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I
**THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
CONTEXT**

I

SALLY PETERS

Shaw's life: a feminist in spite of himself

By his seventieth birthday, Bernard Shaw was one of the most famous people in the world. Yet despite intense scrutiny, perhaps no other figure of his stature and visibility has been so thoroughly misunderstood. The only Nobel laureate also to win an Academy Award (for the screenplay of *Pygmalion*), he was recognized as much for his wit and his eccentric personality as for his writings. Certainly the celebrity made unfailing good copy as he voiced opinions on everything from European dictators to child-raising. But for too long he insisted on caricaturing himself as a clown and buffoon. Late in life, he lamented that he had been all too persuasive, the overexposed G. B. S. figure trivializing views of both man and artist. Then, too, there had always been an undercurrent of antagonism toward the self-proclaimed genius who insisted on the satirist's right to skewer societal foibles – that insistence marked him as guilty of a disconcerting detachment from the mass of his fellow human beings according to his detractors, a detachment noticeable in the personal sphere as well.

In addition to his own part in misleading critics and would-be biographers, Shaw managed to elude attempts to understand him simply because of the enormity of the task. Not only was he the author of some five dozen plays, his mountain of writings includes five completed novels, a number of short stories, lengthy treatises on politics and economics, four volumes of theatre criticism, three volumes of music criticism, and a volume of art criticism. Add to that total well over a hundred book reviews and an astonishing correspondence of over a quarter of a million letters and postcards.

Then there was the sheer length of the life. G. K. Chesterton's *George Bernard Shaw* preceded his subject's death by a full forty years. As Shaw steadfastly outlived his contemporaries, he noisily called attention to his façades, while quietly destroying correspondences and prevailing over biographers. Always needing to control, where his biography was concerned, Shaw was obsessive, coercing, directing, managing. Both Archibald

SALLY PETERS

Henderson, North Carolinian mathematician and three-time authorized biographer, and Hesketh Pearson, a long-time friend, more or less willingly submitted. After the death of Frank Harris, Shaw earned the widow's gratitude by completing his own biography, admittedly "quite the oddest" task of his life (Harris, *Bernard Shaw*, p. 419). When American professor Thomas Demetrius O'Bolger proved both independent and curious, Shaw blocked publication of O'Bolger's work. Although Shaw made clear that his early life was less than idyllic, not until after his death did much darker intimations of family life appear – in the works of St. John Ervine, B. C. Rosset, and John O'Donovan.

A wealth of information about Shaw's life is now available. Dan H. Laurence has edited the massive four-volume *Collected Letters*, while individual collections abound. There are correspondences to admiring women such as Florence Farr, Ellen Terry, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and Molly Tompkins; and to men such as Frank Harris, Lord Alfred Douglas, German translator Siegfried Trebitsch, and actor-playwright Harley Granville Barker. Currently, an ongoing ten-volume project includes the correspondences with H. G. Wells, with film producer Gabriel Pascal, and with Fabian Socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Shaw's diaries, edited by Stanley Weintraub, cover the period of 1885–97, the two volumes offering a snapshot of Shaw's activities, rather than a journal of intimate thoughts and feelings.

A plethora of reminiscences and memoirs abound – everyone from Shaw's cook, secretary, and neighbors to the famous and once famous have recorded glimpses of the man. Serious biographical studies include the thoughtful analysis of critic William Irvine, now a half century old. More recently biographer Margot Peters has spotlighted the actresses in Shaw's life, weaving a richly detailed narrative. In another vein, both Daniel Dervin and Arnold Silver have invoked Freudian analysis to explain Shaw, Dervin citing unresolved Oedipal feelings and narcissism, Silver finding "homicidal tendencies." Michael Holroyd, meanwhile, has followed the interpretations of previous biographers, disappointing scholars.

Although many bright Irish Protestant boys endured difficult circumstances, it was the relatively unknown Bernard Shaw who in 1889 loudly proclaimed: "My business is to incarnate the *Zeitgeist*" (*Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 222). Certainly no other playwright has exercised exactly his influence on society. How did Shaw circumvent the fate that seemed to have decreed that he live and die a clerk in Dublin?

Exploring the many contradictions Shaw presented reveals another Shaw, his real nature intimately but disjunctively connected with his art. Far more enigmatic and complex than the fabricated G.B.S. image, the real

Shaw's life: a feminist in spite of himself

Shaw was a man whose relation to the feminine – in himself and others – hailed from a highly extravagant inner life. As he struggled heroically against his own ambivalences, the artist emerged triumphant. Nurtured too in such rich soil was Shaw the feminist, not only by the standards of the nineteenth century but also by today's criteria as we approach the twenty-first century. What was the nature of the man that eluded detection for so long?¹

Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on July 26, 1856, the third child and first son of Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw (Bessie) and George Carr Shaw. As a member of the much resented Protestant ascendancy, the Shaws laid claim to a relatively high rung on the ladder of prestige. Bessie, the motherless daughter of a country gentleman, displeased both her father and her very proper aunt when she married a matrimonial adventurer nearly twice her age. George Carr Shaw, a civil clerk turned wholesale corn merchant, boasted of his kinship to a baronet. But the family had more pretensions than money. "I was a downstart and the son of a downstart," wailed Shaw (Preface to *Immaturity*, p. x).² Yet he held to the unverified research of Alexander Macintosh Shaw that the Shaws were descended from Macduff, slayer of Macbeth: "It was as good as being descended from Shakespeare, whom I had unconsciously resolved to reincarnate from my cradle" (p. xii). Indeed Shaw spent a lifetime in rivalry with his literary "father," fashioning a dialogue with his powerful precursor that extends through the puppet play *Shakes versus Shaw*, written the year before his death.

Behind the Shaw family façade of snobbery and pretense lurked the reality of daily humiliations incurred by both parents. George Carr Shaw boasted of his teetotalism but slipped away to drink in solitary and morose fashion. His embarrassing alcoholism led to the family's banishment from the home of the baronet, Sir Robert Shaw of Bushy Park. Even more portentously for the young Shaw, the drunken father tried to throw his son into a canal. The sudden terrible recognition of his father's fallibility was aggravated by Bessie Shaw's response: contempt for her husband and a refusal to comfort her young son. The man claimed to be marked for life by that disillusioning incident. Quite early the boy learned that his father's drunkenness had to be "either a family tragedy or a family joke," thereby embracing a polarized approach to life (Preface to *Immaturity*, p. xxvi).

Bessie Shaw offered her own humiliations. For she defied the Shaw family creed by singing in Roman Catholic churches and entertaining Catholic musicians in her home. Even more devastating for her son was the *ménage à trois* formed with her voice teacher, George J. Vandeleur Lee, who moved in with the family when Shaw was ten, and soon arranged for

SALLY PETERS

them all to share a cottage in rural Dalkey, outside Dublin. Although Shaw insisted that it was an innocent arrangement, his preoccupation with his mother's virtue suggests that he feared otherwise. Meanwhile the influence of the mesmeric Lee on Shaw proved profound and lifelong.

Late in life Shaw claimed to reveal "a secret kept for 80 years": the shame he endured in attending the Central Model Boys' School with the sons of Catholic tradesmen (*Sixteen Self Sketches*, p. 20). As a result he was ostracized by the sons of Protestant gentlemen. In recalling his shame and schoolboy difficulties, Shaw omits a crucial piece of information – that he was subjected to taunts because of a highly visible effeminacy. That effeminacy was the reason he was later chosen to play Ophelia in a production of *Hamlet* at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School.

Although there was always money for alcohol, George Carr Shaw had no money to give his son a university education and Shaw never forgave his father for sending him to work at age fifteen. Becoming an ill-paid clerk for a land agency was one of the few acceptable forms of employment for a gentleman's son; the lucrative retail trade was contemptuously dismissed. Despite himself, the adolescent Shaw proved so competent that after the cashier absconded with office funds the young stopgap landed the job. Later transferred to make room for his employer's nephew, the incensed Shaw claimed he had resigned to follow his self-perceived destiny as Shakespeare's heir; "For London as London, or England as England, I cared nothing. If my subject had been science or music I should have made for Berlin or Leipsic. If painting, I should have made for Paris . . . But as the English language was my weapon, there was nothing for it but London." (*Preface to Immaturity*, p. xxxviii).

There was another incentive for Shaw to leave his native land – reunion with his mother. For three years earlier Bessie Shaw had abandoned her son and husband to follow Lee to London. She took her eldest daughter Agnes, and sent for daughter Lucinda Frances (Lucy). Shaw arrived in England just a few days after Agnes had died from consumption, moving in with his mother and sister. Bessie was teaching singing and Lucy was trying to make a career singing in *opéra bouffe*. Both women rebelled against their gender-defined roles and were crucial in Shaw's sympathy with the plight of the independent woman. But it was his mother's assertion of female power and her defiance of assigned female roles concerning sexuality, respectability, and career fulfillment that most affected Shaw. When Lee began forcing his attentions on Lucy, Bessie took the "Method," his yoga-like approach to teaching voice, and set up shop herself. It was a more radical move than that of Eliza in *Pygmalion* (another Elizabeth) who only threatened to

Shaw's life: a feminist in spite of himself

appropriate Higgins's method of voice articulation. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw explores the intersection of male artistic creation and female self-creation.

During the next nine years, Shaw contributed virtually nothing to his own support, although he made desultory and mostly abortive attempts at finding employment. His first meager pay came from acting as ghostwriter for Lee. His brief buzzings as a weekly pseudonymous music critic for the soon defunct *Hornet* would evolve into the sparkling witticisms and musical perceptions of "Corneto di Bassetto" for *The Star* and of G.B.S. for *The World*; his music criticism would culminate with *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), his reading of Wagner's *Ring*. He became a book reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885–88) and an art critic for *The World* (1886–90). He also established himself as a theatre critic, being seemingly omnipresent in that capacity during a stint for the *Saturday Review* (1895–98).

In 1880, the budding critic had not hesitated to launch an attack on the powerful and preeminent actor-manager Henry Irving for his "mutilation" of Shakespeare (a theme Shaw would continually return to even as he denounced "Bardolatry," unconditional admiration of the Bard). His last piece of dramatic criticism would be a May 1950 defense of his own drama of ideas against an attack by playwright Terence Rattigan. The nonagenarian drove home the point: "my plays are all talk, just as Raphael's pictures are all paint, Michael Angelo's statues all marble, Beethoven's symphonies all noise" (*The Drama Observed*, vol. IV, p. 1524). Meanwhile, in the intervening seven decades, Shaw produced some fifteen hundred pages of vigorous prose, peppered with classical, literary, and biblical allusions. Not content merely to review, he campaigned for his vision of the theatre and proselytized for his theories of art; he offered practical advice on stage technique and acting, celebrated the intensity of puppets, and analyzed the relation of the cinema to the theatre. His pieces are so interlaced with provocative commentary on social, moral, and artistic issues that they offer a lens into the very fabric of his society – everything from diet to the penal code. In various guises, he ponders male/female relations in a restrictive society: "I cannot for the life of me see why it is less dishonorable for a woman to kiss and tell than a man"; and "Can any sane person deny that a contract 'for better, for worse' destroys all moral responsibility?" Married people should be "as responsible for their good behavior to one another as business partners are" (*The Drama Observed*, vol. II, p. 629; vol. III, p. 1036). Outfitted with sound judgment, discriminating taste, and an unflinching wit, Shaw produced the finest body of dramatic criticism since William Hazlitt.

But before the mature journalist and critic emerged there was a time of

SALLY PETERS

apprenticeship. He spent his days at the British Museum Reading Room learning his craft. His evenings were occupied with the myriad societies he joined – debating societies, literary societies, political societies. Already he had set himself to the task that would occupy him for more than seven decades: fashioning himself into political and social activist, cultural commentator and satirist, playwright and prophet.

Shaw's development as a playwright cannot be understood apart from his socialism, a cause for which he labored for more than sixty-five years. One September evening in 1882, he heard the American orator Henry George speak on land nationalization and the importance of economics suddenly flashed on him. A few months later, after struggling with the French translation of the first volume of *Capital*, he underwent a "complete conversion" to Marx (*Sixteen Self Sketches*, p. 58). Shaw, who felt compelled to polarize life's possibilities, found Marx's dialectic of history psychologically appealing. Now with a mission in life, Shaw brought the gospel of Marx to the people, speaking in streets and parks, in halls and drawing rooms. Like his hero Sidney Trefusis in *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883), his fifth novel, written during this time, Shaw saw his calling as that of "saviour of mankind" (*Collected Works*, vol. v, p. 110).

The flirtation with Marx was brief. In May, 1884, intrigued by the pamphlet *Why are the Many Poor?* he turned up at a meeting of the newly formed Fabian Society. The name was derived from the Roman general Fabius Cunctator, for the Fabians were attracted to what was believed to be his battle strategy against invading Carthaginian general Hannibal. The Fabian credo declared: "For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did most patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays, but when the time comes, you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless."

As the socialist group struggled to define itself and to reconcile its visionary and practical elements, Shaw contributed *A Manifesto*, Fabian Tract no. 2, which wittily declared that "Men no longer need special political privileges to protect them against Women, and that the sexes should henceforth enjoy equal political rights." Thanks to Shaw, the equal rights of women were firmly established as a Fabian principle from the outset. Meanwhile the pamphleteer was in his glory as he turned out tract after tract on socialism.

Believing that human nature is "only the raw material which Society manufactures into the finished rascal or the finished fellowman" (*The Road to Equality*, p. 96), Shaw collaborated with staunch Fabian friends like Sidney Webb, Sydney Olivier, and Graham Wallas ("the Three Musketeers & D'Artagnan") to forge a better society (*Collected Letters*, vol. II, p. 490).

Shaw's life: a feminist in spite of himself

Everywhere he preached that human potential was being stymied and depraved by inequality. Challenged by hecklers or socialists of other stripes, the accomplished platform speaker demolished the opposition with his devastating wit.

Although devoted to socialism, Shaw was no Utopian, one of the four chief strains of socialist thought in the nineteenth century, along with the Fabian, Marxist, and Christian Socialist. Unlike artist-poet-socialist William Morris, Shaw feared a “catastrophic policy for simultaneously destroying existing institutions and replacing them with a ready-made Utopia” (*Road*, p. 31). He sought a revolution that would be “gradual in its operation” (*Road*, p. 35). The Fabian policy of “permeation,” of infiltrating key organizations, fits perfectly with his psychological need to overturn the *status quo* covertly.

As a critic and platform speaker, Shaw was now a highly visible figure in Victorian London. Four of the five novels he had produced methodically during days spent at the British Museum Reading Room were serialized in little magazines. *Cashel Byron's Profession*, his fourth novel (1883), based on his own acquaintance with the boxing ring, was also published in book form, and to some popular acclaim. In 1901, to protect the novel from theatrical piracy, he transformed it into a play himself. Written in blank verse in one week, it emerged as *The Admirable Bashville*. However, the satiric view of Victorian morality and sentimentality that characterized the novels doomed the author to remain essentially unsuccessful as a novelist.

The novels, all autobiographically revealing, document Shaw's early feminist sympathies. In the conclusion of *Immaturity*, Harriet Russell advises Shaw's hero, the jejune Robert Smith, that marriage is “not fit for some people; and some people are not fit for it” (*Collected Works*, vol. 1, p. 437). Shaw explores that view further in *The Irrational Knot*, the title a reference to the matrimonial knot. The pregnant Marian Conolly has had a romance, left her husband, and refuses to return even after he tells her she “may have ten romances every year with other men. . . Be anything rather than a ladylike slave and liar” (*Collected Works*, vol. II, p. 349). Similarly *Love Among the Artists* praises unconventional women who place their professional identities before domesticity. *Cashel Byron's Profession* wittily overturns cultural stereotypes on two fronts: Cashel, boxing champion supreme and Shaw's first vital genius, cheerfully gives up his career to marry Lydia Carew, who claims she wants him for eugenic purposes – *her* intellect and *his* physique. In *An Unsocial Socialist*, Shaw playfully satirizes his hero as a political firebrand who, at novel's end, has met his match in the down-to-earth woman who will marry him and tame him. Throughout

SALLY PETERS

the novels, Shavian barbs are aimed at Victorian hypocrisy surrounding love and marriage.

Shaw's growth as a writer during his apprenticeship period was paralleled by the crafting of the persona eventually known as G.B.S. Part of that persona involved an array of seemingly idiosyncratic personal interests and habits. Probing them uncovers a psychological minefield.

Shaw's conversion to vegetarianism in 1881 was more than a trendy cheap alternative to the badly boiled eggs he ate at home. His most famous pronouncement was to a packed meeting of the newly formed Shelley Society where he trumpeted that he was, like Shelley, "a Socialist, Atheist, and Vegetarian" (*Sixteen Self Sketches*, p. 58). It was not mere showmanship because for Shaw vegetarianism had links to the artistic, the political, and the religious. Not only did it fuel his great energy, vegetarianism was necessary in his quest for "fragility" (*Collected Letters*, vol. II, p. 27). Fighting his appetite and watching his weight scrupulously, he attacked meat-eating as a form of cannibalism; it was repugnant to his nature – the higher nature. He invested food and eating with ritualistic meaning, embracing vegetarianism the way saints embrace vigils and fasts. Avoiding alcohol, tea, and coffee, feasting on wheatmeal porridge and lentils, he became a missionary whose creed was celebrated with barley water.

He longed, like his Don Juan, to escape the tyranny of the flesh with its eternal counter-pull to the rank crawling underground world of weasels, stoats, and worms that made him shudder, the stupid "forces of Death and Degeneration" (*Collected Plays*, vol. II, p. 661). From the mire of such a dread world arose his militant antivivisectionism. Shaw explicitly equated experiments on animals with those on human beings. The butcher uses animal bodies as an end, the vivisectionist as a means, and both kill animals in the service of human desires. Shaw's seeming high-minded stand may have issued from a buried fear that the hand that smote the rabbit could well smite him. In his outrage at vivisection, Shaw never incriminated Lee or called him vivisector. Yet Lee experimented on cadavers and the heads of birds in his effort to locate the secret of *bel canto*. Lee's dark secrets were all too closely associated with Bessie, his star pupil.

Shaw suffered from a bout of smallpox in May 1881. He claimed to be unblemished but it left his chin and jaw pockmarked, marks concealed by the famous beard that he then nurtured for the first time. His psychological scars were deeper and not so easily concealed. He launched a lifelong campaign against doctors as well as against the vaccination that failed to give him full protection. The one-hundred-page 1911 Preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma* and the 1931 collection of articles known as *Doctors'*

Shaw's life: a feminist in spite of himself

Delusions are major prose examples of doctors as perpetrators. The theme of victimization appears as early as an 1887 book review attacking vivisection and as late as comments in *Everybody's Political What's What?* (1944). In his hatred of the medical profession and scientific medicine, he specifically attacked Edward Jenner, Louis Pasteur, and Joseph Lister. The three men had one thing in common: their fame rested on controlling micro-organisms.

Shaw's hatred stemmed from a peculiar sense of being assailed by an unseen world of germs, which he evidenced in a virulent hypochondria. At the same time, he scoffed at that concept of total health known as *mens sana in corpore sano*, the belief of Victorian intellectuals that training the body resulted in a vigorous mind. For Shaw, who longed for the power to will one's destiny, only the reverse would do: "it is the mind that makes the body and not the body the mind" (Preface to *Doctors' Delusions*, p. xiv and *Everybody's*, p. 247; see also "The Revolutionist's Handbook," *Collected Plays*, vol. II, p. 795).

In his drama, Shaw learned to take the materials of his life and transform the virulent into the playful. In *The Philanderer* (1893), he satirizes the vivisector in the character of Dr. Paramore, whose reputation rests on discovering a microbe in the liver that means certain death. When his discovery cannot be confirmed, he is inconsolable, even though it means perfect health for his misdiagnosed patient. Four decades later, in *Too True to be Good* (1931), Shaw satirizes the doctor who cures no disease while blaming the microbe. Comically, Shaw has the microbe appear on stage and lament that humans infect microbes, but Shaw was dead serious.

In the early 1880s Shaw immersed himself in boxing, which interested him as both a science and an art. In 1883, having acquired some reputation as a boxer, the author of *Cashel Byron's Profession* entered his name in the Queensberry Amateur Boxing Championships in both the middleweight and heavyweight ("Any Weight") divisions. Although he was not given the chance to compete, The Fighting Irishman from the British Museum carefully preserved the program. His fascination for the sport as a trial of skill never waned as he commented and analyzed in articles and letters, always disdaining the slug fest. Shaw implied that boxing was a reenactment of primitive rites, a reaching back into Greek origins with its celebration of the male body. In *Cashel Byron's Profession*, Shaw's reveals his masculine ideal – and reverses the usual voyeurism of gazing at a female – as Lydia is dazzled by the sight of Cashel's body, whose "manly strength and beauty" is compared to the Hermes of Praxiteles (*Collected Works*, vol. IV, p. 38). Meanwhile in the drama, Shaw's characters use their fists or threaten to use them in *How He Lied to Her Husband* (1904), *Major*