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## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW IN CONTEXT

When Shaw died in 1950, the world lost one of its most well-known authors, a revolutionary who was as renowned for his personality as he was for his humour, humanity, and rebellious thinking. He remains a compelling figure who deserves attention not only for how influential he was in his time but also for how relevant he is to ours. This collection sets Shaw's life and achievements in context, with forty-two chapters devoted to subjects that interested him and defined his work. Contributors explore a wide range of themes, moving from factors that were formative in Shaw's life, to the artistic work that made him most famous and the institutions with which he worked, to the political and social issues that consumed much of his attention, and, finally, to his influence and reception. Presenting fresh material and arguments, this collection will point to new directions of research for future scholars.

BRAD KENT is Associate Professor of British and Irish Literatures at Université Laval and was Visiting Professor at Trinity College Dublin in 2013–14. His recent publications include a critical edition of Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* (2012), *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain* (forthcoming), and essays in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *Modern Drama*, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literatures*, *English Literature in Transition*, *Irish University Review*, and *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*. He is also the programme director of the Shaw Symposium, held annually at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada.

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For Anne, Ryan, and Zoé

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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## Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xiv
<i>Preface</i>	xxiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxvii
<i>A Chronology of Shaw's Works</i>	xxviii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xxxii
PART I PEOPLE AND PLACES	I
1 Dublin	3
<i>Peter Gahan</i>	
2 The Fabian Society	12
<i>Lauren Arrington</i>	
3 Germany and Austria	21
<i>Peter Conolly-Smith</i>	
4 London	29
<i>Desmond Harding</i>	
5 Oscar Wilde	36
<i>Eibhear Walshe</i>	
6 W. B. Yeats	44
<i>Nicholas Grene</i>	
PART II THEATRE	51
7 The Abbey Theatre	53
<i>Anthony Roche</i>	
8 Actors and actresses	61
<i>Margot Peters</i>	

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
9	The Court Theatre <i>Sos Eltis</i>	68
10	Fabian drama <i>J. Ellen Gainor</i>	76
11	Farcical comedy <i>Kerry Powell</i>	85
12	History plays <i>Ellen E. Dolgin</i>	94
13	Melodrama <i>Heidi J. Holder</i>	102
14	The New Drama <i>Jean Chothia</i>	109
	PART III WRITING AND THE ARTS	117
15	Cinema <i>John McInerney</i>	119
16	Journalism <i>Elizabeth Carolyn Miller</i>	127
17	Letters <i>Charles A. Carpenter</i>	135
18	Media and technology <i>Lawrence Switzky</i>	143
19	Modernism <i>Christopher Innes</i>	151
20	Music <i>Alfred Turco Jr</i>	160
21	Novels <i>Richard Farr Dietrich</i>	168
22	Publishers and publishing <i>Michel W. Pharand</i>	175
23	Visual arts <i>Martin Meisel</i>	183

	<i>Contents</i>	ix
PART IV POLITICS		197
24 Censorship		199
	<i>Brad Kent</i>	
25 Empire and nationalism		207
	<i>Michael Malouf</i>	
26 Feminism		215
	<i>D. A. Hadfield</i>	
27 Irish politics		222
	<i>Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel</i>	
28 Socialism		230
	<i>James Alexander</i>	
29 Totalitarianism		238
	<i>Matthew Yde</i>	
30 War		246
	<i>Lagretta Tallent Lenker</i>	
PART V CULTURE AND SOCIETY		253
31 Celebrity		255
	<i>Jonathan Goldman</i>	
32 Education		265
	<i>Jean Reynolds</i>	
33 Evolutionary theory		273
	<i>John R. Pfeiffer</i>	
34 Health and vegetarianism		281
	<i>Christopher Wixson</i>	
35 Language		289
	<i>Gustavo A. Rodríguez Martín</i>	
36 Nature		297
	<i>Tony J. Stafford</i>	
37 Philosophy		306
	<i>David Kornhaber</i>	

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978-1-107-04745-7 - George Bernard Shaw in Context  
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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

x	<i>Contents</i>	
	PART VI RECEPTION AND AFTERLIFE	315
38	Reception in London, 1892–1950 <i>J. P. Wearing</i>	317
39	Criticism, 1950–2013 <i>A. M. Gibbs</i>	325
40	The contemporary North American stage <i>L. W. Conolly</i>	334
41	Biography <i>Julie A. Sparks</i>	342
42	The Shavian tradition <i>John A. Bertolini</i>	350
	<i>Further reading</i>	357
	<i>Index</i>	371

## *Illustrations*

- |   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 1.1 Charlotte Shaw and Horace Plunkett standing before Kilteragh, 1913. Photo taken by George Bernard Shaw. Reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics.  | <i>page</i> 10 |
| 2.1 Shaw with Beatrice and Sidney Webb, 1919. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.   | 16             |
| 5.1 Oscar Wilde, 1881. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.  | 37             |
| 6.1 William Butler Yeats, 1911. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.   | 46             |
| 9.1 Shaw and Harley Granville Barker, hamming it up for the camera while rehearsing at Shaw's Corner, 1907. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics.  | 73             |
| 11.1 Andrew Gillies as Mr. Valentine, Sandy Webster as Mr. Crampton. Directed by Christopher Newton, designed by Cameron Porteous, lighting design by Robert Thomson. Production of <i>You Never Can Tell</i> at the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada, 1988.<br>Credit: the Shaw Festival. Photo: David Cooper Photography. | 91             |
| 15.1 Shaw discussing the production of the film <i>Major Barbara</i> with, from left to right, actors Robert Morley and Wendy Hiller, Shaw's secretary Blanche Patch, and director Gabriel Pascal, 1940. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.  | 124            |
| 22.1 Two pages from <i>Saint Joan</i> (Constable & Co., 1924), with its 'Morris margins' and Shaw's detailed stage directions. Photo: Ginger Pharand.   | 180            |

- xii *List of illustrations*
- 23.1 Luc-Olivier Merson, *Le repos pendant la fuite en Egypte*, 1880. Huile sur toile, 77 x 133 cm. Collection: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nice. Photo: Muriel Anssens. Copyright Ville de Nice. 187
- 23.2 Scene from *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1945. Source: Marjorie Deans, *Meeting at the Sphinx: Gabriel Pascal's Production of Bernard Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1946), 116. 188
- 23.3 Scene from *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1945. Source: Marjorie Deans, *Meeting at the Sphinx: Gabriel Pascal's Production of Bernard Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1946), 117. 189
- 23.4 Sir Jacob Epstein, *George Bernard Shaw*, 1934. Bronze, 45.7 cm high. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London. 191
- 23.5 Auguste Rodin, *George Bernard Shaw*. Bronze, 38.1 x 18.4 x 21.6 cm. Modelled 1906, cast 1926. Collection: Rodin Museum, Philadelphia. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Rodin Museum. 192
- 23.6 Shaw modelling for Prince Paul Troubetzkoy, 1926, for a clay statue that was later made into a bronze that Charlotte donated to the Tate Museum. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics. 193
- 23.7 Sir John Bernard Partridge, *George Bernard Shaw*, 1894. Watercolour, 26.7 x 18.4 cm. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London. 194
- 23.8 Bertha Newcombe, *Platform Spellbinder*, 1893. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics. 195
- 23.9 William Strang, *George Bernard Shaw*, 1907. Drypoint, 40.4 x 27.9 cm. Printed by David Strang. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London. 196
- 25.1 Shaw with Jawaharlal Nehru at Shaw's Corner, 1949. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics. 214
- 31.1 Max Beerbohm, *Mr. Bernard Shaw*, 1913. 'Mr. Bernard Shaw. Mild surprise of one who, revisiting England after long absence, finds that the dear fellow has not moved.'

<i>List of illustrations</i>		xiii
	Source: Max Beerbohm, <i>Fifty Caricatures</i> (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1913), plate 8. © The Estate of Max Beerbohm.	258
31.2	Shaw with, from left to right, Charlie Chaplin, Marion Davies, Louis B. Mayer, and Clark Gable at a Hollywood luncheon, 1933. © DIZ Muenchen GmbH, Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Alamy.	261
36.1	Shaw swimming, Cap d'Antibes, France, 1937. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics.	299
36.2	Shaw writing outside with his foot in a splint, 1898. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics.	300
36.3	Shaw cutting wood at Shaw's Corner, 1922. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics.	302
36.4	Shaw in his writing hut, Shaw's Corner, 1929. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.	303
37.1	Max Beerbohm, <i>Life-Force, Woman-Set-Free, Superman, etc.</i> , 1914. 'Georg Brandes ('Chand d'Idées): "What'll you take for the lot?" / George Bernard Shaw: "Immortality." / Georg Brandes: "Come, I've handled these goods before! Coat, Mr. Schopenhauer's; waistcoat, Mr. Ibsen's; Mr. Nietzsche's trousers – –" / George Bernard Shaw: "Ah, but look at the patches!"' Source: Max Beerbohm, <i>A Survey</i> (New York: Double, Page & Company, 1921), plate 44. © The Estate of Max Beerbohm.	309
41.1	Shaw with his official biographer Archibald Henderson, Shaw's Corner, c. 1906. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Authors, the National Trust, and the London School of Economics.	344

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xxi

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## *Preface*

Unlike for some writers of the modern period, scholars need not be defensive about reading Bernard Shaw in context, nor suggest that doing so presents a radical departure in scholarship. As countless studies and biographies of Shaw attest, he is the consummate subject to be read in context. His writing was not only informed by many of the popular modes, genres, and trends of his day – from melodrama and farce to the New Drama, from the Victorian novel to the New Journalism – but also bent them into idiosyncratic forms. ‘Make It New!’ commanded Ezra Pound. But Pound was coming rather late to the party: Shaw and his colleagues had already been making it new for decades.

From the time in 1876 that he quit the provincial backwater that was his native Dublin for the lures of London – the capital of the all-powerful British Empire enjoying perhaps its most dynamic century – Shaw sought to be in the thick of things and of the moment in which he lived. He first made his name as a reviewer of art, music, and theatre, using his columns not merely to comment on culture and society, but to mould public tastes and to forge his identity. In tandem, he circulated in almost every fashionable, avant-garde, and radical organisation, movement, and body of thought there was, from the Fabian Society to the Stage Society, from vegetarianism and evolutionary theory to feminism and continental philosophy. Not happy to take a back or passenger seat to history, he often imposed himself in many of these arenas, becoming a key player by lecturing and pamphleteering on their behalves and, almost inevitably, coming into conflict with many like-minded individuals and friends.

In addition to his perennial writing and lecturing, Shaw held public office as a vestryman and councillor in the Borough of St Pancras from 1897 to 1903 and was active on a wide range of policies that would affect the lives of his fellow citizens. In his travels, socialising, political work, and writing, he enjoyed relationships with luminaries in several fields and attracted the admiration of individuals who would transform the world

in significant ways: Albert Einstein, W. B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, Oscar Wilde, Gene Tunney, Auguste Rodin, Charlie Chaplin, Emmeline Pankhurst, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Lenin, and Jawaharlal Nehru, to name a small but revealing sampling. All of this activity made him distinctly of his time.

When Archibald Henderson contacted Shaw about the articles that he had written in the late-nineteenth-century press, Shaw responded that Henderson would have to consider ‘misspending several weeks at the British Museum’ to go through what he estimated to be over a million words. Shaw further warned him that ‘many of them become absolutely unintelligible now that they can no longer be read with the context of the events of the week in which they appeared’ (*CL* II: 425). Fortunately, the same cannot be said for the majority of Shaw’s writings for which he is best-known, especially his plays. But there is no doubt that a more profound understanding and perhaps even greater enjoyment of Shaw’s works can be achieved by reading them through the filter of Shaw’s times. In turn, it could be argued that the times in which he lived can be better understood through the filter of Shaw, such was his personality, scope of thought, and breadth of influence. Henderson would, after all, subtitle the last of his three biographies of Shaw ‘Man of the Century’ – rather provocative, considering that it was published only in 1956. Yet as early as 1889 Shaw himself had declared that it was his business in life ‘to incarnate the *Zeitgeist*’ (*CL* I: 222).

The essays collected in this volume are arranged in six sections: People and Places; Theatre; Writing and the Arts; Politics; Culture and Society; and Reception and Afterlife. Broadly speaking, they move from the factors that were formative in Shaw’s life, to the artistic work that made him most famous and the institutions with which he worked, to the political and social issues that consumed much of his attention, and, finally, to how he has influenced and been received by others. Although there are over forty subjects surveyed, that number could very well have been much higher owing to the diversity of Shaw’s activities and interests.

It should be noted that while context is the distinguishing emphasis of these essays, the notion of context is approached in various ways, focused to different degrees on Shaw and the specific subject under discussion. There is also some range of opinion on Shaw and his legacy, and while the contributors by and large celebrate him for what he did, many hold him up to critical scrutiny. As Shaw regularly courted controversy, such discordance is both inevitable and welcome.

*Preface*

xxv

The reader will find that the volume treats a number of the more studied aspects of Shaw's life with new critical insights and makes some forays into less explored terrains. In drawing up the projected table of contents, it became abundantly clear from the outset that each of these entries, which run to approximately three thousand words, could easily have been twice as long. In fact, some of these topics have been the subject of a number of books already. But these essays reveal that there is still plenty of work out there for the interested scholar, with many debates far from settled and piles of archival material waiting to be mined. Moreover, while Shaw has featured prominently in accounts of modern British theatre and studies of British socialism, he has yet to be adequately addressed in such fields as Modernism and Irish Studies, both of which are threaded through several of the essays. It is hoped that readers will find other avenues to explore that are perhaps only noted here in passing.

Throughout his career, Shaw cultivated a Mephistophelean persona, and one might mistake him for the devil-as-serpent in *Back to Methuselah*, proclaiming: 'You see things; and you say "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say "Why not?"' (*CPP V*: 345). Yet utopia was not merely enough to theorise or dream about: it needed action to come into being. In *Mrs Warren's Profession*, Vivie, one of Shaw's most independent-minded characters, says to her mother: 'People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them' (*CPP I*: 310). This was, to some extent, Shaw's mantra: not satisfied with the world as it was ordered, he sought to create opportunities to re-order it. He wrote of his perspective in a letter to the American novelist Henry James: 'I never idolized environment as a dead destiny. We can change it: we must change it: there is absolutely no other sense in life than the work of changing it' (*CL II*: 828). Indeed, as he once remarked:

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it over to future generations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1911), 503–4.

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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xxvi

*Preface*

And thus did he live for most of his ninety-four years, feverishly working to change his context and, along the way, reflecting it – with all of his contradictions and paradoxes – perhaps more than any writer of his lifetime. As popular as he has been, Shaw remains a compelling figure who deserves continued scholarly and public attention, not only for how important he was to his day, but for how relevant he is to ours.

## *Acknowledgements*

One of the distinct pleasures of editing this volume has been the opportunity to work with the many contributors. Their collegiality, professionalism, and enthusiasm are exemplary and bode well for the future of Shaw studies. I am privileged to be associated with them and to count so many of them as friends.

A number of people have given significant time and energy in supporting this project, and were especially generous with their encouragement and advice. My thanks in this regard to John Bertolini, Al Carpenter, Leonard Conolly, Peter Gahan, Tony Gibbs, Nicky Grene, Christopher Innes, Michel Pharand, and Nelson Ritschel.

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For their continued support of academics and for once again permitting the use of Shaw's writings and photographs, I would like to thank the Society of Authors.

The dedication speaks to an acknowledgement of a more personal nature: to my family, without whom this book – and so much more – would not have been possible. And yes, Zoé, consider yourself forgiven for suggesting, after I had not shaved for a few days, that should I let my beard grow I might soon come to look like Shaw . . .

## *A Chronology of Shaw's Works*

Plays and novels are listed according to the dates on which their composition was completed. The parenthetical information provides the date and place of the play's first performance, not including specially arranged copyright performances, as well as the subtitle in some instances; in the case of novels, the date on which each was first published as a book – as opposed to a serial in a journal – is indicated. Other major writings are listed according to their date of publication.

- 1856      Born in Dublin on 26 July
- 1878      *Passion Play* (unfinished)
- 1879      *Immaturity* (1930)
- 1880      *The Irrational Knot* (1905)
- 1882      *Love Among the Artists* (1900)
- 1883      *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1886)
- 1883      *An Unsocial Socialist* (1887)
- 1889      *Fabian Essays in Socialism*
- 1891      *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*
- 1892      *Widowers' Houses* (9 December 1892, Royalty Theatre, London)
- 1893      *The Philanderer: A Topical Comedy* (20 February 1905, Cripple-gate Institute, London)
- 1893      *Mrs Warren's Profession* (5 January 1902, New Lyric Club, London)
- 1894      *Arms and the Man: An Anti-Romantic Comedy* (21 April 1894, Avenue Theatre, London)
- 1894      *Candida: A Mystery* (30 July 1897, Her Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen)
- 1895      *The Man of Destiny: A Fictitious Paragraph of History* (1 July 1897, Grand Theatre, Croydon)
- 1896      *You Never Can Tell: A Comedy* (26 November 1899, Royalty Theatre, London)

*A chronology of Shaw's works*

xxix

- 1897 *The Devil's Disciple: A Melodrama* (1 October 1897, Hermanus Bleecker Hall, Albany, NY)
- 1898 Marries Charlotte Frances Payne-Townsend at the Registry Office, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, on 1 June
- 1898 *The Perfect Wagnerite*
- 1898 *Caesar and Cleopatra: A History* (1 May 1901, Anna Morgan Studios for Art and Expression at the Fine Arts Building, Chicago, IL)
- 1899 *Captain Brassbound's Conversion: An Adventure* (16 December 1900, Strand Theatre, London)
- 1901 *The Admirable Bashville: or, Constancy Unrewarded* (14 December 1902, Pharos Club, London)
- 1903 *Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* (21 May 1905, Court Theatre, London, though without Act III; *Don Juan in Hell* first performed 4 June 1907, Court Theatre, London; the entire play first performed 11 June 1915, Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh)
- 1904 *How He Lied to Her Husband* (26 September 1904, Berkeley Lyceum, New York)
- 1904 *John Bull's Other Island* (1 November 1904, Court Theatre, London)
- 1905 *Passion, Poison, and Petrification: or the Fatal Gazogene* (A Brief Tragedy for Barns and Booths) (14 July 1905, Theatrical Garden Party, Regent's Park, London)
- 1905 *Major Barbara* (A Discussion) (28 November 1905, Court Theatre, London)
- 1906 *The Doctor's Dilemma: A Tragedy* (20 November 1906, Court Theatre, London)
- 1908 *The Sanity of Art*
- 1908 *Getting Married: A Disquisitory Play* (12 May 1908, Haymarket Theatre, London)
- 1909 *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet: A Sermon in Crude Melodrama* (25 August 1909, Abbey Theatre, Dublin)
- 1909 *Press Cuttings* (A Topical Sketch Compiled from the Editorial and Correspondence columns of the Daily Papers during the Women's War in 1909) (9 July 1909, Court Theatre, London)
- 1909 *The Fascinating Foundling* (A Disgrace to the Author) (28 January 1928, Arts Theatre Club, London)
- 1909 *Misalliance* (A Debate in One Sitting) (23 February 1910, Duke of York's Theatre, London)

- xxx *A chronology of Shaw's works*
- 1910 *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets: An Interlude* (24 November 1910, Haymarket Theatre, London)
- 1910 *The Glimpse of Reality: A Tragedietta* (8 October 1927, Fellowship Hall, Glasgow)
- 1911 *Fanny's First Play: An Easy Play for a Little Theatre* (19 April 1911, Little Theatre, London)
- 1912 *Androcles and the Lion: A Fable Play* (1 September 1913, St James's Theatre, London)
- 1912 *Overruled: A Demonstration* (14 October 1912, Duke of York's Theatre, London)
- 1912 *Pygmalion* (A Romance) (16 October 1913, Hofburg Theater, Vienna)
- 1913 *Great Catherine (Whom Glory Still Adores)* (A Thumbnail Sketch of Russian Court Life in the XVIII Century) (18 November 1913, Vaudeville Theatre, London)
- 1914 *The Music-Cure: A Piece of Utter Nonsense* (28 January 1914, Little Theatre, London)
- 1914 *Common Sense About the War*
- 1915 *The Inca of Perusalem: An Almost Historical Comedietta* (7 October 1916, Repertory Theatre, Birmingham)
- 1915 *O'Flaherty, V.C.: A Recruiting Pamphlet* (17 February 1917, Western Front, Treizennes, Belgium)
- 1916 *Augustus Does His Bit: A True-to-Life Farce* (An Unofficial Dramatic Tract on War Saving and Cognate Topics) (21 January 1917, Court Theatre, London)
- 1917 *Annajanska, The Bolshevik Empress: A Revolutionary Romancelet* (21 January 1918, Coliseum, London)
- 1917 *Heartbreak House: A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes* (10 November 1920, Garrick Theatre, New York)
- 1920 *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch* (A Play Cycle) (Parts I and II, 27 February 1922; Parts III and IV, 6 March 1922; Part V, 13 March 1922, Garrick Theatre, New York)
- 1921 *Jitta's Atonement*, by Siegfried Trebitsch, translated by Shaw (8 January 1923, Shubert-Garrick Theatre, Washington, D.C.)
- 1923 *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue* (28 December 1923, Garrick Theatre, New York)
- 1926 *Translations and Tomfooleries*
- 1928 *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*
- 1928 *The Apple Cart: A Political Extravaganza* (14 June 1929, Teatr Polski, Warsaw)