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Ibsen and Shaw:

a Comparison

Katherine Waldbauer

January 21, 1977

If you go to see Ibsen I wish you would explain a matter to him which concerns me. The Daily Chronicle published a half column or so of sensational extracts from my lecture; and its Munich correspondent thereupon went to Ibsen and told him that the London Social Democrats had been claiming him as one of themselves Naturally Henrik was infuriated, and declared that he had nothing to do with the dogmas of the Social Democrats. Will you tell him if you get the chance that the true state of the case is that an eminent socialist critic made his plays the text for a fierce attack on the idealist section of the English Social Democrats, comparing them and their red flag to Hilmar Tonnesen and his "banner of the ideal" I set great store by the setting-right of Ibsen about this matter; and you may add, if you please, that I am extremely sorry that my total ignorance of Norwegian prevented my calling on him during my stay in Munich to explain his plays to him.

The above quotation, from a letter to William Archer, his own mentor and Ibsen's translator, written while Shaw was in the midst of revising his lectures to the Fabian Society for eventual publication as The Quintessence of Ibsenism, conveys more eloquently than any comment of mine Shaw's attitude toward the man who has been acclaimed as his artistic model by critics from the 1890's up until, to a certain extent, the present day.

It is true that there has been a gradual reversion of this trend ever since the 1930's. Yet contemporary critics still pay a certain amount of lip service to this idea, and indeed, we sense somehow that they should, despite Shaw's own splenetic repudiation of his indebtedness to Ibsen.² Why do we retain this

uneasy feeling, despite the wealth of recent critical material contradicting it?

Perhaps the single most decisive factor in this persistent impression is The Quintessence of Ibsenism, Shaw's elaborate analysis of Ibsen's work. Yet the passage just quoted gives us perhaps a more accurate view of what Shaw really intended the Quintessence to accomplish than the mixed critical reactions that have accompanied that work. Critics have taken it in general as a complete distortion of Ibsen to explain that Shaw's Ibsen is not exactly the Ibsen we know. Shaw boasts, in the last sentence quoted above, that he understands Ibsen better than Ibsen understands himself, but can this not be seen as a polemical stance, a defiant declaration of personal superiority, and at the same time almost self-mockery?

Let us examine the circumstances of the composition of The Quintessence of Ibsenism. Shaw came to London at the age of twenty, a penniless, uneducated youth who never, throughout his dreary adolescence, lost his sense of having once belonged to a superior social and intellectual class than the one he now mingled with. Within eight years, by dint of push and struggle and stubbornness, he had risen to membership in the daring and intellectually fashionable Fabian Society, had been in turn a music critic, art critic, and drama critic without any previous experience in any of these fields, and had made himself by sheer force of wit and personality a well-known, although not necessarily well-respected, member of London literary and political society.

The young Shaw, fiercely ambitious, possessed at this point a certain celebrity (not to say notoriety), but he hungered for something more -- intellectual authority. Then, in 1883, he met William Archer, the Scots drama critic and theatrical entrepreneur, who possessed in ample measure the kind of authority Shaw craved. They began to collaborate on a play, Rhinogold. Through Archer, Shaw became acquainted with the theater -- and particularly with Ibsen, since Archer was Ibsen's English translator, -- as he was with no other spectrum of London cultural life. His activity in the Fabian Society was beginning to satisfy him less and less as he perceived how little effect it had. Then, while he and Archer were still wrangling over Rhinogold, and were on the brink of throwing it away in despair, the Fabian Society invited Shaw to lecture on Ibsen. The lecture took place in the summer of 1890, its reworking as the Quintessence came out in 1891, and Widowers' Houses, Shaw's own version of Rhinogold, was finished in 1892.³

The Quintessence of Ibsenism, then, came out of a number of contributing factors. Shaw's dissatisfaction with the scope of his Fabian activities, his desire for effectiveness and authority in both the political and the literary realms, his deepened exposure to Ibsen through acquaintance with Archer, and the invitation from the Fabian Society at the crucial moment all combined to produce not only the Quintessence, but also the impression which has persisted from that time to this that Shaw worshipped Ibsen, that he modeled his playwriting style closely on that of Ibsen, and that the two can safely be

bracketed together in a study of the development of the modern theater. The Quintessence is undeniably a major piece of Ibsen criticism, but Shaw's motivation to write it is considerably more complex than just admiration for Ibsen. With the Quintessence, Shaw was trying to achieve all his goals at once: win literary authentication, convey his ideas to people who would normally never go near the Fabian Society, express his conception of Ibsen, and perhaps even create a somewhat more welcoming climate for his own Widowers' Houses than it could otherwise expect. As the work of a youthful fire-eating Socialist, the play would be seen and reviewed from beginning to end as pure propaganda, which of course to a certain extent it was. But as the work of a recognized Ibsen authority, the play could perhaps not only put across its political message, but also serve as even more concrete proof of Shaw's view of the function of literature; namely, that good literature can and must be politically and/or morally didactic.

This last, of course, is pure speculation, but it is an interesting idea nevertheless. At any rate, it becomes clear that the Quintessence is a great deal more than homage to an artistic model. It is Shaw's declaration of his artistic creed, his greatest experiment to date in agitprop, and his bid for intellectual recognition. That Widowers' Houses is not simply a Shavian reworking of an Ibsenist theme can be confirmed by examining the original idea, that of Rhinogold, which is closely related to what Widowers' Houses became. In 1884, when Shaw and Archer developed the plot of Rhinogold, Shaw had had a

certain amount of exposure to Ibsen through knowing Archer, but had not acquired anything like the close acquaintance he had with Ibsen's work by 1891 when he wrote the Quintessence.⁴

Armed with this admittedly speculative evidence, can we at long last lay the spectre of Shaw's artistic indebtedness to Ibsen to rest? Unquestionably, Shaw admired Ibsen greatly, and unquestionably he followed his lead in dealing realistically on stage with things that before Ibsen's time had not been publically discussed, let alone acted out. The two schools of thought concerning the theater of the time have been described by Martin Meisel:

There was an ascendant strain of fashionable or drawing-room drama devoted to an ideal of cultivated truth-to-life, and a surviving strain of romantic-rhetorical drama devoted to an ideal of impassioned flamboyance. There was the purely formal ideal of the well-made play attached to the names of Scribe and Sardou, and the challenging ideal of the social-didactic play attached to the name of Ibsen. These were the conflicting strains in the London theater whose relevance to Shaw's beginnings as a playwright appears in his writings as a critic. These were the dramatic traditions which provided⁵ the immediate context of Shaw's own dramatic work.

When the theatrical works of Shaw's contemporaries and immediate predecessors are seen as divided into these two categories, it is evident that Shaw follows the Ibsenist school. But Meisel's point is precisely that, although Shaw can be linked ideologically with Ibsen, as far as dramatic technique and structure go he takes his referents from all over European civilization. Meisel links him with the English comic theater tradition, Julian Kaye with Molière, and so on.⁶

It is the intention of this paper to demonstrate that, above and beyond such purely historical evidence, Shaw and Ibsen cannot and should not be classified together, or even seen as particularly similar apart from the fact that they dealt with some of the same themes, because they had in fact two completely different world-views. This difference in viewpoint also accounts in large measure for Shaw's distortion, and in some cases downright misunderstanding, of Ibsen.

To say that the essential difference between the two men was that Ibsen was a romantic and Shaw a realist or a rationalist is to use the two terms in somewhat peculiar fashion, but what I am implying by them is that Ibsen, first, last, and always, was interested in the individual, and Shaw in the societal. Ibsen had the inner-centered Romantic vision, a fascination with the mind and soul of one man, one woman, one being, in a way that Shaw never did. Shaw, on the other hand, was fascinated by societal systems in a way that Ibsen never was. Perhaps instead of using the words romantic and realist, we can call Ibsen an analyst and Shaw a synthesist, if we define an analyst as one who is more interested in breaking something (society) down into its component parts (individual human beings), and a synthesist as the opposite, one who is more interested in the whole than in the components. Whatever terminology we use, we must look deeply into the works of both men to see wherein this difference really lies. Let us examine three aspects of each playwright: first and most importantly their focus of dramatic interest on the individual in Ibsen's case and on society in Shaw's, then

their attitudes toward men and women and romantic love, and finally their different solutions to the problem of the individual faced with a corrupt or even merely antipathetic society.

* * *

Although it is usual to think of Ibsen of all people as a realist rather than a romantic, he nevertheless absorbed into himself the Romantic dictum that the individual must find in him- or herself whatever salvation, inspiration, or ethic he or she needs to live by. The cult of personality initiated by the Romantic poets, their glorification of the individual as opposed to the societal, particularly their insistence on the direct relationship between the individual and Nature or God or Truth without any kind of societal intervention -- all this is mirrored in Ibsen. His dramas are almost invariably centered around a few major figures -- in some cases only one major figure -- who must undergo some sort of crisis in order to reach a spiritual goal, whether it be understanding (Mrs. Alving) or happiness (Ellida Wangel) or peace (Rita and Allmers). This is clearly demonstrated in The Pillars of Society and The League of Youth, where constant references are made to "society" or "the brotherhood of man" or similar abstractions, yet the action of the play takes place within the hearts of one or two people. Society, in these plays, becomes a meaningless term, on the one hand used by Ibsen's characters as a cloak for their real motivations, and on the other becoming almost a kind of Golden Calf put up and worshipped by the conventional that eventually acquires a power of its own.

To come to grips with Ibsen's view of society, and to illustrate his insistence on limiting his focus to certain individuals rather than widening it to include social abstractions, let us examine an early play, The Pillars of Society. Its plot is simple: Consul Bernick, the most eminent citizen of a small harbor town, admired by all, has actually acquired this position through lies, chicanery, and the blaming of one of his crimes on another man, Johann Tonnesen. As the play opens, Johann returns to town and demands that Bernick reveal the truth at last. Bernick, who is in the midst of another nefarious project, refuses, giving as a reason the very fact that he is a pillar of society, saying that if faith in him were removed, society would topple. Despite stormy sessions with Johann and his sister Lona Hessel, Bernick's old love, Bernick remains steadfast, and in pursuit of his shady project is prepared to send to the bottom of the sea a ship full of American sailors, all the while retaining his solid reputation. After, however, the ship has finally sailed, he learns that his own son has stowed away on it, and it is this that precipitates Bernick's realization of his own culpability, and his eventual confession after his son is returned to him.

The abstraction "society" is used here in an almost surreal fashion. It is frequently referred to, but never seen in action, and we get almost no sense of the people who make up this much-vaunted society. Society is Bernick's excuse for doing what he really wants to do anyway, much as, later in Ibsen's career in The Wild Duck, Gregers Werle offers as an excuse for the destruc-

tion of the Ekdal household his pursuit of ideal family relations. But "society" is a dramatic device for Ibsen just as much as it is a convenience for Bernick: the author actually cares little more for society than his creation does. Although the crew of the American ship is saved as well as Bernick's son, that is unimportant both to Ibsen and to us; the important thing is that Bernick has undergone his catharsis. The emotional center of the play is the movement in Bernick's consciousness from hiding behind the facade of a pillar of society to a realization of his own responsibility for the lives of various individuals, and this is brought home to him by his son, not by one of the sailors, the members of this image of society. Do we really care about the sailors? And do we even worry about how society will function now? No, not if the play has been successful for us.

Moreover, the emotional focus of the play has remained throughout on Bernick, Johann and Lona. These three are relatively vivid, realistic, demanding characters, although the rest are little more than clumsy cardboard caricatures. The resolution of Bernick's dilemma also precipitates the resolution of Johann's and Lona's lives, and without this we would not feel satisfied, although the main action of the play would be resolved. But as for the rest of the characters, the worshippers of society -- we neither know nor particularly care what will happen to them, let alone what will happen to the American sailors.

This selectivity of who is important and who is not is difficult if not impossible to find in Shaw. In play after play -- Widowers' Houses, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Pygmalion, The Doctor's

Dilemma, Major Barbara, even in such a relatively light-hearted work as The Millionairess -- we are constantly told and shown and reminded of who pays for the sins and pleasures of the rich and the powerful, of who it is that constitutes "society." Indeed, the object of the first two plays cited, and partially of the fifth and sixth, is to bring us face to face with exactly this fact: that society, the nameless, faceless abstraction, is made up of individuals who suffer.⁷

It is interesting, in this context, to read Shaw's description of The Pillars of Society:

The play concludes with Bernick's admission that the spirits of Truth and Freedom are the true pillars of society, a phrase which sounds so like an idealistic commonplace that it is necessary to add that Truth in this passage means the unflinching recognition of facts, and the abandonment of the conspiracy to ignore such of them as do not bolster up the ideals. The idealist rule as to truth dictates the recognition of only those facts or idealistic masks of facts which have a respectable air, and the mentioning of these on all occasions and at all hazards. Ibsen urges the recognition of all facts; but as to mentioning them, he wrote a whole play, as we shall see presently [Shaw refers to The Wild Duck], to show that you must do that at your own peril The word Freedom means freedom from the tyranny of ideals.

Anyone reading this explication, perceptive though it is in explaining half the point of the play, would imagine Ibsen's purpose to be pure social satire very much in the tradition of something like Molière's Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, which was the tradition that Shaw ultimately aligned himself with.⁹ But The Pillars of Society is more than just an indictment of a hypocritical society; it is also a genuine attempt (albeit

perhaps not a wholly successful one) to explore one man's struggle with his conscience and its eventual victory, and it is this aspect of the drama that Shaw ignores. From the brief synopsis of the plot he gives in the Quintessence,¹⁰ it is impossible to guess that we are intended to view the three major characters, at least, as human beings with whom we can identify. The Pillars of Society comes chronologically right after Brand and Peer Gynt, those two tortured explorations of the individual psyche, and although Ibsen is indeed manifesting a greater concern with the evils of society, it is almost impossible to believe that he could abandon his earlier obsession with states of mind, with human emotions, with penetration into the depths of an individual's consciousness.

Certainly the point of The Pillars of Society is not just the redemption of Bernick, but the redemption of Bernick is important in itself in a way that, say, the change of heart of Dick Dudgeon in Shaw's The Devil's Disciple is not. When Bernick is redeemed, we are simply glad; in The Devil's Disciple we are intrigued by Dick's reasons. Ibsen wrote within a certain specific genre, the character study. He treated it straight-forwardly, and made Bernick just enough of a living character for us to identify with his eventual fate. Shaw, however, fiddles with the conventional character-study genre until it is almost unrecognizable. He gives us what we first assume is a character study, and then reveals that we have been hoodwinked and he is actually doing something quite different. But we shall deal with Shaw's character studies after discussing Ibsen's two major contributions to that genre, Brand and Peer Gynt.

One could describe virtually all of Ibsen's works as examinations of the human psyche, but these two plays above all his others fit that description, surpassing even Hedda Gabler and The Master Builder. Brand and Peer Gynt, written within a year of one another, are complementary, and deal essentially with one facet of the human soul in two of its aspects: altruism versus its distorting-mirror-image, solipsism. The message of these two plays that Shaw latched on to, of course, is that the extreme moral position taken by Brand, his all-or-nothing Christianity, is precisely as self-centered and solipsistic as the motto adopted by Peer Gynt, to thyself be sufficient. Ibsen was here investigating two possibilities, two philosophies of living that are polar opposites, yet somehow similar in their narrowness. He discarded both in despair, as can be seen from the quasi-suicidal death of Brand and the ambiguous ending of Peer Gynt, where Peer is given another chance only on condition that he change his ways.

Shaw points out that Ibsen later fuses these two philosophies into a satisfactory synthesis -- satisfactory at least to Shaw if neither to Ibsen nor to us -- in the Third Empire of Emperor and Galilean,¹¹ but it is not the philosophy that enthralls us in Brand and Peer Gynt, but Ibsen's anticipation of Freud, his exploration of the depths of the soul. Emperor and Galilean was meant by Ibsen to resolve all the doubts presented by Brand and Peer Gynt, to succeed where they failed, but ironically enough, it fails where they succeed, because the Emperor Julian can never obsess us as Brand and Peer do.

It is this aspect of Ibsen, this dive into the bottomless

well of human personality, that Shaw could never really empathize with or understand. He seems to imitate the Ibsenist character study several times -- Major Barbara and St. Joan come to mind immediately as his greatest successes, with Lady Cicely in Captain Brassbound's Conversion and Richard in The Devil's Disciple as good runners-up. But Major Barbara and St. Joan, although they are marvellously haunting plays that stay in the imagination and trouble the intellect far longer than some of Shaw's more cerebral tours de force such as Back to Methuselah, are by no means successful imitations of Ibsen, but rather successes in a wholly different genre.

Brand and Peer Gynt are complex plays in that they work on three separate levels simultaneously, but within this complexity Ibsen deals honestly with his reader. The first level is Brand or Peer, the character himself, dealing with the problem or situation of all-or-nothing Christianity or total solipsism or whatever. The next level is the attempt of Ibsen, the author, to deal with these same issues. The third level is the most highly abstracted from the consciousness of either author or character: this is the level of Ibsen drawing back, removing himself completely from the scene, and dispassionately recording the efforts of Peer or Brand to deal with the situation. Ibsen was not propagandizing for Christianity when he wrote Brand any more than he was arguing for the egocentricity of the Nietzschean Übermensch when he wrote Peer Gynt. He was interested in the characters, not their beliefs, although of course belief affects character in Ibsen. Both the plays are straightforward, if intensely complicated, studies of

the human psyche in a particular phase or stage. And this is what we expect from a play like St. Joan, too, but we don't get it.

Shaw, unlike Ibsen, was a propagandist, with a message to deliver in both Major Barbara and St. Joan. Interestingly enough, in both plays he was working with and interested in different aspects of the religious experience and its consequences, but his methods are far different from Ibsen's. Shaw gives us at first the impression that we will find, in Joan and Barbara, the kind of character analysis we found in Brand and Peer, and the beginning of both plays ^{en}orses this view. Joan is easily the most vital, the most attractive, and the most intelligent character in the opening scene with de Baudricourt, just as Barbara dominates her family through charm and force of personality. But Shaw begins to split his character interest as Ibsen never did. Brand and Peer tower head and shoulders above all other characters in their plays, demanding our absorption in them alone. But as St. Joan progresses, our sympathy and admiration are claimed by the witty courtiers, the tormented Cauchon, the wily Warwick, even by the pathetic de Stogumber. And in Major Barbara we have not one giant character but two: Barbara and Undershaft. And it is when we become aware of the division of character interest that we realize that Shaw is also dividing his thematic interest, and that he is trying to do something quite different from what Ibsen did.

No one, reading Brand, could imagine that Ibsen is suggesting to us, "Become a Christian à la Brand!" But it is highly possible

that Shaw is saying to us, "Become a Christian à la Barbara!" The difference between Shaw's and Ibsen's dramatic methods begins with this difference in message. Shaw makes us think that he is going to plumb the depths of Joan and Barbara as Ibsen anatomized the souls of Peer and Brand. But instead of becoming absorbed in the portrait, we are distracted by peripheral issues, which eventually become the main theme of the play. In Major Barbara the issue is whether or not a true Christianity can exist on benefactions from the elements of society it is seeking to exterminate. In St. Joan the theme that gradually assumes prominence is that of a corrupt church crucifying one of its saints to preserve its own power. In Androcles and the Lion and The Devil's Disciple we are forced to ask why Androcles and Lavinia and Richard are willing to die for their faith.

Shaw's purpose is deliberately to subvert and destroy the third level of awareness created by Ibsen. Ibsen says to us, in effect, "Participate with me in my withdrawal from the immediacy of this situation; let us observe it and judge it from afar" -- surely a Romantic idea if there ever was one. But Shaw says, "It is impossible and undesirable to withdraw from society," and therefore insists on reducing our sense of distance from the play, on putting us, as far as possible, in the same position as Barbara, so that we must face the same decision she does. If Shaw's propaganda is successful, we will agree with Barbara. If we do not, he has failed. This is also true of Richard and Androcles, and even to an extent of Joan.

The essential difference between a St. Joan and a Brand is

that in Brand Ibsen manages to deal with several other themes and ideas, while at the same time never really removing the focus of the play from Brand himself. In Shaw's play, on the other hand, we never really know Joan as we knew Brand, but somehow it does not bother us, because we have learned so much about her world, and the church that condemned her. This is not to imply that Ibsen is a greater playwright than Shaw, simply that they have different interests. They both use their title characters as a means to an end, the end of expressing various other themes, but the difference is that Ibsen works through Brand, while Shaw works past Joan.

Perhaps, if he had forced himself to, Shaw could have written as deep and narrow a character study as either of the two Ibsen plays we've looked at. But it wouldn't have been particularly interesting, because Shaw himself didn't find character interesting. For him, character was based on society and situation, and was meaningless without these contexts. Of Shaw's view of the relationship between character and its surroundings, Alfred Turco says:

'Shaw's view of the place of the self in the universe [is that] by doing a higher will one is automatically achieving self-realization Where the self is all, experience subverts solipsism The theme of The Devil's Disciple and Androcles and the Lion is that a man finds his "true profession" or "real faith" in what both plays call the "hour of trial."¹²

Brand and Peer Gynt seem to have little, if any, connection with their backgrounds or surroundings, and leave no lasting impression on the people around them. They are poised in air for a moment to allow us to see them, and then returned to a vacuum. But Shaw

makes sure that we know the backgrounds of Barbara, of Joan, of Richard, and that we find out exactly who^{by} their decisions will influence. Even in Androcles the alternatives offered to Androcles and Lavinia, the choices made by the cowardly Spintho and the thick-headed Ferrovius, are laid out in detail, and we are made to see both what forced Spintho and Ferrovius into their decisions, and the results of the decisions. The "hour of trial" occurs when a Shavian character sees why he is what he is, what has made him so, and what will happen if he continues to be so. This flash of understanding of one's place in the social and evolutionary order in Shaw corresponds most closely in Ibsen to something like Brand's final realization that "He is the God of Love."¹³ Nothing demonstrates more effectively the gulf between the two men than this: that for Ibsen, an ultimate confrontation can only be with God or self; while for Shaw it can only be with society or humankind, which is what created the self in the first place.

* * *

We have seen in the preceding section that Ibsen is interested above all in the individual, and Shaw in that macrocosm of the single being, society as a whole. We shall now try to examine how this affects their different attitudes toward men and women, and toward romantic and sexual love.

Shaw, as well as being a Socialist, was a fervent believer in a beneficent Creative Evolution, an ongoing intelligent process that had as its final goal the evolution of man into the Superman. The broad scope of his vision, while admiring of the

occasional heroes and heroines thrown up by evolution before the entire race has reached the stage they have reached, necessitates a smaller conception of the more ordinary human being. The usual individual, for Shaw, is a link in a never-ending chain, and to linger over-long on one link, fascinating though it may be, can ultimately only hinder the progress towards the Superman.

An inevitable corollary to this view of humanity is the perception of romantic love as a positively villainous agent in the progress of evolution. Romantic love creates great tragic heroes and heroines, sets certain beings apart from other beings whether by the intensity of their own love or the intensity with which their lovers regard them, and eventually succeeds in obfuscating the essential truth, as far as Shaw is concerned, that although not all alike, we are all equally important or equally immaterial to the evolutionary process. An individual may be admirable if, like Joan or Barbara, he or she does something to enable the human race to realize its potential. But if the individual is only considered important by virtue of his or her attachment to another individual? No, says Shaw emphatically. And from the position that romantic love, or at least an excess of it, is an evil, he moves easily to the position that in fact it does not exist at all!

Let us remember here that, as well as an active exponent of the philosophy of Creative Evolution, Shaw was also very much a product of the Victorian era, and shared its confusion about Eros: on one hand, love between men and women was celebrated as the greatest good attainable by all from poets to politicians; on

the other, sex was considered vile and degrading. To seize the Life Force was a legitimate excuse for the sexual instinct, yet at the same time avoiding the embarrassing romanticism of the poets and using only the most clinical terminology was Shaw's solution to this dichotomy in his nature and his culture. Shaw is a Puritan, yes, but about romantic love, not about sex, as many of his biographers have accused him of being. ¹⁴

By proclaiming that love was a device used by the Life Force to produce ever superior children, as he says most convincingly in Man and Superman and over and over again in later plays, Shaw laid himself open to critics who claimed he was incapable of creating real human beings and real emotional situations. His official biographer, Archibald Henderson, tried valiantly to defend him from such criticism, with mixed results:

Shaw's concern was for the normal life of normal people. Aberrations and irregularities had no interest for him: they were negligible as merely trivial and personal incidents The comedy, the tragedy of romantic love affairs were shattered for dramatic purposes on Shaw's startling denial that sex is a personal matter To him Romeo and Juliet are leaves in the autumn wind, carried away by forces of nature that care nothing for Montagues and Capulets There was no drama in that for Shaw. But when the individual is not blinded; when he is conscious of his plight and struggles to keep his footing; when his unclouded judgement warns him against his infatuation, then begins the conflict that makes Shavian drama possible, and Romeo and Juliet develop into Tanner and Ann Whitefield, Charteris and Julia, Magnus and Orinthia. The effect at first was so novel that many rash critics declared that Shaw's love scenes could not have been founded on experience. By this time it is clear that they could not have been founded on anything else. ¹⁵

Henderson is trying to defend Shaw against two accusations -- that

being emotionally cold and that of being an incompetent dramatist -- with one defense. Yet he himself actually endorses Shaw's critics, as we shall see when we compare his description of the plot of Man and Superman with the actuality: Ann Whitefield, faced with two choices of a mate, a poet who adores her and a revolutionary who flees her. She chooses the revolutionary, Jack Tanner, who agrees to marry her only after a dream-vision in which the purpose of Creative Evolution is revealed to him. Tanner is not, as Henderson would have him, a Romeo with added awareness who nevertheless succumbs to an irrational passion -- rather he understands and accepts the fallacious nature of romantic love, as Shaw would have his readers do.

Shaw's theme here is that this seemingly unorthodox situation is actually what happens every day, and he plays on this contrast of actuality and image for all it's worth. But Maurice Valency points out that this is not Shaw's first treatment of this idea. Several years before he created in Candida a nearly identical situation, where Candida chooses between two men the one who can be of greater help to her in fulfilling her function as a helpmeet and mother.¹⁶ What is different about Man and Superman is that the emphasis has shifted from the personal situation of the characters to the microcosmic character of the situation itself. Shaw said in his preface with total frankness that he wanted to universalize his characters as much as possible. "Ann is Everywoman, [although] every woman is not an Ann."¹⁷

As his view of Evolution loomed ever larger, Shaw's interest

in portraying individuals grew ever less, and his use of characters as not just people but mouthpieces for and examples of Shavian doctrine grew ever greater. In time we come to feel that Shaw even sacrificed his feminist principles for his evolutionist ones, because in Don Juan in Hell he turns around and contradicts the sexual egalitarianism of the Quintessence and early plays like Mrs. Warren's Profession and The Philanderer. Women, he says here, are completely other than men, almost a separate species with wholly different goals and different means to accomplish them. 18

This remarkable shift in perspective undoubtedly labels Shaw as a complete sexist, at first glance. But before condemning him, let us remember that his two most Darwinian and evolutionary plays, Man and Superman and Back to Methuselah, were written nearly thirty years apart, and between them falls such a tour de force of feminism as Major Barbara, not to mention constant references to the necessity for feminism in such a highly evolutionary comedy as You Never Can Tell. Is it possible to reconcile these apparently contradictory views of women? Alfred Turco, defending Shaw against charges of woman-hatred, says:

The old charge that Shaw's view of women is misogynous does not necessarily stem from mistaking the qualities with which the dramatist has endowed Ann Whitefield and Violet Robinson. But it is a sad indication of the persistence of stock responses that readers have sometimes assumed that only a misogynist would portray women as efficient and self-assured! The point is not that Shaw dislikes women, but that he does like efficiency; furthermore, he knows that the Ann Whitefields and the Violet Robinsons of the world can play the Tanners and Tavys off the stage every time For contemporary readers, the complaint is less likely to be that Shaw has

failed to make his heroine womanly than that he has directed her efficiency toward exclusively maternal ends. It is certainly true that the "wonderfully dutiful" Ann is both hypocritical and monomaniacal when it comes to stalking a mate. Seen in historical perspective, however, this insistence upon the female's pursuit of a potential father for her children was an attempt, not to reduce women to a stereotype, but to challenge the Victorian stereotype of Woman as a pure, simple, and sexless creature. Ann Whitefield's aggressive eugenics was Shaw's retort to the fantasies of an age that had come close to denying that women were physical beings at all!

Turco goes on to quote Shaw's preface to Man and Superman:

We laugh at the haughty American nation because it makes the negro clean its boots and then proves the moral and physical inferiority of the negro by the fact that he is a shoeblack; but we ourselves throw the whole drudgery of creation on one sex, and then imply that no female of any womanliness or delicacy would initiate any effort in that direction. There are no limits to male hypocrisy in this matter.

Although this is one possible defense, Shaw can be neither wholly condemned or wholly cleared of sexism. For a context to this ambivalence, let us look at an earlier play, Misalliance, which contains two very Shavian women: an Ann Whitefield-figure, Hypatia, who single-mindedly pursues her chosen mate, and a female acrobat and airplane pilot, Lina, who disdains home and domesticity, a kind of sexually neutral artist figure. Although a great deal of the comedy of the play arises from the inability of the male characters to see this sexual neutrality of Lina's, and as a consequence their proposing to her and being rejected one by one, and although Shaw's sympathy is clearly far more with her than with Hypatia, the verdict of the play is clear: the Linas of this world, beautiful and admirable though they may be,

are freaks; Hypatia is the pattern of most womanhood.

Shaw was originally forced into this extremely unpleasant position by his evolutionist ideals which made him declare romantic love non-existent, and women a separate species. Ibsen, who was also interested in the concept of evolution in a mild way -- remember the prophesied Third Empire in Emperor and Galilean -- but not nearly as overmastered by it as Shaw was, avoided this dilemma. Like an honorable nineteenth-century playwright, he admits the supreme importance of romantic love, in some cases as a positive force (Thea Elvsted's influence over Lövborg, the nobility of Wangel's behavior toward Ellida, the spiritual companionship of Rosmer and Rebecca and Rubek and Irene) and in others as a destructive one (Hedda Gabler's incitement of her lover to suicide, Beata Rosmer's baneful influence over her husband's life, the infatuation of Solness for Hilde Wangel). This permits him to carry out in his plays the feminist principles proclaimed by Shaw.

Almost invariably, for Ibsen, the psychological motivation and actual behavior of women is identical to that of men. If, after all, Shaw himself were not struggling with the anatomy-is-destiny idea of Creative Evolution, this would be true of him as well. Ibsen, of course, does not have to distort his feminism, and can express it directly. His two greatest explorations of the feminine psyche are Hedda Gabler and A Doll's House, and we see that Hedda is the female equivalent of a Lövborg or a Judge Brack in temperament, more dangerous only because she is caged by convention. A Doll's House, also, is nearly reversed in

Little Eyolf. Here, instead of a dependent wife, we have a dependent husband, and once again a crisis in the relationship results, although it is resolved considerably differently from the crisis of A Doll's House. Human beings in Ibsen, by and large, behave the same way whether they are men or women, their behavior depending rather on their circumstances. A Rebecca West, for instance, is just as powerful a figure as a Gregers Werle, and ultimately just as noble as a Dr. Stockmann. Irene and Rubek can return to their soul-companionship because they are equals, and want the same thing, rather than having different needs. Even Ibsen's seductresses and sensation-seekers -- Hilde Wangel and Hedda Gabler -- have their male counterparts -- Judge Brack, to a certain extent Peer Gynt.

Finally, the difference between the Shavian and Ibsenist conceptions of woman can be epitomised by Shaw's Candida and Ibsen's Nora Helmer. Candida, faced with the same situation as Nora, makes the opposite decision; she decides to stay with her husband because he needs her, and with him she can fulfill her mothering role. But Nora decides that her first duty is to herself as an individual, and goes.

* * *

We arrive finally at our last question, the plight of the individual who is a member of a somehow imperfect society, whether flawed by corruption or by mere uncongeniality to the above individual. The views of Ibsen and Shaw on this question are to a large extent corollaries of their attitudes towards the previous two questions, and it is not difficult to guess

what they are. Where Ibsen urges alienation from society, Shaw on the contrary argues reform from within.

It is close to impossible to locate in an Ibsen play the most minimal endorsement of society. Ibsen's plays can be put into clearly-differentiated categories -- the symbolic melodramas of the soul such as Brand, Peer Gynt, and When We Dead Awaken; the broadly critical social satires where characterization is at a minimum (or at least a minimum for Ibsen) such as The League of Youth and The Pillars of Society; and the so-called problem plays, which deal with both individuals and social issues such as Ghosts, Rosmersholm, and A Doll's House. This last category is thus almost a fusion of the first two, and it is in this last group that we find Ibsen's most effective social criticism, since he is above all a master of characterization.

Ibsen, as we have stated before, was primarily interested in people and only secondarily in the social forces that shaped them. While he had an acute sense of social injustice, he did not see its far-reaching consequences, as Shaw did. Shaw, for example, would have condemned the townsfolk of Enemy of the People for inefficiency as well as venality; surely, he would have pointed out, it will eventually end in disaster for the townspeople to conceal the contamination of their baths, so why not reveal it now and perhaps salvage at least the good reputation of their spa for honesty, if not for effectiveness? We can, however, only speculate upon what he would have said about Enemy of the People because in the chapter allotted to it in the Quintessence, he dismisses the play itself with a perfunctory

description of the plot, and spends the rest of the chapter discussing the merits and disadvantages of various political systems.²¹

This instance may be seen as fairly typical of Shaw's and Ibsen's divergence, because Enemy of the People was an extremely important play for Ibsen, a turning point in the progress of his playwriting technique. . . The Pillars of Society and The League of Youth inevitably strike us, for all their satiric power, as to a certain extent weak and unsatisfying, because they after all contain little more than social satire. Ibsen did not have the satiric power of a Swift or a Jonson, their quasi-delight in hypocrisy as an artistic perversion of a social norm. He saw things clearly, straight, in black and white, and herein lies much of his weakness, but also much of his effectiveness. Or rather, perhaps it would be more illuminating to say that while he saw men as infinitely fluid and changeable, he could see institutions such as governments only as fixed and static, good or bad. The reverse is true of Shaw.

In Enemy of the People, Ibsen discovered for the first time that he could bring home more powerfully the vileness and sheer wrongness of a social institution by portraying its effects on an individual, or individuals. It is here that he first proclaims the interdependency of man and his institutions; here that he realizes for the first time wholly and completely that a corrupt society will create corrupt men, as well as the other way around. Bernick of The Pillars of Society is one of the maleficent individuals who corrupts his society, and we get the vague impression at the end of the play that the little harbor town will probably be somewhat cleansed by his confession,

but that does not particularly interest us. But the destruction or vindication of Stockmann immediately interests us far more deeply, because he is so much more of a person, such a highly-developed character, and the eventual rapprochement he makes with society is a matter of considerably greater concern to us.

Here, in other words, Ibsen discovers that he can use his real talent, the depiction of individuals, to demonstrate the wrongs of society far better than the clumsy caricatures he employs in The Pillars of Society and The League of Youth. He sees here that the situation of an individual, or the effect of a situation on an individual, can be used as a symbol or microcosm of the effects upon society as a whole of its own corruption, a lesson he puts to terrifying advantage a few years after Enemy of the People in Rosmersholm.

It is indicative of Shaw's incomprehension of this lesson to Ibsen that he cannot see any real difference of method or ideology in Enemy of the People from The League of Youth and The Pillars of Society, and in fact commends Enemy of the People for being almost an exact political sequel to The Pillars of Society. The cycle of corrupt people = corrupt society = more corrupt people was clear to Shaw from his first play, Widowers' Houses; it never burst upon him as a great revelation as it did upon Ibsen, and possibly as a consequence it was never of any particular momentousness to him.

Let us now remember the definitions of synthesists and analysts that we looked at earlier in this paper. Synthesists, we recall, are the natural systematizers of the world, who eventually become its natural bureaucrats but also its natural

reformers, being convinced that one can create a useful and effective system of anything on earth, and keep it functioning by applying it correctly. Analysts, on the other hand, see nothing but evil in systems, and spend their lives taking systems apart, examining every component and then never replacing any of them, because while they may approve the separate elements that make up a system, they can never approve the whole. They then become the natural revolutionaries and iconoclasts of the world. We see now more and more clearly that Shaw belongs to the first class, and Ibsen to the second.

Shaw seems to have almost no particular feelings about the inevitable corruption of all systems. Systems exist, he says, and one must simply make the best of them, and go on improving them until they are perfect, not dispense with them entirely. The thing that appealed to Shaw so strongly in religion, and perhaps destroyed it for Ibsen, is that it is in its ideal form the ultimate system of creation, of living, of belief, of everything. The idea of the Creative Life Force is a system, a neat and orderly plan in which we can discern a purpose for our existence, and instruction as to how we should use it. For Ibsen, precisely the exciting thing about life in the raw as experienced by, say, Brand, as opposed to the cosy existence of his flock below him on the mountain, is that it is random, it is unpredictable, inexplicable, awe-inspiringly mysterious. The element that creates the excitement in Ibsen's plays is the constant tension between the individual, who perceives the unmeasurable quality of the universe and proceeds to act on that premise, and the society which surrounds him, which is dedicated

to the preservation of the status quo. Shaw, who spent his life trying to fit data into descriptions of the way the universe ran, had almost no sympathy with this viewpoint.

From these observations of Ibsen, we eventually arrive at the doctrine implicit in his work, although not always specifically stated, that one must, to achieve any kind of greatness or understanding, leave society and withdraw into oneself. While Brand is in some ways a monster, there is no doubt that he is superior to his parishioners. Nora must defy the dictates of society to truly find herself. Mrs. Alving, who as Shaw perceptively remarks is what Nora would have been had she not left her husband,²² suffers spiritual annihilation as a punishment for performing her social duty. Dr. Stockmann, who seems at first to be re-entering society, is instead creating a tiny anti-societal universe for himself and a few chosen others. Even Peer Gynt, whose ending some critics have read as a vindication of social doctrines of unselfishness and altruism, can only attain salvation by leaving the society where he has become a shallow success and withdrawing into the forest to establish a sincere relationship with the one human being who has truly loved him. Ibsen's enclaves of meaningful understanding of life can occasionally be stretched to include two (Peer and Solveig, Rosmer and Rebecca, Irene and Rubek), but it is essentially designed for one (Nora, Brand, Hedda, Solness, Stockmann), and can never include more.

At the opposite pole from Ibsen, the spiritual hermit, stands Shaw, the social being. He mocks at the pretensions of the ali-

enated artist in The Sanity of Art,²³ and hammers home over and over that we cannot abandon society, because it is the only game in town. It alone can provide us with a system for living that is most useful, most economical, most practical. Plato's statement in the Republic that men are forced into communities for practical reasons can be taken as Shaw's starting point.²⁴ The institutions of society and community are indubitably, to Shaw, the best way to cure existing evils, and even if some of these evils are created by society itself, that does not indicate the necessity of abolishing the institution, but rather of reforming the abuse. One of the characters in Shaw's glimpse into the future, Farfetched Fables, makes a statement about the human body that can be applied to the body politic:

When one of its [the body's] organs went wrong, they did not set it right, but cut it out and left the patient to recover as best he could. The amazing thing is that a few of them even survived it.²⁵

That Shaw could see the attractions of the hermetic life, the withdrawal from the corruption of society, is demonstrated in his second play, Mrs. Warren's Profession. It too presents its heroine Vivie Warren (and by extension the audience) with a decision: should she remain with her mother and thus silently condone her mother's career of brothel management, or should she abandon her? She finally chooses the latter alternative, and rejects mother, friends, and fiancé to make a new life and career for herself.

Vivie is certainly the most sympathetic character of the

play, and it is fairly clear that we are meant to agree with her choice. Our last view of her shows her as happy and self-confident of the rightness of her decision, despite the departure of her mother in tears a few moments before. Yet, on a second reading, we begin to feel somewhat uncomfortable with Vivie, to consider her unnecessarily callous, and to see her new life not as an escape to freedom, but as an extremely straight and narrow solution to her problems. She has, let us remember, made it clear that she will not participate for an instant in her mother's life, or even try to put an end to her mother's exploitation of other women.

This last is what makes her ultimately unsatisfactory as a G.B.S. heroine. Our clue to this is her statement of pure pragmatism to her mother, when she says that they have both chosen avenues to success, and the only difference between them is that she, Vivie, is respectable.²⁶ And indeed, how are the wrongs of a society which first created Mrs. Warren and then permits her to flourish righted by Vivie's virtuous abstention from her mother's profits? Vivie's moral position, finally, is only one notch above that of Harry Trench in Widower's Houses, who agrees to marry a slum landlord's daughter and continue oppressing the slum dwellers when he finds out that his own income is derived from the same source. It is true that Vivie refuses to be an active member of her mother's profession, but we sense in her no awareness that this is an evil in which she has already participated (since it is from this source that the money for her education came) and that she herself should rectify it. Shaw does not

express his distrust of Vivie's solution other than obliquely, perhaps because he had not yet arrived at the point where he could state it specifically at the time that he wrote Mrs. Warren. Fifteen years later, however, he redressed this old wrong by writing Major Barbara, in which Barbara avoids the trap that Vivie (and perhaps her creator as well at that point) falls into.

Barbara Undershaft, the Salvationist whose father is the world's greatest arms manufacturer, is placed in exactly the same position as Vivie Warren. Like Vivie, she is a woman of firm moral principles; like Vivie she has been supported all her life by a parent's violation of those principles; and like Mrs. Warren's Profession, Major Barbara centers around her confrontation with this fact. But here the similarity ends, because Major Barbara is a far greater play than Mrs. Warren, because Shaw shows here that not only the life of one woman, but all of society is subsidized by the professions of Andrew Undershaft and Mrs. Warren, thus addressing himself not only to the issue of a social evil (prostitution in the first play; poverty in the second), but also to the larger question of how an individual should respond to a corrupt society.

Major Barbara is Shaw's Pilgrim's Progress, his most successful and most explicit treatise on what choices to make and how to confront the problems of life. Barbara herself is one of Shaw's glorious creations, and her final speech is perhaps the finest single paragraph Shaw ever wrote. She, like Lina in Misalliance, is a fabulous freak, the one woman in a million who was born to affect humanity not by her participation in the evolutionary pro-

cess of bearing children to create the Superman, but by her actions and ideas. Shaw expresses his opinion of society-hating hermits through her:

I escaped into a Paradise of prayer and hymn-singing for a few moments and was happy. But then you [her father] came and showed me that all of life was one.²⁷

Barbara escapes the trap that both Vivie and Bernick have fallen into: as Bernick excuses his dishonesty on the grounds that his society would crumble without it, and Vivie dissociates herself from her mother because her mother's profession is a social abomination, so Barbara could take refuge in conventional piety and abandon her father's cannon foundry simply because it is wicked. But these are purely personal solutions to what are more than personal problems, and touch nothing outside of oneself; Barbara knows better than this. This refusal of Vivie's and Bernick's to see themselves as necessarily participating members of society, this detachment from the actions of other men constitutes for Ibsen the path to salvation at the same time as it constitutes for Shaw the ultimate sin. As Barbara herself, warns us, to turn one's back on publicans and sinners is to turn one's back on life.²⁸

* * *

Now that we have arrived at the end of our survey of the difference between Shaw and Ibsen, we are able to look back and see if our proofs have been convincing. The difference in interest and focus seems indubitable; what troubles us now is the terminology. The words romantic and realist are both so heavily laden

with other meanings that we have a great deal of trouble fitting them to the concepts that we are talking about. In this context, it would perhaps be instructive to examine Northrop Frye's definitions of comic and tragic drama. When Frye says that in tragedy the hero-figure is alienated from society, while in comedy he or she is reintegrated into it, the similarities with our statements about Ibsen the romantic and Shaw the realist immediately strikes us. So, for Frye Ibsen is a tragedian and Shaw a comedian. This solves many of the problems we encountered with our former romantic-versus-realist terminology, and connects them both to a broad dramatic tradition, as well.²⁹

These terms too, however, cannot be used with absolute security. Maurice Valency, stressing Ibsen's use of irony, defines him as a comic writer,³⁰ and Alfred Turco suggests that more of Shaw's plays are tragedies than has hitherto been recognized.³¹ So, no terminology can precisely express the differences that we are trying to delineate.

What, I think, we can learn above all from the breakdown of whatever terms we use is that this kind of critical approach, while useful, has its limitations. Both Frye's terms and my own assume that the primary values to be applied here are societal ones, and this does work, as we have seen, for a Shaw, but not for an Ibsen. To do Ibsen justice, we need a truly romantic criticism, which will evaluate him on wholly aesthetic grounds rather than measuring him by how far he and his characters relate to society. E.M. Forster says of The Master Builder:

The plot unfolds logically, the diction is flat and austere the chief characters are an elderly couple and a young woman who is determined to get a thrill out of her visit, even if it entails breaking her host's neck. Hilde is a minx But on the other side she touches Gerd and the Rat-Wife and the Button-Molder, she is a lure and an assessor, she comes from the non-human and asks for her kingdom and for castles in the air that shall rest on solid masonry, and from the moment she knocks on the door poetry filters into the play. Solness, when he listened to her, was neither a dead man nor an old fool. No prose memorial can be raised to him, and consequently Ibsen himself can say nothing when he falls from the scaffolding.³²

Forster uses poetry as a metaphor for something that we have called romanticism, but what he means is clear.

We can therefore forgive Ibsen for having dated as a social reformer; which we could not forgive in Shaw, and do not need to. The social issues raised by Ibsen -- the tyranny of nineteenth-century idealism -- are in most cases as dead as the nineteenth century; Ibsen remains a master playwright. The issues raised by Shaw, on the other hand -- how to construct a society without poverty or injustice -- are still so alive that it is a mark of Shaw's dramatic skill that we can overlook them to perceive the great dramatist that he is. Let us, at last, stop trying to compare and measure these two writers against one another, and accept them both as great, and radically different in their genius.

Footnotes

¹Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters 1874-1897, ed. Dan. H. Laurence. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1965), pp. 257-58.

²Bernard Shaw, John Bull's Other Island, How He Lied to Her Husband, Major Barbara (London: Constable and Co., 1931), pp. 203-204 (preface to Major Barbara).

³Shaw, Collected Letters, pp. 125-423.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Martin Meisel, Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 65.

⁶Julian Kaye, Bernard Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Tradition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), p. 193.

⁷We are given detailed descriptions of the slum dwellers' houses in Widowers' Houses, in Mrs. Warren she describes her life before going into prostitution, in Pygmalion Eliza's life is described to us; Ridgeon in The Doctor's Dilemma speaks callously of the washerwoman he crippled, we see the poor in Major Barbara, and we have the sweatshop scene in The Millionairess.

⁸Bernard Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism, The Perfect Wagnerite, The Sanity of Art (London: Constable and Co., 1932), pp. 63-64.

⁹Kaye, op. cit.

¹⁰Shaw, Quintessence, op. cit.

¹¹Shaw, Quintessence, pp. 55-57.

¹²Alfred Turco, Shaw's Moral Vision (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 135

¹³Henrik Ibsen, Collected Works, ed. and trans. William Archer, Vol. III (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 347.

¹⁴Arthur Nethercot, Men and Supermen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 77-125.

¹⁵Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw (Cincinnati: Stewart and Kidd Co., 1911), p. 454.

¹⁶Maurice Valency, The Cart and the Trumpet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 224-225.

¹⁷Bernard Shaw, Complete Plays with Prefaces, Vol. III (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1962), p. 478.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 530-582 (Don Juan in Hell)

¹⁹Turco, pp. 145-146.

²⁰Ibid., p. 146

²¹Shaw, Quintessence, pp. 73-75.

²²Ibid., p. 67.

²³Shaw, The Sanity of Art, p. 330.

²⁴Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, ed., Collected Dialogues of Plato (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 575-844.

²⁵Shaw, Complete Plays, Vol. VI, p. 507.

²⁶Ibid., Vol. III, p. 398.

²⁷Shaw, Major Barbara, p. 338.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 33-52.

³⁰Valency, p. 209.

³¹Turco, p. 256.

³²Forster, E.M., "Ibsen the Romantic," in Ibsen, ed. Rolf Fjelde (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), pp. 177-78.

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