

# Shaw the Poet

EVER since I was a young man I have tried to fathom the irresistible attraction of Shaw's plays. I started with sociological theories about the peculiarities of Shavian drama, but after forty years I give up and confess myself beaten. I have come to the conclusion that I overlooked the obvious—that Shaw was above all a poet.

True, his plays abound in economics and politics and other unpoetic matters. The theory of rent is propounded in "Widower's Louses," and the theory of surplus value in "Man and Superman." Here as in "Mrs. Warren's Profession" the anonymous nature of capitalist incomes is exposed. "Major Barbara" would be pointless but for the iron laws of the market. These compel her father, the armaments maker, to exploit the poor in order to provide them with employment, and to produce instruments of death in order to create conditions of peaceable life.

The comic figures are usually the "idealists" who are innocent of economics. They are shocked to discover that they are unwittingly benefiting from the exploitation of misery and vice.

That's why, I suppose, Shaw's games are often criticised as being not of real, but only embodiments of political and economic propositions, or flesh and blood, but mere abstractions, with tags attached to them to show what they stand for, such as Speculator, Tenant, Owner, Brothel, Armaments Manufacturer, Trade Unionist, and so on. And the result, it is alleged, comes from the very dialogue and the absurdity of the situations in which his heroised heroines find themselves entangled.



This rather reminds me of my own early views of Shaw's comedies. His heroes, I wrote at the time, remain passive and the circumstances around them change. The hero clings to his unplaced opinions about himself and the world, but finds it increasingly difficult to uphold them. In trying to extricate himself, he gets more and more involved. Eventually, his views are shown up as mere empty "ideologies" which are exploded when confronted by the inexorable facts.

Under capitalism these facts are

To-day I strongly feel that this was so much nonsense. For, whether my theories were right or wrong, they certainly did not explain the drama of Shaw's plays. Shaw could never have been a good playwright in virtue of them, only in spite of them. Economics or no economics—at Shaw's touch we are in fairland.

It would be vain to argue that John Bunyan, the theologian, was not a

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poet. How otherwise could he have filled the imagination of generations with the image of his heroes and the scenes of their adventures? Even less could it be denied that Dante was a great poet, merely because he worked pedantically on the scholastic scheme of Thomas Aquinas and people the universe of the dead in accordance with Thomist doctrine.



Shaw acts in a similar way, with the difference that not theology, as in the age of Dante or Bunyan, but economics is at the heart of the time. Precisely because they had so clear and concrete notions of the invisible realities of the world in which they lived, Bunyan's and Dante's imagination was free to create figures as alive to-day as when they were first conceived. But economics is no less real to us than theology was to our ancestors. Now as then, the human problem itself is put, only in a different form.

Incidentally, Shaw himself is at his best, when by the chance of the historical setting he indulges in theology. Androcles, Joan or Barbara are religious personalities; but they are also among his most poetic figures.

As in the paintings of Brughel, the hater of Popes, where countless fantastic fiends and devils peopled the canvas, so with Shaw the critic of an immoral society, an infinite

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ability of running the world, he is compelled to rebuild it according to God's design.

The climate of Shaw's plays is the climate of pure poetry. Sometimes the weather is pleasant, sometimes unpleasant; some plays are for Puritans, some are not.

The wonders of "Saint Joan" are akin to those of the Avenging Angel of the "Simpleton," and Androcles, the martyr, lives in the same world of modest miracles by which Blanco Posnet, the horse thief, is converted; and the same note of idyllic tragedy runs through the "Devil's Disciple," "Candida" or "Doctor's Dilemma."

The social cosmology of "Man and Superman" foreshadowed the prophecy of "Back to Methuselah." The range of rhythm is as vast as that which separates Shakespeare's "King John" from "The Tempest." But whether rain or sunshine, foul or fair, it is such stuff as dreams are made on.

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