

# FACULTY RESEARCH EDITION

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# The Critical Temper of George Bernard Shaw

by

Arthur L. Brentson

The great literary men of the past—creators and critics, are those who took the truth as they found it, and restated it in the idiom of their time. Very often they rethought the ideas, and rewrote the works of men who were considered great before them, for in each age, the truth in all its ramifications must be restated, elaborated, modified and varied. New thoughts and new philosophies are necessary for the advent of new creators and new critics. In any literary realm the first comer generally reaps the harvest, and those who come after are gleaners.

Consequently, one may very well class George Bernard Shaw as a gleaner. He may not rank with Swift or Pope nor may he have made any impact on his age, but he remains an interesting and a provocative contributor to modern criticism. Few writers have motivated their contemporaries to sterner criticism and few writers have enjoyed greater praise. Shaw was aware of the fact that criticism originated from personal opinion; he also knew that subjectivity was the core of all creativity and that the validity and the merit of criticism emanated therefrom. Furthermore, the critic was conscious of the factum that any effort to deny the importance of subjectivity, or claim a criterion more absolute, constituted a perversion of criticism.

Mr. John Freeman has made an excellent observation of Shaw; he said that

It is a truism that no one can be so inexorably inhuman as a convinced humanitarian. Mr. Shaw would sacrifice a nation for a theory put forward in its behalf. His plays are, usually, inhumanly frigid, and, for all their liveliness, unemotional; and it is notable that the play of which this is but slightly true, JOHN BULL'S OTHER ISLAND, is one of his best and ripest dramatic experiments. Here his gift of seeing two sides of a subject, and seeing them in spite of exaggeration, to some extent sympathetically, finds an excellent opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

True, Shaw does appear to be, in some works, inhuman, but he had to be destructive in order to be constructive. His academic operations might have been painful, but the critic was of the opinion that the ills of the world—and particularly those of England, needed such surgery.

As a comic dramatist, demonstrations of kindness and tenderness were unsuited to his objectives; they were words that had been too often profaned by the Victorians. His themes are those that deal with the folly of romance, crime and punishment, the economic oppression of women, the cupidity of doctors, and the prosaic reality

<sup>1</sup>John Freeman, *The Moderns* (London: R. Scott, 1916), P. 8.

of florid history. He revolted against all that the Victorians pretended to hold dear: respectability, morality, charity and modesty. The authority exposed the snobbery of middle class culture, which, as he saw it, had always encouraged the vice of aestheticism at the expense of well-being. Shaw pictured the Victorian artist as one who sat alone and contemplated himself and his remarkable sensations—all was right with the world. This is not to say that the artist was unaware of the condition of the world, but the satirist saw that the artist was much less interested in what he had in common with the world than in what he had apart from it. In fact, to Shaw, the Victorian artist was complacent; he was a conformer to the hypocrisy of his time.

As evidence of the climate of the era, and the attitude which Shaw took toward it, two plays, *Heartbreak House* and *Getting Married*, have been chosen as examples of his dissatisfaction with the snobbery and pretense of British Aristocracy, and the rose-colored sentimentality of marriage.

*Heartbreak House*, begun in 1913 and completed in 1916, is one of Shaw's most provocative plays. It illustrates the writer's life-long belief that knowledge and wisdom are gained through conflict of opinion. In the play, symbolic characters move about within the confines of a complex English society. Everything denotes England as the leader of an empire: the main drawing-room, in the form of a ship, indicates England's maritime supremacy and colonial enterprise; the drawing-board symbolizes her supremacy in craft and industry. It is Victorian England wearing the mask of appearance to hide reality. Lady Utterword gave a striking description of the English atmosphere when she exclaimed:

Oh, this house, this house! I come back to it after twenty-three years; and it is just the same: the luggage lying on the steps, the servants spoilt and impossible, nobody at home to receive anybody, and no regular meals, nobody ever hungry because they are always gnawing bread and butter, or munching apples, and what is worse, the same disorder in ideas, in talk, in feeling.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, the world of *Heartbreak House* was hollow, artificial, but to the British aristocrats it was better than the world on the outside; in this house they were safe from the competitive and inhumane world of business. The work represents a class of people who did not know how to live; they were negligent of duty, self-conceited and trusted too much to Providence. Typical of the British attitude was the answer given Mangan when he inquired of the nature of the house. He was told that he was "beneath the dome of heaven."<sup>3</sup> But Ellie Dunn, who was a realist, saw it from a different angle; it became at once an "agonizing house," a "house without foundations."

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<sup>2</sup>George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House* (New York: The Modern Library, 1919), P. 370.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., P. 377.

Nurse Guinness put it very succinctly when she said . . . "this house is full of surprises for them that don't know our ways."<sup>4</sup>

Although *Heartbreak House* has been discussed from the standpoint of Shaw's attitude toward England and its aristocratic indifference, it is also an anti-romantic diatribe against sentimental marriage. The characters in the play had been similarly frustrated in their romantic and spiritual aspirations and had to adjust themselves to reality. Most of them, however, lacked the courage for an adjustment radical enough to insure salvation. Yet, Shaw infers that their bitter realism would, in turn, "educate" them, if they were capable of learning from experience.

Now the discussion proceeds to a play that is a more elaborate exposure of romantic love—*Getting Married*. To many who hold to conventional ideas of marriage, the preface might be a shock, if it is not, then Shaw failed in his attempt. However, he does not mean it in the light from which he is often criticized. What he said is not new or untrue; it is, perhaps, the method that the author used which infuriated his assailants. Take, for an example, the following quotation:

"When young women come to me and ask me whether I think they ought to consent to marry the man they have decided to live with . . . they are perplexed and astonished when I, who am supposed . . . to have the most advanced views attained on the subject, urge them on no account to compromise themselves without the security of an authentic wedding ring."<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, it cannot be said that Shaw advocated immunities from the obligation of real life nor can it be thought that his ideas were a disparagement on the sacred view of the union. He knew that

. . . marriage is in effect compulsory upon all normal people; and until the law is altered there is nothing for us, but to make the best of it as it stands. Even when no such establishment is desired, clandestine irregularities are not negligible as an alternative to marriage. How common they are nobody knows; for in spite of the powerful protection afforded to the parties by the law of libel, and the readiness of society on various other grounds to be hoodwinked by the keeping up of the very thinnest appearance, most of them are probably never suspected.<sup>6</sup>

In *Getting Married*, the critic revealed his indifference to the varying mores by which sexual union occurs. He was not against marriage but he was concerned that it be fruitful. His quarrel with marriage is its status as a sexual monopoly; he was of the opinion that the Life Force is selectively at work seeking the advancement of the species. Hence, domesticity is not important in reproduction

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., P. 378.

<sup>5</sup>George Bernard Shaw, *Getting Married* (New York: Brantano's, 1917), P. 94.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., P. 101.

—what is important, according to Shaw, is to have some restraining measure which will keep the worshippers of art, of love, of money and of comfort from sterilizing the world.

Thus the novelist, through critical humor, exposed not only England, but the entire civilized world. Try as one may, he cannot dismiss Shaw as simply a Mephistophelian critic. He used his pen as a sword in a struggle that was more ethical than aesthetic.

The author was unusually aware of the common frailties, the vulgar ambitions and the rapacious egotism of man. One may not agree with his opinions or the tenacity with which he held them, but one must agree to the fact that, often, an effective critic is uncompromising. As a critical writer, he may very well be placed in the company of the immortals.