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George Bernard Shaw's Puritanical Approach in *Plays for Puritans*

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George Bernard Shaw's puritanical approach is very pragmatic in nature. He preached what is good for the society and rectified the bad of the society with realistic approach. He believed in true confession of reviving the society through his erratic ideas and reformed the world with pure religion of faith in himself through defying the existing parameters of the church and society in the twentieth century. He took the help of his imaginative characters in the plays and represented each and every single problem of the society and made the audience to think rather than to amuse. He puts his characters in our situations and in our contexts so that every audience thrills with surprise and come out of the theatre with lots of potentials to change the society.

"The original puritans were an English religious non-conformist group in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who objected to ritual and priest-craft. They were the fore-runners of the present day Free Churches. They lived austere and believed wholly in the Bible as an infallible guide to faith and conduct. The word, puritan, has since become a common noun for any person of strict morals who avoids self-indulgence and sensual pleasure and condemns it in others."¹

Puritans are those who strongly endeavour to revive morals against ebbing ideas of utilitarian attitude towards the society. As Trevelyan says "the English of all classes formed in the Nineteenth Century a strongly Protestant nation; most of them were religious and most of them (including the utilitarians and Agnostics) were serious with that strong preoccupation about morality which is the merit and danger of the Puritan Character."²

During the Elizabethan age, both Shakespeare and Ben Johnson took the puritans to task in as much as they were opposed to the theatre. Shakespeare ridicules Puritanism through Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Ben Johnson satirises the puritans thoroughly in the *Bartholomew Fair* mainly through the character of Zeal-of-the Land Busy.

Shaw's anti-puritan attitude is effectively and artistically dramatised in the *Three Plays for Puritans*. *The Devil's Disciple* is a scathing satire on puritanical faith hardened into mere conventions, besides he debunks contemporary romantic melodrama. In *Caesar and Cleopatra*, he exposes and ridicules the concept of hero and hero-worships and attacks the traditions of legal and permissible ways of revenge in the society. Besides, Shaw dramatizes "the folly and wickedness of glorifying human vindictiveness by romantic codes of honour and institution in systems of jurisprudence."³ *The Devil's Disciple*, the first of the *Three Plays for Puritans*, discriminates further the moral positioning of characters in Shaw's comedies and thus sharpens our sense of the contrast. The moral underpinning of the play is a kind of vitalism, a better term for it than Shaw's prefatory phrase "diabolonian ethics"⁴, but it is no less a melodrama for that.

“Shaw was becoming deeply committed to an ideal of “creative evolution,” a two-pronged attack on both the rich and the poor remained an important part of his political philosophy, but what was required also was raising the moral level of the individual, and the principal agency of this improvement was the will, an unconscious force but one working inexorably and capable of enlisting something like conscious participation (“a will of which I am a part” is Andrew Undershaft’s phrasing of the idea).”⁵

This play, labelled by Shaw, “A Melodrama”, also belongs to that nineteenth-century popular form of melodrama in which a historical figure enters into a fully fictional plot, as General Burgoyne does here. Burgoyne, a Shavian realist, who contributes a number of sharp remarks about the conduct of the American Revolution and the play is set in puritanical, revolutionary New Hampshire of 1777. The people are the puritans, exemplified by Mrs. Dudgeon, a dour self-righteous nag. As Richard is clearly a handsome here, and perhaps the audience’s loyalties are not torn as much as they should be by his announced affiliation with Satan. The play is a delightful, fast-paced combination of melodrama and farce. Only Shaw could look at the heroic confrontations of British and would-be-American soldiers during the American Revolution and make it matter for a comedy with a melodramatic theme. But the Shavian wit is here in plentiful amounts and even the most sombre of characters speak with underlying sarcasm. The sardonic comments roll off Dick’s lips with wonderful grace and condescension. His harsh, truthful comments about the British soldiers and red-tape-filled bureaucracy are true gems and he maintains as much style and insight as his major lacks. The playwright is at his best when he takes on organized religion. The play is a brilliant comedy. The plot is a clever twist of personal circumstances set amidst the great public events of the American Revolution. It balances private motives of greed and acquisitiveness against high aspirations for liberty, independence and self-sacrifice.

It dabbles in romance but stands on genuine affection. Perhaps more than in any other Shaw play, its hero and heroine are people of feeling rather than thought and act freely on their instinctive knowledge of what is right and wrong. It is also a dark comedy and a critique of war. As well as using the stock devices of melodrama, Shaw writes in the preface that he unashamedly borrowed from previous works, “Mrs. Dudgeon being drawn from Mrs. Clennam in Dickens’s ‘Little Dorrit’ and Dick Dudgeon’s willingness to go the gallows for another man deriving from Sidney Carton’s sacrifice in *A Tale of Two Cities*.”⁶ Melodrama was attractive to Shaw at the beginning of his dramatic career because it incorporated certain ideals, attitudes, beliefs, values, which an audience accept virtually without question but which he aimed to undermine. Thus he retains the form of melodrama but radically alters the content, his aims being to tackle the large numbers of shams, repressions, sentimentalities, insincerities, and ideal with which, he claims, the English identity and take pride in. Two of the ideals that Shaw sets out to attack in this play are the ideal of the family and the ideal of marriage.

The killing scene of Julius Caesar is done in campy style as the soothsayer saysm “Beware the Ides of March” to which Caesar replies, “What the hell is the Ides of March” and the sayer say, “It is the fifteenth of March” and Caesar replies, “Why, that’s today.”⁷ In the days before critics came to terms with moral ambiguity, many critics did take sides, but half of them claimed that, Shakespeare was justifying the assassination and the other half that he was condemning it. Virtually every character is ambivalent. There can be no doubting Brutus’ integrity, but

honourable men have perpetrated much evil. “Cassius’ motives are highly suspect, but that still allows for the possibility that he might be doing the right deed for the wrong reason.”⁸

In any case many of the moral and political questions posed are dilemma questions, that is, questions to which there never have been and never will be absolute answers: for example, “whether the end justified the means, and whether public loyalties should overrule private loyalties. These are questions Ibsen and Brecht were still asking centuries later, and to which they found opposite answers in consecutive plays, or in the same play.”⁹ “Is it too harsh to suggest that Caesar is in the play only to be assassinated? He is all things to all men.”¹⁰ We see Caesar through many pairs of eyes, and each is a different Caesar. At the two extremes there do Mark Antony, and the weak present megalomaniac Caesar belittled by Cassius the god-like Caesar yet. Caesar does not present a problem to Antony or Cassius, for each is aware of only one Caesar, but Brutus is aware of both and others between. For him Caesar the military hero, Caesar the perfect man, Caesar the tyrant and Caesar the loyal friend are indivisible. “Shaw’s play tells the story of an aging Caesar, in pursuit of his rival, Pompey, coming to Egypt and stumbling into a royal court battle between young Ptolemy and his sister, Cleopatra, regarding the succession to the throne.”¹¹ Shaw’s play, first produced in 1906, was written as a kind of prologue to the events portrayed in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The play begins with a prologue, “adapted from Shaw usually omitted prologue spoken by the Egyptian god Ra, who from the perspective of eternity, sees human endeavour as vanity”¹² – “the dust heaps on which ye slave, and which ye call empires, scatter in the Roman wind.”¹³ Shaw’s implicit comparison of the Roman Empire with the British Empire now becomes explicit. According to Legend, “Cleopatra was not a particularly beautiful woman, but rather a charming, seductive one.”¹⁴

Shaw’s play is a comedy with a tragic heart: Rulers are a living sacrifice. The best rulers sacrifice themselves completely, and now that is what they are doing. That self-awareness is their crippling flaw, and their signal virtue. In *Cleopatra*, Caesar finds his Liza Doolittle, a girl who no more sense of power politics than if she were the royal housecat. He begins to remake her, to show her, her own power as a ruler. Almost immediately, she begins to bloom, saying, “Oh! I love you for making more a Queen.”¹⁵ In fact, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (written in 1901) presages several of the themes we see fifteen years later in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. The basic setting of the play, Caesar’s meeting and imitation of the young Cleopatra into the rigors and rituals of ruling a nation, are easily understood. Cleopatra will never be the same, however, for now she has a vision: “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 may liking or disliking; I do what must be done, and have no time to attend to myself. That is not happiness; but it is greatness.”¹⁶

Shaw’s plays are a delightful confection. Not only does he take aim at his usual targets of British hypocrisy and adulation of hierarchy, but also satirises low-budget theatricals, dramatic conventions, theatre criticism and even himself. “Shaw’s characters close to living persons onstage are statutes who interact with, and converse with, flesh-and-blood figures.”¹⁷ Shaw’s plays – largely their intellectual and mental influence on others – but also in the subject matter they discuss. “Shaw conceals his catastrophic vision concerning the future of his plays behind the mask of Nietzsche’s philosophy.”¹⁸ “One should keep in mind that Shaw promotes the ideas

of Nietzsche in abstract philosophical terms without using them as a vehicle for a concealed political message.”¹⁹

However, the very same device of using an imaginary figure to elaborate on the future image of the world is applied by Shaw. Shaw’s old-fashioned dramaturgy does not prevent his own thoughts and concepts from being influenced by the vision of making the conflict of ideas a core element of drama. Although Shaw’s theoretical arguments are less prominent and his solutions are less drastic than any other playwright, his theatrical impact has been strong. His view on “theatrical shock treatment” confirms this. “Shaw believed that indifference in audience or playwright was a major sin, and that the playwright’s clear duty was to shock audiences out of that state whenever necessary - and, in fact, more than necessary.”²⁰ The plain working truth is that it is not only good for people to be shocked occasionally, but absolutely necessary to the progress of society that they should be shocked pretty often. Shaw devoted much of his art to putting the extraordinary onstage, creating plays and designing a theatre intended to change the face of the world.

“The institution may be an effete and poisonous one, whilst the mask may be, and indeed generally is, an image of what we would fain have in its place. If the existing facts, with their masks on, are to be called ideals, and the future possibilities which the masks depict are also to be called ideals – if, again, the man who is defending existing institutions by maintaining their identity with their masks is to be confounded under one name with the man who is striving to realise the future possibilities by treating the mask and the thing masked asunder, then the position cannot be intelligibly described by mortal pen: to distinguish pioneers like Shelley and Ibsen as realists. Ibsen himself, though he has not formally made the distinction, has so repeatedly harped on conventions and conventionalists as ideals and idealists that if we were not perversely to call them realities and realists.”²¹

“Shaw’s greatest and most complete portrait of an artist is the character that he created for himself, G.B.S., the platform Orator, Corno di Bassetto - the music critic, the drama critic, the playwright, and, in his personal life, the philanderer, the socialist, the devil’s disciple, etc.”²² Shaw reveals that he does indeed believe in it, even to the extent of suggesting, like Wilde, that “a mask enables a man to tell the truth or, like Yeats: that the mask is a link with the permanent in existence.”²³ Shaw says that acting is self-realisation, not sham, that a great actor, given a great role, can achieve an expression of his total personality which is more real than life itself. In him individuality in concentrated, fixed, gripped in one exceptionally gifted man, and, if he were given a part that shows all sides of him and realises him wholly to us and to himself, he would become “Completely real” as he lost “the conventional mask” that man in everyday affairs has to assume. The argument is very similar to that of Yeats: “Active Virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask.”²⁴ Shaw’s fictional artists consciously pose; but he readily acknowledged his ability to act a role, justifying his pose by proposing, like Henry James, that “humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms.”²⁵

Shaw explains:

“Like all men, I play many parts; and none of them is more or less real than another. To one audience I am the occupier of a house in Adelphi Terrace; to another I am “One of those damned socialists.” A discussion in a club of very young ladies as to whether I could be more

appropriately described as an old josser or an old geezer ended in the carrying of an amendment in favour of an old bromide. I am also a soul of infinite worth. I am, in short, not only what I can make of myself, which varies greatly from hour to hour and emergency to no-emergency, but what you can see in me.”²⁶

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