christoph Conrad argues that it is in the 1920s – precisely the moment of Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* – that aging is considered as really “troublesome” (79). As part of the context for cementing associations of older age with unproductivity and economic and social dependency are what Lagretta Tallent Lenker refers to as the “endless debates over old-age pensions, society’s proper treatment of the elderly, and the Darwinian/Neo-Darwinian theories of evolution” (50).

A discourse of fear over the growth in the number of people age sixty-five or over in Britain intensified in the first half of the twentieth century, a period punctuated by the introduction of pensions in 1908 and the imposition of retirement in 1948 (Blaikie 7). The construction of aging and the older person as *problems* is exemplified by Richard Titmuss and Kay Titmuss’ study of the declining birth rate in the early twentieth century and the concomitant increase in proportion of older people in society. They warn that Britain would soon need to prioritize “armchairs and bedroom slippers instead of children’s foods.” With an expansion of the older population, they claimed that this could result in the loss of “the mental attitude that is essential for social progress.” Qualities vital to the advancement of

society – “intelligence, courage, power of initiative, and qualities of creative imagination” – were not “usually [...] found in the aged” (Titmuss and Titmuss 46). This flagrant diminishment of the older person, which was repeatedly articulated as part of normative thinking, is a crucial context for understanding the significance of Bernard Shaw’s interest in aging, and in particular, it allows us to appreciate the unconventional, indeed radically progressive, reimagining of aging, old age and the older subject in *Back to Methuselah*.

Back to Methuselah

Bernard Shaw’s high valuation of old age is a significant but, as I have shown, not isolated example of utopian representation. However, his focus on old age as central to his utopian vision is extremely unusual.⁴ *Back to Methuselah* imagines aging and longevity as a conduit through which the possibility of a more advanced political subject emerges, a subject capable of seeing beyond short-term self interest, one with the enhanced capabilities necessary for responding to the complexities of the modern world. This unusual proposition is developed across the five playlets. The play is subtitled “A Metabiological Pentateuch” and Shaw described the play as a bible for the modern world. The utopian societies of parts four and five emerge from the new social and political potentialities afforded by extended life, which – as well as offering the advantages of wisdom and maturity – also make possible the long-term investment in futurity and common interest central to establishing and maintaining the utopian good life. Shaw was sixty-five when *Back to Methuselah* was published, and while sixty-five may connote the beginnings of old age today, it was perceived as late life for many in the 1920s. According to a recent report published by the Resolution Foundation: “A century ago new-borns were expected to live to 63 on average, whereas for the generation

born in the last 15 years life expectancy at birth is 93, with over a third of the generation after expected to reach age 100” (Finch). While it is useful to note that the inclusion of infant mortality somewhat skews these markedly different life expectancy rates, Shaw was nevertheless considered to be old when he wrote *Back to Methuselah* and this personal experience of aging is likely to have informed his utopian intervention into this subject.

The first of *Back to Methuselah*'s five parts – “In the Beginning” – is set in the Garden of Eden and is a re-writing and expansion of parts of Genesis. On encountering a dead fawn, the then immortal Adam and Eve discover the existence of death and contemplate the lonely implications of each other's demise if one were to suffer an accident. The serpent suggests they consider mortality, and proposes that Adam choose 1000 as the age at which he should die, as a solution to the numbing boredom of immortality and the potential extinction of humanity if they were to suffer an accident. The serpent proposes birth as compensation for relinquishing immortality so that human life has the opportunity to continue from generation to generation. In this dynamic rewriting of Genesis Adam and Eve are born of Lilith; the concept of evil exists before the forbidden fruit episode (Eve calls death evil); and Eve returns to the Garden of Eden periodically. As for Cain and Abel: after the former (a perverse Shavian superman, a kind of dialectical provocation) has murdered the latter, instead of being cursed to wander the earth away from his parents, Cain is free to come and go wherever, whenever he chooses. These departures from scripture produced a Shavian dialectical set of tensions which were received with great pleasure. In reviews of the early productions, part one – with its “poetry and dignity” – was the part most celebrated by theatre critics (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1928, 7). Refashioning parts of Genesis as the cornerstone of an epic, expansive utopian vision worked to produce a creative social myth, an essential supplement, Shaw believed, to political doctrine.

Part two, titled “The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas,” is set during the first few

years after WW1 (the time Shaw was writing the play) in London. The Barnabas brothers⁵ – Franklyn (a cleric) and Conrad (a biologist) – have been working on the theory of longevity, and Conrad has published a book with their conclusions: Living for 300 years would provide enough time to accrue the experience and wisdom necessary for the long-term thinking and planning essential for the creation and sustainability of a better society. Politicians, Burge and Lubin (with deliberate echoes of Liberal Party leaders and rivals, Lloyd George and Asquith, which most reviews of productions at the time easily picked up on⁶) hear the theory but their primary interest is its potential for aiding electioneering. Very different in form and tone to part one, part two functions in a similar way to book one of More’s *Utopia*: it presents a critical representation of the status quo, thereby encouraging audiences to come to their own realization of the need for fundamental change, the initial expressions of which start to become apparent in part three. The form of drawing-room comedy serves to accentuate the flaws of the characters and weaknesses of the social structure: people should be better and radical change is essential.

Part three – “The Thing Happens” – is set in 2170, around 250 years in the future, in the “official parlor of the President of the British Isles” (Shaw, “The Thing Happens” 146). “Short-living” – which actually refers to the typical human life span of the reader or spectator – is causing immense political problems: the English are too short-lived and immature to conduct political affairs competently, and international consultants are brought in from China and Africa to help. Although also short-lived, they are more mature and thus better at managing state affairs. It transpires that there are a few people who are long-lived and have a lifespan of 300 years: the Archbishop of York and the Domestic Minister, Mrs Lutestring, who are characters from part two (the Reverend Haslam and the parlor maid), the latter of which had been the only character genuinely interested in Barnabas’ theory of longevity, having closely read the book. That Shaw imbues the quiet, shy reverend and the working-

class parlor maid with long life is part of his critique of class society and normative hierarchies (see Jameson. “Longevity As Class Struggle” for a reading of the play as primarily about class struggle).

Part four – “Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman” – is set in Galway Bay in the year 3000, 830 years after part three. A visitor – a short-lived old man from the capital of Britain (now comically relocated in Baghdad) – returns to the islands of his ancestry but struggles to make sense of, and communicate with, the long-lived utopians, who now inhabit these islands. A further comical sub-plot consists of his traveling companions: The British prime minister, who is married to the old man’s daughter, and the Emperor of Turania who disguises himself and pretends to be Napoleon; they have come to consult the Oracle. At the end of the part the short-lived old visitor wishes to stay with the long-lived utopians, and although is warned about the life-threatening dangers of what the play calls “discouragement” (to which I return later), is granted permission to remain, but then immediately dies. In many ways, this part is resonant of the classic utopia in its employment of the convention of a visitor traveling to a utopian land, this encounter serving to produce the double effect of re-familiarizing the initially strange utopian ideas and simultaneously making strange – and increasingly undesirable – the familiar, non-utopian society of the spectator.

Part five – “As Far as Thought Can Reach” – is set in the year 31,920, 28,920 years after part four. The long-lived community is fully established and the short-lived community no longer exist. The focus of this part is on the birth of a new utopian – from an egg – who is born fully grown. The utopians are living hundreds and sometimes thousands of years now: They are potentially immortal, although a fatal accident is inevitable, the spectator is told. The utopians are also maturing much more quickly: Arriving from eggs fully grown, and wishing to relinquish childish play at four-years of age. The scene also includes two

sculptors, Arjillax and Martellus, who participate in debates on the acceptability of the Ancients (the *really old* utopians) as worthy subjects for sculpture. There is also a scientist, Pygmalion, who has created two artificial humans in a lab, who are vain and violent and serve to represent the non-utopian short-lived people of Shaw's own time. The Ancients destroy them, and the part concludes with Adam reappearing in a ghostly form, followed by Eve, Cain, and then Lilith, who calls upon the end of life's submission to matter – the play's ultimate utopian goal of a disembodied Life Force.

Written between 1918-20 and published in 1921, *Back to Methuselah* was first performed by the New York Theatre Guild at the Old Garrick Theatre in 1922, and then in Britain at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1923, this production transferring to the Court Theatre in London in 1924. As is evident from the above synopsis, it is a monumental play: one of the longest, epic in temporal reach, formally unusual, and titanic in ambition.⁷ Shaw responded to Barry Jackson's decision to produce the play at the Birmingham Rep by asking, "was he mad," Shaw's own passion for the play accompanied at the same time by recognition of its mammoth proportions, awkward singularity and lack of commercial viability. But after getting used to the idea of its staging, Shaw decided: "[t]he impossible had become possible. I handed over *Methuselah*" (Shaw qtd in Geduld 115). That the play itself is somehow an impossibility is peculiarly befitting of the shifting, other worldliness of the utopian vision it expresses.

Its awkward singularity is due partly to the play's blurring and bending of different forms, styles and genres and its diverse addressees. In a press release for his publishers Constable & Co., Shaw declared that *Back to Methuselah* – which he referred to as "his supreme exploit in dramatic literature" – would "interest biologists, religious leaders, and lovers of the marvellous in fiction as well as lovers of the theatre" (Shaw qtd in Holroyd 497). The play's comic form provided an appropriately flexible medium for a mix of

philosophical treatise; drawing room comedy, farce and satire; political comment; scientific compendium; and fantastic and religious mythologizing. Part two – as presented by the Birmingham Rep – is described by the theatre critic of the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* as “one of the funniest pieces that Mr. Shaw has ever written” (1924, 4). The utopian communication of *Back to Methuselah* is couched in and contextualized by a variety of different political and aesthetic registers, allowing spectators to consider utopian ideas in manageable portions. The farcical and satirical aspects serve to interpellate a particular mode of attention, a mode that encourages laughter and mockery as much as it does critical thinking and utopian desire.

Many theatre reviews expressed warm enthusiasm for Shaw’s “tremendous play” (Dukes 66).⁸ The *Aberdeen Press* states: “with its Nietzschean dream of super-humanity,” *Back to Methuselah* was one of “the finest developments of modern evolutionary thinking that have appeared in the study or on the stage” (3). The *Gloucester Journal* compares the play to Wagner’s Ring Cycle and says it reveals “all the dexterity of his brilliant intellect and caustic wit” (1).⁹ Yet the play’s temporal expansiveness, coverage of past and future human history, interweaving of different genres (or deployment of “mixed methods” as one critic put it (Bulloch 10), and bold ambition to radically rethink being human made *Back to Methuselah* difficult to grasp. While also comparing the play to Wagner, and describing it as “extraordinary drama” and “a wonderful intellectual feat,” the *Diss Express* additionally emphasizes “the mental endurance demanded” of the work (3).¹⁰ Its length and unwieldy structure meant it was also difficult to stage. Unlike the play’s premiere at the Theatre Guild in New York, which produced the cycle over a period of three weeks, the Birmingham Rep followed Shaw’s wishes and staged the play over four consecutive evenings with one matinée, of which Shaw approved, as it “preserved a sense of continuity” (Bishop 25). Shaw also suggested that the run went down much better than it had in New York, where audiences had, he thought, been sent into a stupor (Shaw qtd in Wherl, 84). But Lawrence Langner of

the Theatre Guild (who had produced the New York production) also saw the Birmingham Rep version and found the intensity of nightly performances “murderous” (175). An even more intense presentation took place at the Arts Theatre in 1947, where all five playlets were performed in one day. The event started at 2pm, this being “the only occasion that this has been done” (Mander and Mitchenson 190). At the Atlanta Theater production of the play in November 2000 directed by Michael Evenden, the performance was presented in two parts and the audience moved round various spaces for the five playlets (Hulbert 11). A recent production directed by Bill Largess at the Washington Stage Guild was multi-seasonal with Parts 1 and 2 presented in 2014, Parts 3 and 4 in 2015, and Part 5 in 2017, the performances presented along with readings of the other parts and panel discussions.

As these different formats show, the play is excessive, excessive in its temporal coverage of human history (both past and future), excessive in its duration as a piece to be read or watched at the theatre, and excessive in its use of different genres, styles and modes. Yet the excessive quality of the cycle is, I would say, part of its utopian otherness: its refusal of non-coincidence with familiar dramatic and utopian texts, modes, forms and spectatorial experiences. That said, while much is surprising and eccentric, there is enough in the play that is familiar from other utopian texts (in both prose and drama) to provide spectatorial anchoring: critique of economic structures and political governance; imagining a post-capitalist system; radical rethinking of traditional discourses (in this case the Bible); envisaging the implications of future technological advances; and challenging conventional ideas about gender and class, and human identity more broadly.

Of course, most profoundly, and unusually for a utopian text, *Back to Methuselah* takes up the aging question. The play casts the 300-year-old characters in part three “The Thing Happens” – the Archbishop and Mrs Lutestring – as vital, serious and authoritative. The stage directions indicate that the Archbishop “*does not look a day over fifty, and is very*

well preserved at that; but his boyishness of manner is quite gone: he now has complete authority and self-possession" (158). We are told that Mrs Lutestring is "*in the prime of life, with elegant, tense, well held-up figure, and the walk of a goddess. Her expression and deportment are grave, swift, decisive, awful, unanswerable*" (168). The 300-year-olds are represented as being in a state of extended middle age, this life phase marked as both dynamic and commanding, a combination of qualities the play considers essential for engaging with the complexities of the modern world. Part four sees a further development in longevity where a mixed age community of "primaries" who are in their first century, "secondaries" their second, and "tertiaries" their third (197) have developed a utopian society that no longer recognizes gender or class divisions, private property, marriage or the family. Much of this part consists of dialogue familiar from classic utopias where the visitor to utopia – in this case the elderly gentleman – converses with a range of primary, secondary and tertiary utopians about the advances of the new society, advances facilitated by the extraordinary capacities bestowed by longevity.

While these characters are important intermediaries in the transitional period in the development of longevity and the concomitant improvement to social relations and social structures, Shaw is most interested in the potential of extreme longevity, which is documented at the end of the cycle. The really long-lived utopians – the Ancients in the final part "As Far As Thought Can Reach" – have in Robert Brustein's words, a "deeper sense of reality" (201). Their cumulative acquirement of intellectual and spiritual engagement with the world works to perform the play's resignification of aging as potentially progressive – as deepening, as enriching – rather than a process of decline. In place of the idea that aging is "pure pathology" to use a phrase Betty Friedan ascribes to a dominant strain of thinking about aging (even within gerontology studies), Shaw's play reimagines aging as "a state of becoming and being, not merely as ending" (Friedan 36). The old person's value is no longer

determined by economic productivity but by the accrual of experience, knowledge, maturity, sensitivity and wisdom. For sociologist Ricca Edmondson, a key problem for older people is “struggling to assert a commitment to meaningful citizenship in the face of a banal official language that tends to delete its expression” (16). The utopian mode’s tendency to remove or deprioritize economic productivity in favor of other forms of signification, contribution and worth, means that it provides a fertile form for reconstructing the older person as one, who through what Edmondson refers to as the ancient notion of “cumulative value,” is able to press at the limits of human possibility (38). Shaw imbues his Ancients with a progressive aptitude for amassing intellectual, spiritual and emotional strengths. This offers an explicit counter-narrative to dominant accounts of decline. David Gutmann states: “[a]t best the aged are deemed barely capable of staving off disaster, but they are certainly not deemed capable of developing new capacities or of seeking out new challenges by their own choice [...]” (7). Through the advantage of longevity, the Ancients acquire an aggregation of superior qualities and an accrual of memories and different selves, producing a richly resourced utopian subject.

Shaw did not attempt to meet the theatrical challenges of presenting convincing spectacles of enhanced utopian subjectivity – as expressed through old age – on stage; he wrote: “I could not shew the life of the long livers, because, being a short liver, I could not conceive it” (qtd in Holroyd 508). In his review of the Court Theatre production, Ashley Dukes describes “[t]he figures of this immense work [as] often ordinary, sometimes trivial; but the idea grows and grows until it towers above them and above us with a dizzy magnificence” (66). The theatre critic for the *Nottingham Journal* thought that the “very modernist setting designed by Paul Shelving made an effective background for the simple costumes of the year thirty thousand and something [...]” (5). Heike Hartung notes the “problem of representing longevity” in the play, which she perceives as applying to “both the

narrative and performative modes, since the difference of extreme age is expressed primarily in the descriptive mode: extended temporal dimensions have to be explained to us, they are not easily enacted” (87). Shaw captures the Ancients’ utopian otherness instead by emphasizing the uncomprehending perspectives of the young characters, and short-lived spectators, who are interpellated by the play as not able to grasp or appreciate the superiority of the Ancients. The Ancients are only partially revealed, remaining strange and just out of sight or understanding. They have “forgotten how to speak” and appear to communicate through some form of telepathy; “[a]m I wanted. I feel called”, the He-Ancient asks (Shaw, “As Far As Thought Can Reach” 264; 284).¹¹

Utopian difference, or otherness, is expressed in the conceptual gap between the short- and long-lived, the former vulnerable, as mentioned earlier, to suffering what the play terms “discouragement” in the presence of the latter. An Ancient tells a youth in the final part: “Infant: one moment of ecstasy of life as we live it would strike you dead” (253). Frederic Jameson refers to “the terror of obliteration” that arises from the utopian encounter (“The Politics of Utopia” 38). Utopian subjectivation requires a fundamental reconstitution of the self, which in turn, for Jameson, is a form of death wish (the death of the non-utopian self). *Back to Methuselah* seems to bear this out: encountering utopian possibility makes the non-utopian present more difficult, even unliveable in the case of the short-lived “elderly gentleman” of part four, who, once having experienced the ways of the long-lived, now “cannot live among people to whom nothing is real” (Shaw, “Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman” 249). The insignificance – or lack of meaning – conventionally attributed to late life is relocated in the play to the earlier parts of the life course, and an accumulative profundity manifests in the very old. The *Nottingham Journal* observed that “the impressive performances of the ancients, were appreciated in reverent silence” (5). This reverence registers the gap between the bounded subject of the now and the enhanced state of a future

utopian subjectivity; or, it is analogous to psychologist, Rudolf Arnheim's mapping of the late styles of artists and thinkers on to the development of civilization. Of the early life phase, he says, "[i]t is a state of mind in which the outer world is not yet segregated from the self"; the middle phase includes the "gradual conquest of reality": the exploration of the environment in order to master and control it; the late phase, involves "a world view that transcends outer appearance in search of the underlying essentials" (151; 152). Arnheim's description of the late styles of artists and thinkers speaks to the distinctive qualities of Shaw's Ancients, whose quests are to discover unmediated truths.

Their capacity to have a "direct sense of life," as the She-Ancient describes it, is enabled by the Ancients' specific occupation of space, which they undertake freely and expansively ("As Far As Thought Can Reach" 294). This is in direct contrast to the progressive restrictions of space associated with dominant depictions of old age. In a discussion of the exclusionary implications of the professional mediation of old age (for example through care work, residential homes and other institutional forms), William F. May writes that "[t]he world at large shrinks to a single room and ultimately to a casket" and "the psychic life of the elderly also shrinks, with an increasing preoccupation with the body and its troubles" (46). In contrast, Shaw's old people wander through space without restriction. They appear to live nomadically, at one point walking "over the mountains" with friends, then – on discovering the potential power of self-improvement – walking over them alone, before concluding that the mountains "are only the world's cast skins and decaying teeth on which we live like microbes" (Shaw, "As Far As Thought Can Reach" 294). The Ancients are not confined to domestic spaces, physical buildings or company with each other, but instead sit or roam in the outdoors, often "*unconscious of [their] surroundings*" (250). Their free movement is paralleled by a psychic depth and plasticity, an intellectual agility stretching far beyond what the play considers to be the superficialities of youth.

The more profound engagement with the world that old age has the potential to facilitate, poses an explicit Shavian counter narrative to the hegemonic view of old age as decline and deterioration, and is also one that troubles the association of old age with anachrony: the idea that old age is non-synchronous with the contemporary. The older person is not *in* time, is out of date, and is in an important sense, *untimely*. Shaw uses this association to produce a distinctive vantage point for old age. Giorgio Agamben also makes a case for untimely figures as bearers of knowledge:

[...] those who are truly contemporary [...] those who truly belong to their time, are those who neither fully coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (40)

Shaw's Ancients are these untimely figures, figures non-coincident with the contemporary, but because of this non-contemporaneity, able to comprehend more deeply what it means to be human in the world. There are resonances of this idea too in the (auto)biographical articulations of Shaw himself as one both "ahead of his time and unfashionably behind it, sometimes simultaneously" (Switzky 142).

However, while radically fresh in its challenge to rethinking the value of old age, Shaw's energizing reappraisal of the capacities of the old is simultaneously undermined by what appears to be a subscription to normative ideas of the aging body – as a fundamental constraint, or even a fatal encumbrance. As Glenn Clifton writes: "Shaw uses both dialogue and stage directions to manipulate the appearances of the body so that it might function as a signifier of its own meagre role as an obstruction to the evolutionary will" (116). The utopian

Ancients, in the final act, long for the day when – through the process of Creative Evolution – they will be able to shed the body and exist as pure thought. The He-Ancient exclaims: “Look at me. This is my body, my blood, my brain; but it is not me. I am the eternal life, the perpetual resurrection” (Shaw, “As Far As Thought Can Reach” 294). A little later the She-Ancient opines: the “trouble of the ancients” is that “whilst we are tied to this tyrannous body we are subject to its death” (297). Cole points to a trans-historical “tension,” a fundamental conflict “between infinite ambitions, dreams, and desires on the one hand, and vulnerable, limited, decaying physical existence on the other – between self and body” (Introduction 5). The representation of physical decline as defective: as an attenuation of what it is to be human, precipitates, as Sally A. Gadow observes, a condition where “the self repudiates the body to escape being contaminated by its deterioration” (239). This informs the cultural invisibility of the aging body, where that body serves as an observable delimitation of the human subject. Shaw resolves this conflict by rejecting the body, but in the process, perpetuates official censure of the aging fleshly body.

Yet, it is worth noting, and appreciating, that in Shaw’s vision of aging, he does not attempt to mitigate bodily precarity. He could have animated his Ancients through bodily activity – created physically enhanced superhumans – which as Moody argues, is a common response to the “problem of late-life meaning in the modern world” (“The Meaning of Life” 22). The notion of “successful aging” (also called “vital” or “active aging”) first emerged as an idea in gerontology studies shortly after Shaw’s death – in the 1950s – and refers to “life satisfaction, longevity, freedom from disability, mastery and growth, active engagement with life, and independence” (Moody, “From Successful Aging to Conscious Aging” 59). How to measure these states is just one problem with this concept, but more fundamentally, this vision of aging validates some forms of life – forms expressed through the fit, healthy, active body (a body that simultaneously simulates a young abled body) – and undermines others,

particularly lives aligned with disabled, dependent bodies. While Shaw perpetuates a familiar rejection of the old frail body, he does not – unlike advocates of successful aging – replace the old, infirm body with a simulation of youth. Switzky describes Shaw’s Ancients as “old, genuinely sophisticated but lacking the spark of vigor – waiting, tepidly to be reabsorbed into the ‘vortex’ from which they originated” (142). Brustein makes comparisons with the supposedly unattractive qualities of Shaw himself: “[t]he bodiless character of Shaw’s Superman – not to mention Shaw’s own vegetarianism, teetotalism, and abstention from sexual intercourse after his marriage – indicates a kind of Swiftian disgust at the human body and its functions” (203). While Shaw perpetuates familiar Platonic and Christian notions of the body as an obstruction to the mind or soul, it is important to recognize that Shaw is no more interested in the youthful body than he is in the aging body, and in this sense is not culpable of repeating familiar ideas of the aged *contra* youthful body as abject. For Shaw, the body in all phases of the life course was “a bore,” as the sculptor, Martellus exclaims in *Back to Methuselah* (Shaw, “As Far As Thought Can Reach” 298).

Indeed, the body (in all life stages) was such a bore for Shaw that disembodiment figures as utopian yearning in his drama. This is despite the Ancients’ acquirement of the ability to transform their bodies through the use of creative will:

The She-Ancient: One day, when I was tired of learning to walk forward with some of my feet and backwards with others and sideways with the rest all at once, I sat on a rock with my four chins resting on four of my palms, and four of my elbows resting on four of my knees. And suddenly it came into my mind that this monstrous machinery of heads and limbs was no more me than my statues had been me, and that it was only an automaton that I had enslaved. (Shaw, “As Far As Thought Can Reach” 296)

The body – with its corporeal vulnerability and unruly desires – while a necessary conduit for human subjectivity was, for Shaw, simultaneously an impediment to the swift progression of the evolutionary Life Force. After returning to her conventional human bodily form, the She-Ancient still considers herself to be “a slave of this slave, my body” (297). For the Ancients, the body remains a bathetic encumbrance. It is in unproductive tension with the intellect, consciousness and the spirit, wherein the Life Force manifests.

Shaw’s Distinctive Contribution

Back to Methuselah is conspicuous during the early to mid-twentieth century for its boldly imaginative investment in human agency, so very different to other examples of utopian literature of the same moment, which are mostly expressed through dystopia. Shaw has generally been excluded from scholarly categorizations of modernism, largely due to what Switzky describes as Shaw’s “genuine singularity” (144). In addition to the specific peculiarities of his work identified above, the dominant theme of his utopian plays – enhanced human capacities enabled through greater longevity – is also one that does not fit with modernist preoccupations. These include challenge to tradition (with which “old” is discursively aligned), the idea that the self is continuously remade (rather than a developing aggregation), and the rejection of the belief that life has fundamental meaning. Life’s meaning used to be mediated by wisdom, itself a quality aligned with elders. In the modern/Enlightenment era and especially in the modernist twentieth century with its accelerating emphasis on youth and the obsolescence of anything old, the devaluing of wisdom, as Harry Moody observes, “deprives old age of any particular epistemological significance” (“The Meaning of Life” 32). For scholars of modernism, it seems Shaw is not modernist enough; for scholars of utopias, Shaw is not utopian in the right way.

It is also striking that Shaw's fantastical elements – such as living several hundred or thousands of years – are newly resonant in the contemporary moment. Longevity is sincerely assumed by the play to be scientific possibility and while this may have seemed fantastical to many in 1921 (particularly because the characters simply willed it), the attainment of a significantly longer life span is less farfetched in 2017. The subject of longevity is peculiarly resonant in the twenty-first century, where aging and longevity are among the most conspicuous of social changes of our age. Aging and death have remained perplexing issues for scientists. Georges Minois asks, '[h]ow is it that cells, which are potentially immortal, end by weakening and dying through non-generation?' (1). While Shaw got some of the science wrong, he correctly predicted the likelihood of significant leaps in age attainment. A recent *Guardian* article with the headline: "[a]geing process may be reversible, say scientists," which covers scientists' findings in recent experiments with gene therapy and mice, says: "[t]he scientists are not claiming that ageing can be eliminated, but say that in the foreseeable future treatments designed to slow the ticking of this internal clock could increase life expectancy" (Devlin). Shaw exploited the lack of scientific knowledge of the causes of aging and death, and combined scientific possibility with a supra-normal investment in the idea of Creative Evolution. In some ways, the play proposes a high-tech, futuristic vision of human being – as opposed to an impossible fantasy of magic and the supernatural. Even the more bizarre elements – such as humans being born from eggs – have been proposed in utopian science fiction, such as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Marge Piercy's, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) as plausible scientific possibility (fetuses are grown outside the womb in breeders). The prospect of humans reproducing via non-viviparous means is certainly within reach, as a *Guardian* article, which discusses the recent success of lambs being developed in artificial wombs, evidences (Prasad).

The extraordinary features of Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* – both dramatic and utopian – have been submerged, not permitted to shape the way we understand utopianism or early twentieth-century drama. Sincere engagement with this play as a utopia means pressing at the edges of utopian taxonomies. This genre blurring, eccentric, and ambitious play combines with an audacious idea of human capacity and social possibility not in tune with scholarly discussions of writing of the time. The aesthetic strategies of Shaw's work – the blending of styles, the deliberate dissonance of sincerity with satire, the mix of the earnest and ironic – provide an exhilarating provocation for the spectator. The individual is the site of interest in *Back to Methuselah* – and this is unusual in utopian literature – but as I have demonstrated, there is also a deeply focused and thoughtful attention to aging, the potential of the aging person, and the power and social possibilities of longevity more generally, which offer exciting and meaningful stimulations, and which reverberate newly in the twenty-first century. The play clearly proposes that the prospect of long-life helps humans to think more expansively and profoundly about how to develop and sustain better lives and it is deeply invested in the concept of the cumulative value of old age. Utopian literature has been at the forefront of providing radical new ways of thinking differently about identities, particularly classed, gendered, raced and sexual identities. Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* extends this to age, particularly to old age, and in the process, offers a rare utopian vision of the value of old age, and a radical denunciation of a deep-rooted normalization of gerontophobia.

NOTES

¹ Along with *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw wrote two other utopian plays: *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934) and *Farfetched Fables* (1949), the latter of which was the very last play he wrote before he died.

² The first act in Shaw's play, *Buoyant Billion* (1948) is called "The World Betterers".

³ Shaw's interest in eugenics seems to have been the cause of a squeamishness in critical and scholarly responses to his utopian plays. It is also apparent – as Peter Gahan observes – that there is a dominant view within Shaw Studies that Shaw's later plays (from 1920 onwards) were artistically inferior, and in particular, there has been frustration with a perceived lack of formal structuring and a move away from psychologically rounded character in Shaw's late work.

⁴ Christopher Innes says H. G. Wells' novel *Men Like Gods* represents a utopian world that is "almost a literal transcription of Shaw's world of A.D. 3000 in *Back to Methuselah*." Like *Back to Methuselah*, the characters in *Men Like Gods* live extended lives without disease and with selective breeding: "[h]owever, in deliberate contrast to Shaw's 'Creative Evolution,' the driving force of progress in *Men Like Gods* is an ideal of 'Creative Service': a communal dedication to social improvement in practical ways" (42).

⁵ Shaw's selection of Barnabas as the brothers' name gives "Creative Evolution [...] added symbolic weight [...] – the historical Barnabas having been a first century missionary and a companion of Saint Paul" (Innes 42).

⁶ Debenham K. Freebody's comment that the identities of Burge and Lubin were "glaringly apparent" is typical of reviews at the time (18).

⁷ G. W. Bishop states that *Back to Methuselah* is "possibly the longest play written outside China since the three parts of *Henry VI*" (230). The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* claimed *Back to Methuselah* to be the longest play in the English Language (1924, 3).

⁸ *Back to Methuselah* sold more copies in America than any of Shaw's other works. Max Beerbohm thought it was the "best book Shaw had written." Shaw sent copies to many friends and acquaintances, including Lenin, who wrote comments in the margins (some approving, some disapproving) (Holroyd 509).

⁹ Shaw had attended a performance of Wagner's *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1908 (Holroyd 359).

¹⁰ In the same review, the theatre critic states: "it is pre-eminently a production for intellectuals, for while Shaw, as a Socialist, may make challenging claims for the rights of the ordinary person, it cannot be said that he has done anything to add to his entertainment" (*Diss Express* 3).

¹¹ The movement beyond speech and text also appear in Sally Miller Gearheart's feminist utopian novel *The Wanderground* (1979) and Howard Brenton's utopian play *Greenland* (1988).

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