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G.B.S.: PAMPHLETEER OR PLAYWRIGHT?

"The Relationship of Shaw's Political Ideas to His Dramatic Art"

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## FOREWORD

My purpose in this paper is to answer within the limits of the paper the question, Was Shaw an artist or a propagandist? I propose to arrive at an answer by analyzing what happens to ideas in three of Shaw's plays. Taking his political ideas as a measuring stick, I have selected three plays, Back to Methuselah, Man and Superman, and Caesar and Cleopatra, which illustrate Shaw's treatment of ideas. I have selected these because they treat extensively political ideas and because they were written during the height of Shaw's career as a playwright. My chief interest has not been Shaw's political ideas; I have not attempted to explore the ideas in his plays, nor to set forth a political philosophy derived from the plays--I have been interested in what happens to these ideas in the plays, and their relationship to the dramatic form. I have not attempted to trace the development of a dramatic style or technique, nor to explain in terms of Shaw's career why in one play he subordinates idea to art, and in another art to idea. In Back to Methuselah written in 1921 after Shaw's position as a playwright had been established, he reverts in dramatic style to the style of his earlier political writings. Perhaps Shaw felt that his position was so secure that he could afford to do this. There is no consistent, discernible development, however.

In order to give the reader some background in Shaw's political thought as stated in his serious political writings, I have included a section in which I outline Shaw's theory of government. I have also briefly discussed the style of his political writings to show its similarity to his dramatic style.

## SHAW'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Shaw was a Fabian Socialist. His political philosophy is shaped by the belief that every individual should be allowed to develop to his highest capacities.<sup>1</sup> The function of government, therefore, should be to insure that equal opportunity for this development is provided for every individual. At present, there is no equality; the existing economic system makes it impossible. Capitalism with its unequal distribution of income enables the few rich to prosper, while the majority of the people must live in poverty. Poverty is regarded by Shaw as a great crime of civilization. Whereas the poor have no time for the cultivation of cultural and intellectual interests, the system of unequal distribution fosters the growth of the idle rich class who become corrupt and irresponsible. To eliminate these evils in society and to increase the leisure time of the poor and the work requirements of the rich, Shaw proposes economic reform to be carried out by a newly organized and competent parliament. Ultimately Parliament must transfer the rent of the country into a national treasury and place all sources of production in the hands of the state.<sup>2</sup> This reform must be achieved gradually, not by revolution, but by grafting its principles upon a system of government. Accompanying this economic reform, there should be also a gradual parliamentary reform in which

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<sup>1</sup> Augustin Hamon, Twentieth Century Moliere: George Bernard Shaw, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> George Bernard Shaw, "Transition," Fabian Essays in Socialism, p. 179.

the existing government is replaced by a new bicameral system composed of a Political and a Social Parliament. As to the structure of the government Shaw advocates the building of a vast hierarchical state, the blueprint for which is set forth in "In Praise of Guy Fawkes":

You can conceive the new state getting a basic representative Congress to keep it in touch with its subjects. This Congress would have sufficient local knowledge to elect the local chiefs of industry throughout the country. These local chiefs can elect national chiefs. These national chiefs--you may call them if you like a Cabinet--in their turn have to elect the national thinkers, for a nation needs two cabinets; an administrative Cabinet and a thinking Cabinet.<sup>3</sup>

Shaw holds that until there are some thinkers in the government as well as politicians and administrators, the government cannot possibly act with the ultimate good of mankind in view. The ideal statesman for Shaw is the artist-statesman, whose mind is as great as his position.

To insure competence in leaders, Shaw suggests that legislators and administrators be tested and their capabilities ascertained before they can become candidates for office. They will be empanelled in their various degrees, thus making government in this respect like another profession, with the empanelled legislator or administrator comparable to the registered doctor or the ordained clergyman. These leaders will be chosen by panels of persons who have passed tests of their "wisdom, comprehension, knowledge, and energy."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Eric Bentley in George Bernard Shaw: A Reconsideration, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> George Bernard Shaw, Everybody's Political What's What, p. 352.

The common people will have an opportunity to ventilate their grievances through a representative popular parliament. This parliament will have no power to legislate, but will serve, in general, to keep the government in touch with the people. It will question and criticize ministers and cabinets, suggest remedies and new methods, and move resolutions and votes of confidence.<sup>5</sup>

Shaw advocates the abolition of the party system. In party politics, the question is never the merit of a bill, but whether the present party is to remain in office. Shaw recommends that parliament should consist of members elected for a fixed term. Instead of parties, there should be standing committees which would discuss and consider all questions appropriate to their department and report their conclusions to the whole body. The parliament would then amend, discuss, and send back proposals to the committee for further consideration if they wish. Since there would be no personal gains in the vote, measures would be voted upon for their merits.<sup>6</sup>

Shaw's political reforms must be accompanied by a moral reform of the entire population. Unless there is moral reform, the problem of power exists; armaments and powers of destruction are entrusted to men whose chief concern is power, not the advancement of mankind. A socialist revolution is not enough to achieve social justice. This cannot be achieved until the entire population is moral enough to refrain from abusing the majority power. Man as he has been

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 353.

corrupted by society and "the machinery of living" is incapable of this reform. The only hope lies in the evolution of the Superman. Man's task, then, is to will the evolution of the Superman. Real democracy will be achieved only when the nation is a nation of Supermen who understand politics and accept responsibility for them.<sup>7</sup>

While Shaw's political and economic reform is in one respect a gradual socialist revolution, it is not a revolution in the usual socialist sense. Shaw does not believe in the revolution of the proletariat. The real struggle for Shaw, and the Fabians, was not against the capitalists but, as stated in the Fabian Creed, against the "stupidity, narrowness, the idiocy, (to give the word its precise and original sense) of the class which actually suffers most from the existing system."<sup>8</sup>

In the realm of international politics, Shaw's political philosophy is based upon his concern for mankind. The necessity for controlling war is becoming greater with scientific advances; and at the same time, war is becoming so mechanized that the power of the human conscience to keep its abuses in check is being reduced.<sup>9</sup> Civilization is being wrecked by war. "Since it cannot be abolished, it must be supranationally controlled and converted into a police force for the frustration of attempts to make it a means of gratifying imperial and other anti-social instincts, national or personal." Shaw believed that man's restless courage must be channelled into

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<sup>7</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by James Fuchs in Socialism of Shaw, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, Everybody's Political What's What, p. 127.



some constructive activity such as research, science, business, or politics, rather than wasted in homicide and destruction.<sup>10</sup>

This outline of his political thought notwithstanding, Shaw's writings do not offer a comprehensive system of political philosophy. They deal with the areas of political thought that have been neglected by other social and economic writers; they challenge the assumptions of the socialist system and point out needs for revision in the present system. Shaw's principal political writings are the Fabian essays, The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism (1928), and Everybody's Political What's What (1944). The titles of some of the Fabian essays reveal the general area of treatment in Shaw's political writings: "The Impossibilities of Anarchism," "The Illusions of Socialism," "Socialism for Millionaires," "Socialism for Superior Brains." In his early years with the Fabian Society, Shaw dealt with some of the more general principles of socialism in such essays as "Transition" and "The Basis of Socialism: Economic." The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism is a discussion of the practical applications of socialism addressed to the "intelligent woman." In his last political work, Everybody's Political What's What, Shaw states his purpose as "an attempt to track down some of the mistakes that have landed us in a gross misdistribution of domestic income and in two world wars in twenty-five years."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

The titles of Shaw's writing are clues to the style in which they are written. Shaw's early essays are written in a very serious, formal style which one would not recognize as Shavian. About 1900 there is a change in the style. His books and essays from then on are written in an informal "tongue-in-cheek" style, spiced with witty overstatement and Shavian humor. Shaw believed that anything must be overstated if it is to receive attention.<sup>12</sup> In these writings, it is evident that style is only the means to a didactic end. Shaw will be funny, will risk being called a fool, to get across a point. He sometimes becomes over-involved in rhetoric, so intent he seems upon making his point clear. While the style is very informal, Shaw writes, in the main, very concretely, at times illustrating his points with imaginary characters. His chapter on "The British Party System" in Everybody's Political What's What is given in the form of a "little historical drama" which occurs in one of the homes of the politicians. Since this change in the style of Shaw's prose writings occurred at the same time that he began to write plays, one might speculate that the style of his essays was affected by the style of his plays. His plays, addressed to a larger audience, had to be witty and humorous; and perhaps he thought that his essays, with a little Shavian humor, would have a wider appeal.

In spite of continued political writing up to 1944, the principal medium for Shaw's expression of his political philosophy and social criticism was the theater. Let us turn to an analysis of

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<sup>12</sup> Edmund Fuller, George Bernard Shaw, p. 9.

three of Shaw's dramatic works in an effort to determine whether Shaw's dramatic style, like the style of his political writings, was a means to a didactic end.

The playwright, for instance, is not only a "chastener of morals by ridicule" and a "purger of the soul through pity and terror" (these are the time-honored classical definitions) but a biologist, philosopher, and prophet as well.

-----Everybody's Political What's What-----

Metabolism is Shaw's most completely political play. Written in 1921, it is regarded by many Shawian critics as a summation of Shaw's religious ideas and a resolution of some of the contradictions in his religious thinking. The closing line of the play--"It is enough to know that there is a beyond"--has been called by Edmund Fuller Shaw's final qualitative philosophical statement.<sup>13</sup>

The lengthy play is actually a volume containing five plays, the central theme of longevity and creative evolution is the only link among the five parts. (When Shaw submitted the play to the Lord Chamberlain for its license as a play, he was charged the customary fee for the reading of five plays.)<sup>14</sup> While Shaw calls the volume a "Metabiological Pentateuch," there are two plays in which political ideas emerge concretely and dominate the action, or more accurately, the discussion of the play. Political views are discussed

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Marder and Joe Hutchinson, Theatrical Companion to Shaw, p. 130.

## SHAW THE PHILOSOPHER

Back to Methuselah

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, Theatrical Companion to Shaw, p. 190.

in "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas" and "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman."

These plays are appropriately included in the volume since Shaw's political thinking is so closely related to his religious and ethical thought. Shaw's political philosophy is based on the socialist ethic that society must be changed in order to change man. Shaw sees too that man must be changed before he will change society.<sup>15</sup> The change which he advocates then in Back to Methuselah is the lengthening of the life span to three hundred years. Knowing that he will live to experience the results of his mistakes, man will take life more seriously and will more carefully plan his life. This extension of life is to be achieved through thought, through a will to live longer. Life is too short, and the mind of man too small to attain the wisdom and knowledge needed for governing. The true destiny of the long-livers is to supersede the present generations.

In Back to Methuselah, then, as in other plays, Shaw is in "politics a theocrat."<sup>16</sup> "Back to Methuselah" is the election cry of the socialists Franklyn and Conrad Barnabas in the play. Their hope is that a statesman with three hundred years to live will care more for mankind than for politics, and will be careful in his use of armaments and powers of destruction.

Shaw's purpose in Back to Methuselah is to point out man's political inadequacy and to suggest a means (impractical as it may be) for making man capable of dealing with the problems of his

<sup>15</sup> Eric Bentley, George Bernard Shaw: A Reconsideration, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

civilization. Shaw calls the play drama, and intends for it to carry its political message to the world. We would question Shaw. Is the play really drama? Does it carry its message to the world? And is it successful as a philosophy?

Is the play really drama? Shaw has prefaced his play with a lengthy discussion of Darwinism in its political, religious, and social aspects. Many of the prefatory ideas are found unchanged in the play. By the rules of drama, a dramatic statement of these ideas should differ from a prose statement. Is there a difference in Back to Methuselah? To find the answer, let us, as Shaw suggests, clear from our consciousness everything we have read about him from critics,<sup>17</sup> and turn to a somewhat scientific (although Shaw would scorn the word) analysis of the relationship of the ideas in the preface to those in the play.

Here is Shaw's prefatory attack on the existing system of political education and its result:

Our schools teach the morality of feudalism corrupted by commercialism, and hold up the military conqueror, the robber baron, and the profiteer, as models of the illustrious and the successful.<sup>18</sup>

The public schoolboy...is taught to honor parasitic idleness and luxury, learns to shoot and ride and keep fit with all the assistance and guidance that can be procured for him by the most anxiously sincere desire that he may do these things well, and if possible superlatively well. In the army he learns to fly; to drop bombs; to use machine-guns to the utmost of his capacity. The discovery of high explosives is rewarded and dignified: instruction in the manufacture of the weapons, battleships, submarines, and land batteries by which they are applied destructively,

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

<sup>18</sup> George Bernard Shaw, "Back to Methuselah," Selected Plays, II, p. xiii. All references to Shaw's plays are to this collection.

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<sup>18</sup> George Bernard Shaw, "Back to Methuselah," Selected Plays, II, p. xiii. All references to Shaw's plays are to this collection.

is quite genuine: the instructors know their business, and really mean the learners to succeed. The result is that powers of destruction that could hardly without uneasiness be entrusted to infinite wisdom and infinite benevolence are placed in the hands of romantic schoolboy patriots who, however generous by nature, are by education ignoramuses, dupes, snobs, and sportsmen to whom fighting is a religion and killing an accomplishment; whilst political power....is obtained by heredity, simple purchase, keeping newspapers and pretending that they are organs of public opinion, by the wiles of seductive women, and by prostituting ambitious talent to the service of profiteers.<sup>19</sup>

The ruled and the rulers have been educated quite adequately not in political science, but in slaying.

Schools in nineteenth-century Britain taught self-reliance, ruggedness, and qualities admirable in the youth of a country with imperialist and commercial aims. Education was for the "gentleman" and was conceived as "fitting the rulers of the nation to take their places in the state, church and world."<sup>20</sup> Shaw is repudiating this educational philosophy and pointing out the disastrous results.

The expression of the same idea in the play is little more powerful dramatically than this prose expression. In the play, it occurs in a conversation between Lubin, a practical politician and leader of the Liberal party, and Franklyn and Conrad Barnabas, biologists and socialist advocates of the "Back to Methuselah" election cry. Lubin admits that his economics and science are a "little rusty," that it does not matter to him whether he uses "obsolete rot, or unmitigated tosh" in dealing with the "troublesome, half-educated people," and that he does not hesitate to "force

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>20</sup> R. Freeman Butts, A Cultural History of Education, p. 422.



elections." With Lubin's political education in the background, Shaw's personal ideas emerge in Franklyn's statement. Attempting to show the relationship of the "Back to Methuselah" cry and politics, he illustrates the effects of dangerous education in leaders like Lubin and Burge:

Franklyn. The connection is very evident. You are now, Mr. Lubin, within reach of your seventieth year. Mr. Joyce Burge is your junior by about eleven years. You will go down to posterity as one of a European group of immature statesmen and monarchs who, doing the very best for your respective countries of which you were capable, succeeded in all-but-wrecking the civilization of Europe, and did, in effect, wipe out of existence many millions of its inhabitants.<sup>21</sup>

This passage is not actually necessary to the dramatic action of the play. Up to this point, Lubin has been soliciting the support of Franklyn for the Liberal party. Now Franklyn announces that he has a program of his own, but he is sure that Lubin and Burge will not understand. Excited at the possibility of adapting Franklyn's new program to their own party platform, thus preventing a party split, they open their political ears, only to find no apparent connection between "Back to Methuselah" and politics. The intervening speech about war, then, is not really necessary to explain this connection. It is introduced arbitrarily to relate the ideas of the play to the characters which are no more than pegs or ninepins. Shaw then returns to the original idea. If the passage were omitted, nothing would be lost and the sequence would be fully logical:

Lubin. ... May I ask what this (Back to Methuselah election cry) has to do with politics?

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<sup>21</sup> "Back to Methuselah," Plays, II, p. 68.

Conrad. It is certain that the political and social problems raised by our civilization cannot be solved by mere human mushrooms who decay and die when they are just beginning to have a glimmer of the wisdom and knowledge needed for their own government.<sup>22</sup>

The only difference, then, in the prose treatment and the dramatic treatment of this idea is that in the preface, Shaw is speaking directly, and in the play he has put the ideas into the mouths of Franklyn and Lubin. In the play, the idea is a little more real, since we can see its actual exponent and the object of criticism before us. Franklyn is the attacker; Lubin and Burge, the practical politicians being attacked. The idea, however, is merely a part of the dialogue, and no more dramatic than the statement in the preface. Similarly, the statement in the preface that "At the present moment one-half of Europe, having knocked the other half down, is trying to kick it to death,"<sup>23</sup> is echoed in Conrad's "Well, I shall clear out. It was hard enough to stand the party politicians before the war, but now that they have managed to half-kill Europe between them, I can't be civil to them and I don't see why I should be."<sup>24</sup>

In Back to Methuselah, then, Shaw has done a little more than simply restate his preface. In the play, for instance, the ideas about war are treated more extensively than in the preface. He demonstrates the military leader as organizer of this slaying called war, in Napoleon, whom he introduces in "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman." Napoleon, has tried other professions and failed; now he has

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

turned to the only thing he can do: exercise force and organize war. He calls it a game, one which he must go on playing because if he stops, "he will lose power and become a beggar in a land where he now makes them drunk with glory."

In Napoleon, Shaw approaches the dramatic treatment of an idea. The inner conflict between giving up power, glory, and a position of destruction to become a common man, yet a virtuous one, is very sharp. Napoleon approaches the oracle, who can give advice on all matters, to seek a resolution of this conflict. Her solution is too simple: "to kill you before the tide of glory turns." She shoots, but misses. Shaw has indicated that the conflict is not so easily resolved, but even here, he has not realized successfully the potential dramatic force of the situation. In its effect upon Napoleon, the oracle's message neither resolves nor heightens the inner conflict.

The character of the practical politician, though not treated dramatically, is more clearly illustrated in the play than in the preface. The devious methods of obtaining political office are mentioned briefly in the preface, but are more convincing and real when demonstrated in the confessions of the two scheming politicians, Burge and Lubin. To hear them condemn the Tories for not "representing the people" when they are guilty of the same vice is to some degree a dramatic experience. Even with his rhetorical skill Shaw could not present certain ideas as successfully in a preface as in the play. For example, Franklyn contends that Burge and his government have operated without principle: when war came, Burge had gone behind

the backs of his followers and made a secret agreement with the Opposition to keep him in power, on the condition that he would drop all legislation of which they did not approve:

- Burge. I solemnly declare that this is a false and monstrous accusation.
- Franklyn. Do you deny that the thing occurred?
- Burge. Certainly not. But I did not do it. I was prime minister then. It was that old Dotard, that played-out old humbug, Lubin.
- Franklyn. Do you men to say that you did not know.
- Burge. Oh I had to be told. But what could I do? If we refused we might have had to go out of office.
- Franklyn. Precisely.
- Burge. Could we desert the country at such a crisis? The Hun was at the gate. Everyone has to make sacrifices for the sake of the country at such moments. We had to rise above party; and I am proud to say we never gave party a second thought. We stuck to....
- Conrad. Office?<sup>25</sup>

The character of the politician is demonstrated in other instances. While Burge accepts the "Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas" and their election cry, he is thinking of it only in terms of what it will mean toward getting votes. Burge and Lubin think that the elixir to extend life for three hundred years is something tangible like lemons and sour milk. The British Envoy in "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman" is concerned about the dangers of losing his position as prime minister when he approaches the Oracle. He does not ask, "How can we best serve the people?" but "What question can we start which will excite the public and thus defeat our Opposition in the by-elections?" The Oracle answers, "Go home, poor fool."<sup>26</sup> Political oratory is rather dramatically illustrated in the following speech

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

of the British Envoy, as he is approaching the Oracle:

What I want to ask is this. (He refers to the paper). Ahem! Civilization has reached a crisis. We are at the parting of the ways. We stand on the brink of the Rubicon. Shall we take the plunge? Already a leaf has been torn out of the book of the Sybil. Shall we wait until the whole volume is consumed? On our right is the crater of the volcano: on our left the precipice. One false step, and we go down to annihilation dragging the whole human race with us. (He pauses for breath).<sup>27</sup>

Despite such dramatic elements, Back to Methuselah is not true drama, not even by Shaw's own definition. "The material of the dramatist is always some conflict of human feeling with circumstances; so that since institutions are circumstances, every social question furnishes material for the drama," he wrote in a London periodical in 1895.<sup>28</sup> Back to Methuselah fails as drama because there is no conflict of feeling. And there is no conflict of feeling because the characters are not human. In giving his characters a set of ideas, Shaw has made them too consistent to be true. They are identified as individuals only in so far as they represent points of view. Franklyn and Conrad are the socialist exponents of some kind of purification of politics; Burge and Lubin are the practical, scheming politicians; Haslam, the typical minister. Thus they are even consistent in their mannerisms: Burge is consistently loud-spoken; Franklyn very calm; Lubin self-righteous. But a character is more than an idea and a mannerism. In consistency, they are similar to Jonson's humor characters. Jonson's characters are consistent in some human passion; Shaw's characters are consistent in ideas.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>28</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 94.

The characters are almost allegorical: Franklyn representing honesty in politics; Lubin, personal glory; Burge, party glory. In "The Thing Happens," the negress and Confucius represent different races. In "As Far as Thought Can Reach," the He-Ancient represents Vitalism; Pygmalion, scientific values. Ideas, rather than people speak. They are more universal, less limited in their applicability. In one passage, Conrad and Franklyn are explaining the "Back to Methuselah" program to Lubin and Burge. Speaking as a practical politician, Lubin is not so sure that he endorses it:

- Conrad. We are not practical politicians. We are out to get something done. Practical politicians are people who have mastered the art of using parliament to prevent anything being done.
- Franklyn. When we get matured statesmen and citizens . . .
- Lubin. Citizens! Oh! Are the citizens to live three hundred years as well as the statesmen?
- Conrad. Of course.
- Lubin. . . . .
- Lubin. . . . You see, we must put this into a practical parliamentary shape.
- Burge. We shall have to draft a Bill: that is the long and the short of it. Until you have your Bill drafted you don't know what you are really doing; that is my experience.<sup>29</sup>

In the above passage, Burge, who is accepting the "Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas" for political purposes, might well be called Bunyan's Mr. Facing-Both-Ways which Shaw mentions in "The Revolutionist's Handbook."

The passage also brings to mind other allegorical characters of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress--Talkative, Mr. By-Ends, Mr. Worldly-

<sup>29</sup> "Back to Methuselah," Plays, II, p. 82.

Wiseman, and Mr. Hate-Good.<sup>30</sup> The conversation among the politicians is similar to the conversations of Christian and his friends and foes along the trail to the Celestial City. Bunyan's characters are a little more successful dramatically than Shaw's because they represent traits and qualities common to all human beings.

The characters, with the exception of Napoleon, are so simple that we cannot see them as people with feelings and conflicts. Shaw shows us only one level, the political interests of these people. If one has read the preface, he can predict what each character is going to say. One cannot say, "how each character is going to act," for Shaw's characters do not act; they simply talk, and the talk does not advance the action of the play.

The characters consistently talk Shavian ideas. For this Shaw has written his own criticism in the Epistle Dedicatory of Man and Superman:

Not that I disclaim the fullest responsibility for his opinions (Don Juan's) and for those of all my characters, pleasant and unpleasant. They are all right from their several points of view; and their points of view are for the dramatic moment, mine also. They may puzzle the people who believe that there is such a thing as an absolutely right point of view, usually their own. It may seem to them that nobody who doubts this can be in a state of grace. However that may be, it is certainly true that nobody who agrees with them can possibly be a dramatist, or indeed anything else that turns upon a knowledge of mankind.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bunyan probably had a direct influence upon Shaw. The Pilgrim's Progress was one of the trio of books in which Shaw was "steeped" as a child. Shaw, Everybody's Political What's What, p. 180.

<sup>31</sup> "Man and Superman," Plays, III, p. 505.

In Back to Methuselah Shaw has violated his own law. While certain characters represent ideas which Shaw wishes to deflate, other characters represent Shaw's own ideas. In the case of Franklyn and Conrad, the above statement is reversed to read: "My points of view are theirs also." The close relationship of the preface to the play has proved this.

When Shaw wants to introduce a new idea, or illustrate a point, he introduces a new character. The characters enter at such timely moments that Shaw's scheme becomes obvious. In "The Gospel of the Brother's Barnabas," for example, Burge is contrasting himself with his partner Lubin: "I can hustle: even if you admit that. But Lubin! Oh my stars, Lubin!!! If you only knew...." and at this moment, to speak for himself, Lubin enters for the first time. This sudden appearance on stage of a character who is being discussed is a device from English comedy which Shaw has used for his own purposes. While the device is traditionally used to play one individual against the other, Shaw has used it to play one politician against the other. Other comic devices adapted by Shaw will be demonstrated in Man and Superman.

The one exception to the general inhumanness of the characters is Savvy, the young enthusiast of "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas." Even she is not complex. Shaw describes her as a "simple-lifer," and has made her human by paying attention to details of her appearance and her personal mannerisms. She "switches at her Gozzoli fringe with her fingers, but gives it up as hopeless." She is sunburnt, independent, and very clever in a feminine way. When Lubin,



who is holding her hands against her will, turns to look at Burge, she quickly slips away to the settee.

In general, the characters are so inhuman that they evoke no emotion in the spectator or reader. In the final scene, Franklyn and Conrad return looking "weary and glum" because the gospel of the brothers Barnabas has been received as an immediate political expedient, not as an ideal for the ultimate good of mankind. There is no feeling for these two exponents of the ideal. If the reader has somehow become attached to the idea, then he may be sorry to see it meet such reception; but he can certainly have no feeling for Conrad and Franklyn, whose only human quality is their ability to possess ideas.

The explanation for this absence of feeling lies in Shaw's failure to place his characters in human situations where human qualities will emerge. While Back to Methuselah has a central theme, it is more like a panel discussion than a play. In one play, it is a panel on politics; in another a discussion of aesthetics; in another, a discussion of free will and determinism. In some sections, it might be called a debate, with Shaw's spokesman triumphing. This kind of discussion is found in other Shavian plays. It is particularly noticeable in Getting Married, an early play, and The Apple Cart, a later play. In these plays the discussions are for their inherent interest and are not dependent upon situation and character.

Dramatically inadequate and burdened with ideas, the play contains some Shavian touches of humor. In the following passage from "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman are discussing colonization:

Zozim. Oh, nothing, nothing, nothing. We are thinking of trying North America: that's all. You see the Red Men of that country used to be white. They passed through a period of sallow complexions, followed by a period of no complexions at all, into the red characteristic of their climate. Besides, several cases of long life have occurred in North America. They joined us here; and their stock soon reverted to the original white of these islands.

Elderly Gentleman. But have you considered the possibility of your colony turning red?

Zozim. That won't matter. We are not particular about our pigmentation. The old books mention red-faced Englishmen: they appear to have been common objects at one time.<sup>32</sup>

The wit is often of a somewhat inferior quality. Lubin is the wittiest of the characters, yet here is an example of his wit.

Lubin. ...the peace found out your weaknesses.

Burge. Oh! what did it find out in you?

Lubin. You and your newspaper confederates took the peace out of my hands. The peace did not find me out because it did not find me in.<sup>33</sup>

The satire on British government which Shaw attempts in "The Thing Happens" is not completely successful. The Chinese under the rule of Confucius have taken over the government of Britain. They govern successfully using political tactics directly opposed to those the British say they have used. Actually the measures are exactly the same as those of the British. Shaw points out the loop-holes in the so-called British liberties--the habeas-corpus act, trial by jury, and parliamentary government. The section is too long, however, and what might have been a successful satire is marred by a rather unpleasant attack on British race attitudes. The relationship of

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<sup>32</sup> "Back to Methuselah," Plays, II, p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

Burge-Lubin to the Negress and the condemnation of Americans approach the vulgar. Here, again, Shaw is trying too hard to get across his idea and to get across too many ideas at once. Through Confucius, he is simply reiterating some of the defects in the existing form of government: that people in the government have no time to think, that the British people are incapable of government, that they are not concerned about learning the laws of economics and political science.

Thus Back to Methuselah fails as a drama. Shaw has been so intent upon conveying his ideas in a pure form that he has failed to make them compatible with human complexity and feeling. Shaw would not be unhappy that we deny its literary greatness, if we would ascribe to it social utility. To have done "a work in the world is enough for the highest genius,"<sup>34</sup> he writes in a London periodical. It is doubtful, however, that the play carries its message to the world; it is doubtful that any person would leave the theater ready to reform the world. Had Shaw not tried so hard to get across so many ideas, perhaps he would have had a drama; and had he been able to incorporate his ideas into a drama, he would have come nearer giving his message to the world. In this play Shaw has sacrificed drama to ideas. In other plays, however, Shaw sacrifices ideas to drama. He even vitiates his ideas by using them as comic devices. Man and Superman illustrates this relationship of ideas to dramatic art.

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<sup>34</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 95

## SHAW THE COMIC ARTIST

Man and Superman

No doubt, I must recognize as even the Ancient Mariner did, that I must tell my story entertainingly if I am to hold the wedding guest spellbound in spite of the siren sounds of the loud bassoon.

\_\_\_\_\_ "Epistle Dedicatory," Man and Superman

Man and Superman, like Back to Methuselah, is a play of ideas. Shaw calls it "A Comedy and a Philosophy," and the comedy and the philosophy exist separately. Acts I, II, and IV constitute a comedy; Act III is an act of pure ideas. Shaw is in this play, which could more accurately be called a work consisting of two plays, the comic artist and the philosopher. He is not, however, what he calls himself, the artist-philosopher. He is artist in Acts I, II, and IV, and philosopher in Act III.

This injection of an extraneous act of ideas into a comedy is a trick which Shaw used to hold his listeners. Shaw would go to any extreme to get and hold his listeners. Like all good orators, he knew the art of anecdotal beginning. (Shaw had a great deal of experience as a public speaker with debating societies in his early years.)<sup>35</sup> In achieving his anecdotal beginning in Man and Superman, however, he has actually used his ideas as comic devices, sacrificing them to dramatic form. Let us look at what happens to the ideas in the comedy, and to these ideas in the philosophy.

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<sup>35</sup> Archibald Henderson, European Dramatists, pp. 331-333.

As in Back to Methuselah, Shaw is propounding the necessity of a higher form of man to replace the present generations and is pointing out man's inadequacy for solving the social and political problems produced by society. This higher form, the Superman, further demonstrates the close relationship between Shaw's religious and political thinking. Everyman must be a Superman before real democracy can be achieved.<sup>36</sup> Man's nature must be changed before any real progress can be made in society, and man must will his own improvement. To bring into existence this higher form of man, the Superman, man must conceive some form better than himself, and dedicate himself to the purpose of bringing it into existence.

In Man and Superman, the comedy, the mother woman is seeking a father for the Superman. As Bentley suggests, however, the "world-shattering theme" announced in the Epistle Dedicatory "becomes mere biological comedy in the play."<sup>37</sup> Woman chases man becomes the theme.

This is not to say that ideas are not present in the comedy, Acts I, II, and IV. The ideas are there, but Shaw, the comic artist, has so dramatized them that they lose their vitality as ideas and become vital only as comic elements. In other instances, ideas are subordinated to character and dramatic situation, and the conflicts arising from character and the situations in which these ideas occur. The opening episode illustrates what Shaw, the comic artist, does with ideas in Man and Superman.

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<sup>36</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

Roebuck Ramsden and John Tanner have been appointed guardians for Ann Whitefield. Roebuck Ramsden classes himself as an "advanced thinker and a fearlessly out-spoken reformer." He is a Unitarian, Free Trader and an evolutionist; he stands for equality and liberty of conscience, but draws the line at "anarchism and free love." John Tanner, on the other hand, is a more advanced thinker, who criticizes Ramsden for his obsolete ideas. He is a true libertine; he believes in evolution and the Superman. Marriage and property are for him institutions which hamper the evolution of the Superman. Thus Ramsden represents one set of ideas, and Tanner another. Here is a conflict of ideas which could be no more dramatic than the differing views of Franklyn and Burge in Back to Methuselah. The conflicting ideas here, however, occur in a dramatic situation: these two men are to be joint-guardians for Ann, a charming young woman who has recently inherited the large estate of her father. In this context, then, the following scene is effective not as conflict of ideas, but as dramatic comedy:

Tanner and Ramsden are awaiting the arrival of Ann. Tanner has just given some advice to Octavius, who is in love with Ann. "Do not marry for a lifetime of happiness; no man could bear it; it would be hell on earth."

Ramsden. Stuff, sir. Talk sense; or else go and waste someone else's time: I have something better to do than listen to your fooleries.

Tanner. You hear him, Tavy! Not an idea in his head later than eighteensixty. We can't leave Ann with no other guardian to turn to.

Ramsden. I am proud of your contempt for my character and opinions, sir. Your own are set forth in that book, I believe.

Tanner. What! You've got my book! What do you think of it?

Ramsden. Do you suppose I would read such a book, sir?  
 Tanner. Then, why did you buy it?  
 Ramsden. I did not buy it sir. It has been sent to me by some foolish lady who seems to admire your views. I was about to dispose of it when Octavius interrupted me. (He throws the book into the wastepaper basket with such vehemence that Tanner recoils under the impression that it is being thrown at his head.)<sup>38</sup>

While Ramsden and Tanner are incompatible in their political thinking, the chief issue between them is Ann's welfare. But their views on Ann's welfare are dictated by their political differences. Shaw has subordinated ideas to the dramatic, comic situation.

At times, in Man and Superman, Shaw actually undercuts his ideas for the sake of comedy. In the following scene, Shaw's ideas do not triumph, but are made to look foolish. Violet Ramsden is pregnant. Her family thinks she is unmarried and therefore condemn her for breaking a moral law. Tanner is in sympathy with Violet and jumps to her defense.

Violet. They don't know that I am in the right, I mean.  
 Tanner. Oh, they know it in their hearts, thought they think themselves bound to blame you by their silly superstitions about morality and propriety and so forth. But I know, and the whole world really knows, thought it dare not say so, that you were right to follow your instinct; that vitality and bravery are the greatest qualities a woman can have, and motherhood her solemn initiation into womanhood; and that the fact of your not being legally married matters not one scrap either to your own worth or to your real regard for you.<sup>39</sup>

Tanner, like the conventional thinkers, is made to look foolish when Violet announces that she is a married woman. The ideas of both sides--the conventional thinkers who respect moral laws, and the

<sup>38</sup> "Man and Superman," Plays, III, p. 527.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 558.

free-thinkers who, like Shaw, holds conscience to be the only law for morality--are undercut for the sake of comedy. Tanner is satirized, his ideas sacrificed, when he applauds Hector for defying the conventional laws of morality and pursuing a married woman. Tanner is mocked when Hector announces that the married woman he is pursuing is his wife.

That Shaw has sacrificed his ideas to dramatic form is evident in the discrepancy found in the Epistle Dedicatory and the play. The Don Juan of the play, Tanner, Shaw's man of ideas, is not the same as Shaw's prefatory, theoretical Don Juan. As Bentley suggests, what Shaw the philosophe found to be true is not always true for Shaw the artist.<sup>40</sup> In John Bull's Other Island, for example, the preface expounds the possibilities of anti-imperialist reform. The play, however, presents obstacles and problems not encompassed in the theoretical possibilities for reform. The Epistle Dedicatory to Man and Superman discusses the artist man's resistance to the mother woman; the play presents the human complexities and conflicts involved in this comic struggle. Here is Shaw's prefatory ideas of the philosophical man and his resistance to the mother woman:

He is a true Don Juan with a sense of reality that disables convention, defying to the last the fate which finally overtakes him. The woman's need of him to enable her to carry on nature's most urgent work does not prevail against him until his resistance gathers her energy to a climax at which she dares to throw away her customary exploitations of the conventional affectionate poses and claim him by natural right for a purpose that far transcends their mortal personal purposes.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>41</sup> "Man and Superman," Plays, III, p. 497.



The true philosophic man of genius is free from the otherwise universal dominion of sex...is selected by nature to carry on the work of building up an intellectual consciousness of her own instinctive purpose..In this man, woman meets a purpose as impersonal, as irresistible as her own.<sup>42</sup>

The first of the above passages is actually illustrated in the seduction scene of Act IV. The scene is not taken seriously, however, because Tanner has preached the necessity of the man of genius's resistance to the mother woman; and now he is in the grip of the Life Force. The idea of the philosophic man of genius is therefore mocked in the play.

The second of the above passages presents the idea of irresistible force versus immovable object. In the play this idea is not so simple. In the play Tanner resists Ann, but not by standing up to her as a man with an irresistible purpose would. He runs away from her. As soon as he learns that he is being pursued by Ann, he leaves for Granada. Rather than the struggle of two irresistible forces, the play is actually, as Bentley expresses it, "the snapping up of a clever young man by a shrewd young woman."<sup>43</sup> This discrepancy is found in play and preface because the characters in the grip of these irresistible forces are real people: man and woman.

While Shaw has intended his characters to represent certain types--John Tanner, the political pamphleteer-philosopher; Ann, the mother woman--he has shown them in situations where more complex human qualities emerge. Tanner is more than a single-purposed idealist preaching resistance to the mother woman and the defiance

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 499.

<sup>43</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 154.

of convention and system. Tanner is also a man; and the man and the artist-philosopher conflict in him. The conflict is evident in the following conversation:

- Ann. You will make me so unhappy if you refuse to be friends with me.
- Tanner. You need not go begging for my regard. How unreal our moral judgments are! You seem to have absolutely no conscience--only hypocrisy, and you can't see the different--yet there is a sort of fascination about you. I always attend to you somehow. I should miss you if I lost you.
- Ann. But isn't that only natural, Jack? We have known each other since we were children. . . Do you remember . . .
- Tanner. Stop! I remember everything.
- Ann. Oh, I daresay we were often very silly, but. . .
- Tanner. I won't have it, Ann. I am no more that schoolboy now than I am the dotard of ninety I shall grow into if I live long enough. It is over: let me forget it.<sup>44</sup>

In this passage, Tanner is fighting sentimentality and the feeling which he has for Ann.

He preaches obstinancy, and tries to be obstinate, but the man in him cannot deny that Ann is taking him into her grip. "I feel the coils tightening round my very self, though you are only playing with me," he admits. Unlike the allegorical figures in Back to Methuselah, Tanner is too human to be consistent. Shaw, the comic dramatist, has made him human at the expense of the ideas which he represents. Tanner is a comic character whose ideas are not taken seriously because he does not live the life he preaches. He preaches as the artist-philosopher; he lives as a man. He poses as an iconoclast, but talks rather than act. Here again, Shaw, has sacrificed his ideas to comedy.

<sup>44</sup> "Man and Superman," Plays, III, pp. 545-546.

Ann, too, is very human. She is more than a woman dedicated to the purpose of finding a father for the Superman; she is a clever, sometime scheming woman with a feminine charm and vitality. Her feminine psychology is very human. In the opening episode of the play when Tanner argues that he will not accept the appointment as her guardian, Ann is able to make him and the other two men present happy. She plays on Jack's emotions with "Come Jack, be kind to me in my sorrow"; she captures Ramsden with "Nobody is more advanced than my Granny (Ramsden)"; and she bolsters the hope of Octavius, who is in love with her, with her affectionate pet name for him, Ricky-Ticky-Tavy.

In the scenes with Tanner, she moves cautiously and cunningly, knowing more about him than he knows about himself. And she tells Tanner about himself in an inoffensive, almost flattering manner:

Ann. What a shocking flirt you are, Jack.  
 Tanner. A flirt!! I!!  
 Ann. Yes, a flirt. You are always abusing and offending people; but you never really mean to let go your hold of them.<sup>45</sup>

Ann knows Tanner well enough not to pay any attention to his talk. Tanner gives her long moralizing speeches, but she merely answers them in a very unconcerned manner. She does not bother even to defend her own ideas. In the following passage Tanner is chiding Ann for submitting to her mother's authority:

Tanner. ...I tell you, the first duty of manhood and womanhood is a Declaration of Independence: the man who pleads his father's authority is no man; the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 555.

woman who pleads her mother's authority is unfit to bear citizens to a free people.<sup>46</sup>

And Ann answers irrelevantly, "I suppose you will go in seriously for politics some day, Jack."

While Ann is chasing Tanner, she is smart enough to keep her purpose concealed. When he invites her to come with him on a motor trip, she accepts with "simple earnestness": "Yes, I will come, since you wish it. You are my guardian; and I think we ought to see more of one another and come to know one another better."<sup>47</sup>

Even Shaw's minor characters are very real. Ramsden, although not extremely complex, is very human. While he is known for his prudery and his "old-fashioned ideas," the man in him emerges in defense of Violet, who is being condemned for breaking a moral law. The political character, Straker, is a creation of Shaw the comic artist. Straker is the new man, the proponent of vocational education as opposed to classical. He has no doubt been introduced by Shaw to satirize this tendency in British education. Most memorable about him, however, are his characteristic speech and his human pride in his ability to "fix things."

Shaw the comic artist has created the Americans, Hector Malone and Mr. Malone. While these characters are a satire on American class-consciousness, sentimentality, and practicality, they are shown in a very human situation. Hector Malone marries an English girl against the wishes of his father. Mr. Malone objects to the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 574.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 575.

marriage because the two are from the same class, and in the marriage, no one benefits. In the end, however, his strong parental pride breaks through his resistance; and he offers his son money and retracts his rash statement about Violet.

For his comedy, Shaw has used the traditional plot-sub-plot pattern. The Ann-Octavius-Tanner triangle is the plot, the Violet-Hector romance the sub-plot. The woman-chases-man plot is nothing new with Shaw. While he is using it to satirize the conventions of modern society, the comic effect is the same as in Shakespearean comedy and Restoration and eighteenth-century comedy. A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, Congreve's Way of the World, and Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer employ the same device. Barrie and Wilde, among others, also employ this device. The problems of the inheritance as an element in the comic plot is likewise borrowed from Restoration and eighteenth-century comedy.

A counter-effect is achieved by plot and subplot. In the plot, Ann has an inheritance; she sets out to get her man. In the subplot, Violet has her man; she wants to make sure she will get her inheritance. Ann and Tanner illustrate the biological drive; Violet and Hector the social drive. And as demonstrated earlier, the subplot sometimes mocks the ideas in the main plot. The plot and subplot culminate in the traditional pattern of romantic comedy. The final scene in which the lovers are together and "every lassie has her lad" reminds us of the final scenes of Shakespeare's romantic comedies.

Shaw has used other traditional comic devices: the misunderstanding and the recognition scene where Hector is revealed as the

"mysterious" husband of Violet. The Shavian inversion is also a comic device. Woman courts the man. Tanner who thinks himself wise, intelligent, and philosophical goes to school to Ann. Tanner preaches the Life Force; Ann is the Life Force.

Thus Shaw's comedy, while it undercuts his ideas, does teach a moral lesson: the need for overhauling the existing social structure. The play, however, does not teach the political lesson, the triumph of Tanner's ideas. The conventions of comedy demand a happy ending. Thus Tanner with his ideas compromises with the existing social structure. To illustrate his ideas, Shaw would have had to write a tragedy. Shaw realized the limitations of his comedy:

There is a political aspect of the sex question which is too big for my comedy, and too momentous to be passed over with culpable frivolity....this sex initiative is politically our political experiment of democracy, the last refuge of cheap misgovernment, will ruin us if our citizens are ill bred.<sup>48</sup>

Realizing that he could not incorporate his ideas into a dramatic comedy and that in his comedy he has subordinated ideas to comedy, Shaw has used other methods of conveying his ideas. He has devoted several pages of the Epistle Dedicatory to a discussion of the evils of democracy, the illusion of progress, and the inadequacy of education. He has appended "The Revolutionist's Handbook" written by John Tanner, Member of the Idle Rich Class. And he has injected an extraneous act of ideas into his play.

This act of ideas, Act III, is in the form of a dream. In the dream, Shaw has transformed the characters of his comedy into their

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 501.

sixteenth-century prototypes; and they philosophize in lengthy speeches. The act is not first-rate drama and is not organic to Man and Superman. Shaw himself calls it "a totally extraneous act in which my hero, enchanted by the air of the Sierra, has a dream in which his Mozartian ancestor appears and philosophizes at great length in a Shavio-Socratic dialogue."<sup>49</sup> Although it might pass the test for drama by its frequent production in the theater, it is still hardly more than a panel discussion and presentation of ideas, or what Shaw calls "a Shavio-Socratic dialogue." Perhaps its success in the theater as "Don Juan in Hell" has been greatly aided by the high-calibre actors and actress who play it.

The act is very funny in places. When the characters cease to be stock characters and become real people, there are flashes of comedy which help to hold the interest of the audience. Don Juan's human folly of boasting is comic:

When I was on earth and made these proposals to ladies which though universally condemned, have made me so interesting a hero of legend, I was not infrequently met in some such way as this.<sup>50</sup>

We laugh at the statue's courtesy to the devil:

The Statue. This is metaphysics, Juan. Why the devil should...(to the devil) I beg your pardon.<sup>51</sup>

Such comedy also helps to explain the act's success in the theater.

Despite the comedy, the play becomes tedious with long speeches and too many ideas. Religious, social, and political ideas are

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 494.  
<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 638.  
<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 627.

present in pure Shavian form. Heaven and Hell, the Superman, sex and marriage, conventions of society, democracy, and the illusions of progress are discussed. Don Juan is the spokesman for Shaw's ideas about poverty and the robbery and the enslavement of the civilized poor. The Superman is preached by Don Juan as the only salvation for mankind which is now destroying itself by its own inventions. He blasts the military man and sings the philosophic man. As the single-purposed idealist, Don Juan is possessed with a purpose beyond his own. He steers his own life instead of drifting with it; he is a philosopher, "nature's pilot"; he is what John Tanner preaches.

The insertion of this act of ideas cannot be justified dramatically. It is obvious that Shaw has injected it merely for the sake of ideas. In the comedy, Acts I, II, and IV, he has sacrificed ideas to comedy; by the insertion of Act III he has sacrificed dramatic for to ideas. Shaw is more effective when he fuses the two. Only then can he be called artist-philosopher. This fusion is achieved in Caesar and Cleopatra.

Shaw, in order to produce an impression of complete disinterestedness and magnanimity, he has only to act with entire selfishness; and this is perhaps the only sense in which a man can be said to be naturally great. It is in this sense that I have represented Caesar as great. Having already, he has no need of goodness. He is neither forgiving, frank, nor generous, because a man who is too great to repent has nothing to forgive; a man who says things that other people are afraid to say need to be more great than Bismarck was; and there is no generosity in giving things you do not want to people of whom you intend to make use.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "Caesar and Cleopatra," *plays*, III, p. 479.



## SHAW THE ARTIST-PHILOSOPHER

Caesar and Cleopatra

The serious thing about drama is not the ideas. It is the absorption of the ideas by the characters, the dramatic or comic force which the characters give to the ideas.

Henry Becque

In Caesar and Cleopatra, there is a fusion of ideas and dramatic form which meets the requirements for that kind of artist which Shaw himself took seriously--the artist-philosopher. More importantly for us, the play comes closest to meeting the requirements of dramatic art. In this play, there are ideas; there are characters; there is a plot. The characters demonstrate the ideas, yet remain people. The result of this fusion is a dramatic work of art.

In this play, Shaw is giving us his idea of the artist-statesman and the artist-statesman's influence upon relation to the masses. Shaw is dramatizing the qualities of the "naturally great" man which he defines in the Notes:

Hence, in order to produce an impression of complete disinterestedness and magnanimity, he has only to act with entire selfishness; and this is perhaps the only sense in which a man can be said to be naturally great. It is in this sense that I have represented Caesar as great. Having virtue, he had no need of goodness. He is neither forgiving, frank, nor generous, because a man who is too great to resent has nothing to forgive; a man who says things that other people are afraid to say need be no more frank than Bismarck was; and there is no generosity in giving things you do not want to people of whom you intend to make use.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> "Caesar and Cleopatra," Flays, III, p. 479.

This idea is dramatized in the play, not through discussion of the nature of greatness, but through the life of Caesar and its relation to the lives of his subjects. Caesar is a great man as well as a great military hero: he is Shaw's idea of the artist-statesman. An examination of Caesar--the revelation of his character and his influence upon others--will demonstrate the fusion of ideas and dramatic art in this play.

The audience meets the great conqueror as he salutes the Sphinx with a solemn speech, declaring, "...I am he of whose genius you are the symbol: part brute, part woman, and part god--nothing of man in me at all." The audience then sees not a pompous ruler, but a bald-headed old man climbing up into the arms of the Sphinx to play with a little girl, Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, who is hiding there from the Romans. While this action is incompatible with the pompousness of the ordinary great man, it demonstrates Caesar's natural greatness. Caesar is naturally great; he has no need for pretension.

In this scene at the Sphinx, Shaw begins to reveal Caesar's clemency. Caesar does not take Cleopatra prisoner, nor eat her as she expects, but offers to make her joint-ruler of Egypt with Caesar. This first act of kindness is followed by more acts of clemency in Acts II and III. Caesar, the military hero, refuses to take the Egyptians prisoners; he will not imprison Pothinus, his rival for controlling the throne. The supreme display of his benevolence comes in his refusal to hear the names of his enemies who may be plotting to kill him as they have killed Ptolemy. To Britannus's announcement

that he has just captured a bag of papers which will reveal all of Caesar's foes, Caesar makes the following answer:

- Caesar. Put them in the fire.  
 Britanmus. Put them (gasp)...  
 Caesar. In the fire. Would you have me waste the next three years of my life in proscribing and condemning men who will be my friends when I have proved that my friendship is worth more than Pompey's was--than Cato's is. O incorrigible British islander: am I a bull dog, to seek quarrels merely to shew how stubborn my jaws are?  
 Britanmus. But your honor, the honor of Rome...  
 Caesar. I do not make human sacrifices to my honor, as your Druids do. Since you will not burn these, at least I can down them.<sup>53</sup>

Actually, what appears to be clemency and kindness in Caesar is practicality. Caesar is clement and kind because he knows it is expedient to be so; he does not act out of a sentimental humanitarianism. He releases the prisoners because each prisoner will require two of his own soldiers for guards; in another instance, he releases prisoners because they require food. When it is more practical not to show mercy, Caesar is very severe in his demands. Caesar does not withdraw his demand for 1600 talents when Pothinus tells him that there is no money in the treasury:

- Caesar. Taxes are the chief business of a conqueror.  
 Pothinus. Then take warning, Caesar. This day, the treasures of the temple and the gold of the king's treasury shall be sent to the mint to be melted down for our ransom in the sight of the people. They shall see us sitting under bare walls and drinking from wooden cups. And their wrath be on your head, Caesar, if you force us to this sacrilege.  
 Caesar. Do not fear, Pothinus: the people know how well

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 425.

wine tastes in wooden cups. In return for your bounty, I will settle this dispute about the throne for you.<sup>54</sup>

Thus Caesar acts not out of pious goodness and mercy. He is above these things: he has virtue, he does not need goodness. Being naturally great, he acts out of complete selfishness. He is original; he does not pretend to be a "goody-goody" like the ordinary statesman. Caesar's is not an illusionary greatness like that which is found in the military conqueror-statesman.

Caesar is also beyond love. While he is helpful, patient, almost parental in his relations to Cleopatra, he is doing no more for her than he would do for any other person. Cleopatra understands him. "Love is the absence of hate; and since he hates no one, he loves no one." When Pothinus asks of Caesar's relationship to her, "Well: is not this love?," Cleopatra answers very perceptively:

What, when he will do as much for the first girl he meets on his way back to Rome? Ask his slave, Britannus: he has been just as good to him. Nay, ask his very horse. He kindness is not for anything in me: it is in his own nature.<sup>55</sup>

The absence of any love for Cleopatra is demonstrated in Caesar's actions. When in the preparation for battle Caesar is interrupted with a gift from the Queen, he takes time out to receive it because "the queen must not be hurt--a child--she must not be disappointed." After months together, Caesar almost embarks for Rome without saying good-by to Cleopatra.

Caesar is too much of a realist to be sentimental. The artist-statesman must be able to see things as they really are. This

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 390-1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 439.

quality of the artist-statesman is revealed in the following speech:

Caesar. I have been in Britain--that western land of romance --the last piece of earth on the edge of the ocean that surrounds the world. I went there in search of its famous pearls. The British pearl was a fable; but in searching for it I found the British oyster.<sup>56</sup>

Caesar knows that it is better to live a life than to dream it away.

And Caesar, the practical man of affairs, does live his life.

He is, nevertheless, in part a dreamer. Like every great man, he must have a bit of the dreamer in him to balance the practical man of affairs. His imagination catches fire when Apollodorus mentions the source of the Nile. Caesar is ready to "track the flood to its cradle in the regions of mystery." He is ready to leave Rome that "has achieved greatness only to learn how greatness destroys nations of men who are not great," and found in the great unknown a new kingdom. He is a man of action; therefore, he can afford to be a dreamer at times. Because his greatness is not of the kind that destroys men, his wish for a holy city where all leaders will be artist-statesmen is justified. Here is the romantic idealism of the creative artist-statesman. Here is an idea, real, powerful, convincing, because the audience has seen it dramatically demonstrated in Caesar.

These god-like qualities in Caesar Shaw has incorporated into a human being. While in thought, feelings, and actions Caesar is above human standards, he is very human in his little human vanities and his self-consciousness. His human traits are very funny. The

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 449.

comedy in Caesar and Cleopatra results from the emergence of human qualities in a seemingly superhuman man. Its effect is to make Caesar convincing; to make the superhumanness in him human. Here is Caesar, the great, the benevolent, hailed by all the Romans, looked up to by his followers; yet all the worship on earth cannot cure his complex about his baldness--nor can Cleopatra's sugar and water. He must wear an oak wreath to hide it. Even as a great man, a superhuman, he is not exempt from the wrinkles of age.

Very clever, very human is he in his "petty deceits" which he admits he will never conquer; seven birthdays in ten months--a birthday every time there is a pretty girl to be flattered or an ambassador to be conciliated. Very witty he is too. Upon standing for a few moments after entering the king's treasury, he makes the following reply to Pothinus's statement that "The King's treasury is poor":

Yes, I notice that there is but one chair in it.<sup>57</sup>

Because Shaw has made Caesar human and plausible, the audience is prepared for any ideas which Shaw might be preaching through him. Since Caesar has lived the ideas, they are actually his; and the audience almost forgets that the ideas are Shaw's. Here Caesar might be contrasted with Tanner in Man and Superman. Tanner talks Shaw's ideas, but does not live them; Tanner talks about the artist-philosopher, but he is only a comic version. Caesar is the artist-statesman. Caesar with his vanities and foibles is a paradox,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 389.

yes, but Tanner is a contradiction. Thus, since talk and action are consistent in Caesar, the following speech is more than mere moralizing. Taken in the light of Caesar's character and the sequence of events in the play, it is very dramatic. Cleopatra has had Pothinus killed and is justifying her right to do so on the grounds that he has accused her of betraying Caesar, and insulted her to her face:

Cleopatra. Listen to me, Caesar. If one man in Alexandria can be found to say that I did wrong, I swear to have myself crucified on the door of the palace by my own slaves.

Caesar. If one man in all the world can be found, now or forever, to know that you did wrong, that man will have either to conquer the world as I have, or be crucified by it....These knockers at your gate are also believers in vengeance and in stabbing. You have slain their leader: it is right that they shall slay you...And then in the name of that right shall I not slay them for murdering their Queen, and be slain in my turn by their countrymen as the invader of their fatherland? ...And so to the end of history, murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honor and peace, until the gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand.<sup>58</sup>

This speech is not the mere injection of an idea. It is the speech of the artist-statesman whose actions have proved that he cannot stoop to vengeance, that he values the lives of men. Idea has been embodied in dramatic form.

We take Caesar seriously because he possesses complete self-knowledge. He knows that he is so much above the level of the common man that the ordinary "hatchet man" cannot possibly understand him. He knows too, however, that in death he will lie beside the common

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 457.

soldier just as the "hatchet man" will. Caesar knows that he trusts no one, and therefore cannot be betrayed; that because he has no hope, he cannot despair; that he cannot stoop to vengeance because he is too great to have anything to avenge. He appears to disregard his life because he is fully aware of a destiny greater than his own personal and physical safety.

Caesar is aware of the problems and the fate of the artist-statesman. He knows that he must elevate the common man and use him, but that the common man because of human limitations cannot fully understand him nor rise to his level. He knows that in the end he will die, having lived a brief moment unable to reform the world, even to conquer it. Had Shaw not given his hero self-knowledge, he would have defeated his idea of the artist-statesman, as he did the idea of the artist-philosopher in Man and Superman.

While the artist-statesman is unable to affect a permanent change in the masses, he is able to elevate them when in his presence. He is like a catalyst, causing them to fulfill their capacities when under his tutelage. This quality in the artist-statesman is dramatized in Caesar's relationship to Cleopatra, and his "hatchet man," Rufio.

Caesar finds a Cleopatra who is a mere child possessing neither the dignity, education, intelligence nor maturity demanded of a queen. While she does have what Fuller calls "a certain feline charm,"<sup>59</sup> she is egotistical, superstitious and ignorant of the world. Under Caesar's tutelage she grows from a child into a woman,

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<sup>59</sup> Fuller, op. cit., p. 33. Part III, p. 134.



or more accurately, to use the play's metaphor, from a kitten into a cat. She cannot rise to Caesar's greatness because she is limited in her capabilities. Even Caesar cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Cleopatra's childish impulses continually break through her newly acquired cloak of a queen's dignity. Her actions continue to be barbarous: she would have Ptolemy slain by the Romans.

Cleopatra does, however, achieve a degree of greatness. In her is the deflation of her ego. At the lighthouse when she is pitched screaming into the water to swim with Caesar to safety, she discovers that her life matters little to anyone but herself. Following this incident, Cleopatra begins to imitate some of Caesar's actions: she allows her slaves to chatter away, believing that she can learn something from them.

Cleopatra knows, nevertheless, that her greatness is dependent upon Caesar's presence; and that at heart she is really very cruel. To Iras's wish that Caesar were back in Rome, Cleopatra replies:

It will be a bad day for you all when he goes. Oh, if I were not ashamed to let him see that I am cruel at heart as my father, I would make you repent that speech.<sup>60</sup>

She does not like having to live up to Caesar's expectations. She prefers to enjoy the impulses of her cruel heart; she wearies of having the best in her brought out; she would like to be foolish again:

When I was foolish, I did what I liked, except when Ftatateeta beat me; and even then I cheated her and did it by stealth. Now that Caesar has made me wise, it is no use my liking or my disliking: I do what must be done and have no time to attend to myself. That is not happiness but it is greatness.

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<sup>60</sup> "Caesar and Cleopatra," Plays, III, p. 436.

That is not happiness but it is greatness. If Caesar were gone, I think I could govern the Egyptians; for what Caesar is to me, I am to the fools around me.<sup>61</sup>

Cleopatra's servants, weary of Caesar, are uncomfortable in his presence. "He makes you so terribly prosy and serious and learned and philosophical. It is worse than being religious, at our ages,"<sup>62</sup> says Charmian.

When Cleopatra attempts to act without Caesar's advice in Acts IV and V, her limitations and her dependence upon Caesar are fully dramatized. Here the ideas of the common man's dependence upon the artist-statesman is expressed dramatically, so that we see the idea rather than hear about it. Cleopatra commands her servant to slay Pothinus, who has told Caesar that she is a traitress. She cannot rise above vengeance; and making this decision without Caesar's sanction, she has blundered. When she asks Caesar to say that she was justified in this murder, he refuses. She is terrified at the possibility of his deserting her, and she knows she is not capable of defending herself. She knows that it has been Caesar's hand that has held the "heads of the Egyptians above the Red Sea of blood, and that if he chooses, they will all sink into the flood." The murder of Ptatateeta is dramatic proof that after Caesar leaves, the Egyptians will revert in part to their old ways, and "murder will continue to breed murder."

The relationship of Cleopatra and Caesar is not without its comic episodes. Comedy is achieved through the use of a traditional

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 438.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 436.

device, the reversal of roles. The roles of Caesar as teacher and Cleopatra as pupil are sometimes reversed. At the same time, the device is used to reveal character. In the following scene, for example, a truth is revealed about Cleopatra. She does think she has something to teach Caesar:

Cleopatra. (To Ftatateeta) No, I am the Mistress of the Queen's household. Go and do as you are told, or I will have you thrown into the Nile this very afternoon, to poison the poor crocodiles.

Caesar. Oh, no, no.

Cleopatra. Oh, yes, yes, You are sentimental, but you are clever; and if you do as I tell you, you will soon learn to govern.<sup>63</sup>

The following situation reveals even more concretely Cleopatra's limitations:

Caesar. What! As much a child as ever, Cleopatra. Have I not made a woman of you after all.

Cleopatra. Oh, it is you who are a great baby: you behave seriously. But you have treated me badly, and I do not forgive you.<sup>64</sup>

Thus Shaw has used even comedy to fuse his idea with his dramatic art.

There is one notable exception to this general fusion of dramatic art and idea in Caesar and Cleopatra. Shaw has one of his characters step out of role to illustrate an idea; and only with a little stretch of the imagination can the speech be justified dramatically. Rufio, the common "hatchet-man" whom Caesar uses and elevates, murders Ftatateeta. In the light of Rufio's character, the audience knows that he has done it out of animal instinct in defense

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 400-1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

of Caesar and himself. To show his idea however, Shaw has Rufio give the following explanation of his murder:

Rufio. Why, Cleopatra had a tigress that killed men at her bidding. I thought she might bid it kill you some day. Well, had I not been Caesar's pupil, what pious things might I not have done to that tigress! I might have punished it. I might have revenged Pothinus on it.

Caesar. Pothinus!

Rufio. I might have judged it. But I put all these follies behind me; and, without malice, only cut its throat. And that is why Cleopatra comes to you in mourning.<sup>65</sup>

One could justify this speech dramatically, however, by regarding it as the human trait of "trying-to-please-teacher" coming forward in Rufio. In other less dramatic works, Shaw's injection of ideas cannot be justified.

Because Shaw's characters are people with human feeling, follies, vanities, and with the exception of Caesar, limitations, the play meets the prime requisite of true drama: it evokes emotion in the audience. We are horrified at Ptatateeta's lying dead on the altar of the god Ra. We despair at Rufio's limitations, and gasp at his statement, "I only cut its throat." Whoever contends that George Bernard Shaw was without heart has not read Caesar and Cleopatra, nor the scene of poverty at the Salvation Army tent in Major Barbara. Chesterton has this to say about Shaw's occasional emotion:

Though I always argue with him when he argues, I confess that he always conquers me in the one or two moments when he is emotional.<sup>66</sup>

Caesar and Cleopatra is real drama, too, in that it ends on an unsolved dilemma: the great man's influence on the masses.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

<sup>66</sup> G. K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 208.

The god Ra and the Prologue have a dramatic function in the play. While the Prologue resembles a Shavian preface in content, it is dramatic since it is uttered by Ra, who in the play is used as a symbol of the divinity behind Caesar. Ra, in the Prologue, laughs at the Romans whose riches and dominions have grown large, but whose minds have remained small. Theirs is the way of the soldier, which is the way of death, but the way of the gods is the way of life:

And Pompey's friend Julius Caesar was on the side of the gods; for he saw that Rome had passed beyond the control of the little old Romans. This Caesar was a great talker and a politician: he bought men with words and with gold, even as you are bought. And when they would not be satisfied with words and gold, and demanded the glories of war, Caesar in his middle age turned his hand to that trade; and they that were against him when he sought their welfare, bowed down before him when he became a slayer and a conqueror; for such is the nature of you mortals.<sup>67</sup>

Here is Shaw's message in Caesar and Cleopatra. The play meets the test of the Shavian work which is designed to "do a work in the world." The message is learned, however, not from Ra's Prologue, but from "them that lived it" in the story of Caesar and Cleopatra. Ideas are here; drama is here. But they are fused in such a way that each enhances the other. Whereas in Back to Methuselah drama is sacrificed to ideas and in Man and Superman ideas to comedy, in Caesar and Cleopatra drama is the effective mode of conveying the idea. Here when Shaw lets his ideas live in real persons, they are more effective than when they are merely discussed. While this discussion technique conveys Shavian ideas pure and

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<sup>67</sup> "Caesar and Cleopatra," Plays, III, p. 358.

uncontaminated, it does not convey them so forcefully as work of art, but from Shaw's point of view it was produced not for art's sake, but as a vehicle for conveying his message. Perhaps the reason for Shaw's failure as a dramatist and a philosopher in a number of plays was his failure to realize that his message was frequently too big for the size and strength of his vehicle.

We are now prepared to deal with the question that arises in any study or discussion about Shaw: Was he a propagandist who used the theater as his platform, or was he a dramatic artist whose ideas were a springboard for the portrayal of human experience." First let us look at what Shaw thought of himself. He thought he was the artist-philosopher, which was for him the artist. "That the author of *Everyman* was no mere artist, but an artist-philosopher, and that the artist-philosophers are the only sort of artists I take quite seriously, will be no news to you," he states in the Epistle Dedicatory of *Man and Superman*.<sup>68</sup> He calls himself the artist-philosopher in *Everybody's Political What's What*.<sup>69</sup> He conceived art as the most effective means of propaganda; he felt that the playwright had a duty to give the world a message, a moral lesson. The purpose of art for him was to teach. This purpose is implied in the following quotation from *Everybody's Political What's What*:

It (art) has become an instrument of culture, a method of schooling, a form of science, an indispensable adjunct of religion.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Man and Superman," *Plays*, III, p. 507.

<sup>69</sup> Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What*, p. 190.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Only those whose art teaches are regarded by Shaw as artists. While he reads Shakespeare "without shame or stint," he criticizes him because his "observations and demonstrations of life are not coordinated into any philosophy or religion."<sup>71</sup> "A Doll's House will be as flat as ditchwater when A Midsummer Night's Dream will still be as fresh as paint; but it will have done more work in the world; and that is enough for the highest genius," he writes in 1895 in a London periodical.<sup>72</sup>

To give the world his message, Shaw had to be willing to sacrifice dramatic art. To get across his ideas, his moral, he had to make his characters consistent, and reduce the complexity of human experience. In doing this, Shaw cannot give us truth or reality of human nature; for in reality, human beings are inconsistent and human life complex. Art, then, in his case is merely a means to a didactic end, and in achieving this end, loses its validity as art. When he subordinates art to propaganda, we must call Shaw not an artist, but a propagandist. Shaw does in some of his plays sacrifice his art for his ideas, using his play merely as a vehicle for conveying his ideas. He does this in Back to Methuselah and the third act of Man and Superman. While the plays are witty, even dramatic in places, they are not consistently drama. Shaw is, in them, the responsible thinker, but the irresponsible artist: in brief, the romantic idealist.

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<sup>71</sup> Plays, III, p. 514.

<sup>72</sup> Bentley, op. cit., p. 95.

Shaw to meet our definition of the artist must be willing to sacrifice ideas to his portrayal of human experience. And he occasionally does, in spite of himself, meet our definition. He is willing to subordinate his doctrine, his ideas to the dramatization of human conflicts and feelings. Ideas are present, but they are embodied in real people. In plays like Saint Joan, Major Barbara, and Caesar and Cleopatra, Shaw has not allowed his ideas to interfere with his drama. Here is Shaw at his best; and here we can call him a true dramatic artist. While Shaw had a passionate belief that the theater should be a medium for educating the public, he failed to realize that he could best teach the public as an artist, not as an artist-philosopher. We cannot pigeonhole Shaw. We can only say that at times he was the artist, almost in spite of himself, and unfortunately at other and more frequent times, the propagandist.



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