

From *Man and Superman*
by Bernard Shaw
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In a cartoon by Max Beerbohm about *Man and Superman*, the Danish critic Georg Brandes asks Bernard Shaw what he would take for his motley clothes, and Shaw answers, 'Immortality.' The sophisticated Brandes scoffs, 'Come, I've handled these same goods before! Coat, Mr. Schopenhauer's; waistcoat, Mr. Ibsen's; trousers, Mr. Nietzsche's...'

'Ah,' counters Shaw, 'but look at the patches!' And the patches are a collection of other influential writers to whom Shaw was allegedly indebted. Beerbohm's mockery failed to disturb Shaw. He would write, in the preface to another play, 'I did not cut these cerebral capers in mere inconsiderate exuberance. I did it because the worst convention of the criticism of the theatre current at that time was that intellectual seriousness is out of place on the stage.... My answer to all this was to put all my intellectual goods in the shop window under the sign of Man and Superman. By good luck and acting, the comedy triumphed on the stage...'

He began the scenario in July 1901, determined not only to write a play that would be for all seasons, but one that would encapsulate the new century's intellectual inheritance. 'Accordingly,' he wrote, '... I took the legend of Don Juan in its Mozartian form and made it a dramatic parable.' He also took some of his Don Juan from Lord Byron's verse satire, where the alleged philanderer is not the pursuer, but the pursued, a concept Shaw also attributed to 'Shakespearean law,' where 'the woman always takes the initiative.' From the Victorian comedy fashionable in Shaw's earliest days he took the twin themes of love and money, giving one heroine an inheritance but not the man she wants to share it with her, and the other the man, but not the money his father wants to withhold if he marries the wrong woman.

'I should make formal acknowledgment,' he wrote in his preface to the play, 'to the authors I have pillaged in the following pages if I could recollect them all.' His 'brigand-

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poetaster' was owed to Arthur Conan Doyle; his 'motor engineer and New Man' was from H. G. Wells. His 'servant who knows more than his masters' he conceded to James Barrie. He took his Octavius 'unaltered from Mozart,' but neglected to note that the same character is also 'Ricky-Ticky-Tavy,' from Rudyard Kipling. After watching a production of the medieval *Everyman*, he asked himself, 'Why not Everywoman?' – and confessed, 'Ann was the result: every woman is not Ann, but Ann is Everywoman.'

Readers and playgoers will find that the feast of overt and covert sources in *Man and Superman* adds continuing dimensions to the comedy. There are many more. Shaw even mined his own earlier and little-known writings. As a failed novelist in his twenties, Shaw began a satirical novel he intended to call *The Heartless Man* but eventually titled *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883). Its hero is an analogue of John Tanner in the later play, and the novel's ineffectual poetasting suitor is a precursor to Octavius. Its 'duel of sex' at the conclusion recalls Congreve's elegant comedy of manners *The Way of the World* (1700) and anticipates the witty, ironic last scene of Shaw's play. Even less known is Shaw's 1887 short story 'Don Giovanni Explains', rejected by editors who sensed scandal. In this, his first working out of the Don Juan legend, the narrator – the Don himself – confides that he had been initiated in sex by an amorous widow. Two years before, that had actually happened to Shaw, who noted in his diary that he had celebrated his birthday 'by a new experience.' (Shaw finally published the story in his Collected Edition in 1932, when he was seventy-six.)

Even the four figments of a dream in the almost-independent Interlude that makes up most of Act III are anticipated in 'Don Giovanni Explains', which opens with a young woman daydreaming on a train about the opera she has just seen, and then observing the Don sitting opposite her in his traditional Mozartian costume. When she startles, he advises her, 'Pray be quiet. You are alone. I am only what you call a ghost, and have not the slightest interest in meddling with you.' At that point the story turns into what

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seems to be a preliminary scenario for 'Don Juan in Hell', the dream interlude, with the Lady, an equivalent to Dona Ana, who finds herself at the opening of the interlude face-to-face with an equally ethereal Don Juan.

Even more striking is the resemblance of the concepts of Heaven and Hell in the Shavian short story to those in the Hell Scene. The principals of the Hell Scene – all four are equivalents to characters in the frame-play – learn that the frontier separating Heaven from Hell is 'only the difference between two ways of looking at things,' and Ana is told that they 'see each other as bodies only because we learnt to think about one another under that aspect when we were alive.' The Don of the story had told the Lady, 'If I speak of [Hell] as a place at all, I do so in order to make my narrative comprehensible, just as I express myself to you phenomenally as a gentleman in hat, cloak, and boots, although such things are no part of the category to which I belong.' The Hell of the play is a place for gross satisfaction of the senses, and the Devil is the leader of its best society. The Don acknowledges the Devil's intellectual and debating gifts, but resents his insufferable cordiality. In the story, the Don confides to the Lady, 'I found society there composed chiefly of the vulgar, hysterical, brutish, weak, good-for-nothing people, all well-intentioned, who kept up the reputation of the place by making themselves and each other as unhappy as they were capable of being. They wearied and disgusted me; and I disconcerted them beyond measure. The Prince of Darkness is not a gentleman. His knowledge and insight are remarkable as far as they go; ... and I was polite to him.' Each Don, in both the early story and the mature play, is a subversive whose austere vision of life is unsuitable for the Shavian Hell.

To integrate play and play-within-the-play, Shaw would identify his hero, John Tanner, as a distant relative of the legendary Don Juan Tenorio – thus his echo of a surname. Throughout the romantic misadventures and misunderstandings with which the play abounds are echoes of dreams and references to dreams, even, in Ann/Ana's words 'an

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echo from a former existence which always seems to me such a striking proof that we have immortal souls.' Toward the close, Tanner wonders, 'When did all this happen to me before? Are we two dreaming?'

Shaw calls the phenomenon which disturbs John Tanner the Life Force, and explains it at length in the preface which he dedicated ironically and extravagantly to Arthur Bingham Walkley, the most influential theatre critic of the day. Drama reviewer for *The Times*, Walkley loathed Shaw's plays and wished none of them well. He failed to appreciate the wry comedy of manners which Shaw had wrapped around his philosophical romp (produced at first without the interlude in Hell), and was at a loss to explain why the play worked. When it was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square in 1904, Walkley began his critique by comparing Shaw to Shakespeare and putting his ambitious contemporary down. 'On the one hand a born dramatist, and that the greatest,' he wrote of the Bard; 'on the other [hand] a man who is no dramatist at all.' Yet Walkley felt forced to confess that there was something peculiar about what he had seen. 'When I venture to say that Mr Shaw is no dramatist I do not mean that he fails to interest and stimulate and amuse us in the theatre. Many of us find him more entertaining than any other living writer for the stage. There are many things in his plays that give us far keener thrills of delight ... than many things in Shakespeare's plays.'

Walkley and most other critics could not make sense of Shaw's coupling of newness and tradition in what was the first great twentieth century English play. It was even more difficult for the London critical fraternity to comprehend it in its book form. 'I decorated it,' Shaw blamed himself later, 'too brilliantly and too lavishly. I surrounded it with a comedy of which it formed only one act, and that act was so completely episodic (it was a dream that did not affect the action of the piece) that the comedy could be detached and played by itself. Also I supplied the published work with an imposing framework consisting of a preface, an appendix called 'The Revolutionist's Handbook' [supposedly written

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by John Tanner], and a final display of [Tanner's] aphoristic fireworks.' It was all too much for the critics, who had never seen anything like it before. They dismissed it. Somehow he and theatre critic William Archer remained friends despite Archer's smug dismissal that Shaw 'is not, and never will be, a great dramatist; but he is something rarer, if not better – a philosophic humorist, with the art of expressing himself in dramatic form'. The *Daily Telegraph* agreed that there was no play, not even a story, in *Man and Superman*, but, its-reviewer conceded, 'let us frankly admit that it is one of the most amusing pieces of work which . . . the Court Theatre has ever put upon the stage.'

Shaw subtitled his pairing of play and dream 'a comedy and a philosophy.' When the third act, largely John Tanner's dream, is performed with the frame-play, the performance can run five hours – no longer than the uncut *Hamlet*, Shaw reminded contemporaries. (It was first given in full in 1915.) In its entirety it is a vivid evocation of his ideas about male-female relations and the inner forces that dominate them. Playing it in its Edwardian setting does not diminish that impact. Performed without the dream interlude, as audiences first experienced it in 1905, *Man and Superman* is buoyant, romantic theatre with a satirical edge. Performed separately as 'Don Juan in Hell' in 1907, and often, still, performed independently, the dream-interlude proved to be a lively conversation, a quartet for voices that aspires to the condition of music, yet given dramatic tension by a thread of plot: which alternative, Heaven or Hell, will Juan and Ana each choose? Whether the characters are only opinions in costume, or mythic figures brought to near-life, remains Shaw's challenge to directors, players, audiences – and, even, readers.

As the play closes, with the heroines having snared their prey, we realize that Shaw's plays are open-ended, like life. Is the power of biological purpose, which both Juan and his Edwardian successor, John Tanner, consider unscrupulous, enough to keep the sexes together for a lifetime? The 'true joy of life', Shaw contends in his rhetorical feat of a preface,

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is 'being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out [in fulfilling it] before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.' If so, is *Man and Superman*, for all its effervescence, a comedy after all?

The Royal Court Theatre, managed and directed then by John Vedrenne and Harley Granville Barker, used the repertory system, making long runs impossible, but the public demanded more opportunities to see *Man and Superman*. Through 1907 the Court revived it three times, for a total of 176 performances. That success was too much for the still-influential quarterly, *Blackwood's*, which sneered that Shaw had enjoyed a 'peculiar triumph', and predicted unhappily that 'henceforth there is no extravagance which will not be permitted to him' while he 'wrap[ped] up a genuine talent in the rags of charlatanry . . . under the inspiration of that demented professor, Friedrich Nietzsche'. Shaw did not believe in wasting his writing energy on anger, and waited until 1910 to put a collection of critics into a comedy. In *Fanny's First Play*, Walkley is the critic 'Trotter', who reviews the play-within-the-play ostensibly written by Fanny O'Dowda. Waiting for the curtain to go up, 'Trotter' rails against an unnamed playwright, clearly Shaw, who 'resorts to the dastardly subterfuge of calling [his work for the stage] conversation pieces, discussions, and so forth.' To 'Trotter' they were, of course, not plays. But play or nay, *Fanny* would run for 622 performances, one of the longest-running hits of the time.

By putting recognizable critics on stage in the frame-play, Shaw was taking a step farther toward what Bertolt Brecht would later call the 'alienation effect' – the audience recognition that the play being seen and heard was not a representation of reality but a presentation by a playwright that required, beyond possible empathy with its characters, a stepping back to consider the play as a play. While a Shakespeare or a Dryden had created a 'Chorus' figure to

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step forward and ask the audience (as in *Henry V*) to 'entertain conjecture of a time', Shaw created as early as *Man and Superman* the player who is both actor and character in the same person – the self-conscious character, or actor directly aware of his audience. In 'Don Juan in Hell' he combined two of the most primitive, yet basic, elements of the self-conscious theatre – the platform of the philosopher and the ring of the clown. In post-Shavian refinements the technique would sweep across the century. When the Devil, exasperated by Juan's long speeches, challenges, 'Let us go on for another hour if you like,' and Don Juan agrees, 'Good: let us,' the perceptible groans amid the laughter make it clear that the audience knows it is at a play. When the Statue (of the Commander) carps, 'I begin to doubt whether you will ever finish, my friend. You are extremely fond of hearing yourself talk,' the audience recognizes Shaw's tongue in his cheek, a perception reinforced by Juan's response, 'True; but since you have endured so much, you may as well endure to the end.'

That a playwright can misunderstand the implications of his words has energized critics since the dawn of drama reviewing. Shaw, then, may have been mistaken in his contention, quoted earlier, that the dispensable dream scene does not affect the action of the frame-play. Indeed it seems otherwise. Readers and audiences may find John Tanner's collapse of resistance to betrothal related to his experience as the dreamer, for in the dream scene Don Juan encounters the inevitability of the Life Force, 'the universal creative energy, of which the parties are both the helpless agents, [which] overrides and sweeps away all personal considerations', and which throws potential sexual partners 'into one another's arms at the exchange of a glance.' Whether or not Ann has long plotted her moves, and Tanner has long resisted even the thought of them, his subconscious, in the grip of his dream, prepares him for the inevitable. Tanner recognizes that he is doomed to happiness and to what Francis Bacon, in his Shakespeare-era essay on marriage, had called 'hostages to fortune'. Despite pages of paradoxes,

Shaw had, in the end, recognized the realities of the box-office, without which there is no theatre. Thus *Man and Superman* plays on, and on, and on.

Stanley Weintraub

LIFE

- 1856** Born in Dublin on 26 July
- 1871** After only short periods of schooling, started work as an office boy in a Dublin firm of land agents
- 1873** Mother and sisters moved to London
- 1876** Joined mother in London; she taught singing and his sister Lucy sang professionally in musical plays
- 1879** While working for the Edison Telephone Company began to meet the earliest British socialists, including, in 1880, Sidney Webb and Beatrice Potter (later Mrs Webb), who became lifelong friends
- 1879–81** Wrote five novels, four published serially in magazines
- 1884** Joined the Fabian Society, which advocated gradual progress towards socialism, and began giving lectures both to the Fabians and on their behalf. At about the same time, met the hugely influential theatre critic William Archer, who helped Shaw to find work as a critic. First meeting with William Morris whose disciple he became
- 1885** Appointed as a book reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and music critic for the new *Dramatic Review*
- 1886–9** Art critic for *The World*
- 1888–90** Music critic for *The Star* (under the pseudonym 'Corno di Bassetto')
- 1889** Attended English première of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*
- 1890–94** Music critic for *The World* (writing as GBS)
- 1891** Published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*
- 1892** *Widowers' Houses* (his first published play) given a private performance by the Independent Theatre in London
- 1894** *Arms and the Man* produced at the Avenue Theatre in London; then by actor-manager Richard Mansfield in New York
- 1895–8** Drama critic for *The Saturday Review*
- 1897** Encouraged by the success of *The Devil's Disciple* in New York, gave up most of his work as a critic
- 1897–1903** Elected borough councillor for the London borough of St Pancras
- 1898** *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* published. Married Charlotte Payne-Townshend. Began concentrating on his writing as playwright and essayist
- 1899** The newly founded Stage Society produced *You Never Can Tell*, followed by *Candida* and *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* in 1900

- 1904–7** Granville Barker and Vedrenne take over the (Royal) Court Theatre in a challenge to the commercial West End theatre system. Eleven Shaw plays produced at the Court including the newly written *Man and Superman*, *John Bull's Other Island*, *Major Barbara* and *The Doctor's Dilemma*
- 1905** Bought a country home at Ayot St Lawrence, approximately 25 miles north of London (retaining an apartment in Adelphi Terrace, off the Strand)
- 1910** *Misalliance* produced at the Duke of York's Theatre
- 1913** *Androcles and the Lion* at St James's Theatre. World première of *Pygmalion* in Vienna (in German), followed by a production in Berlin
- 1914** *Pygmalion* produced by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, at His Majesty's Theatre. *Common Sense about the War* published
- 1920** *Heartbreak House* produced at the Royal Court. Completed *Back to Methuselah*, a five-part cycle of plays, transforming the biblical version of creation and human destiny into post-Darwinian science fiction
- 1924** *Saint Joan* produced at the New Theatre
- 1925** Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. First English public performance of *Mrs Warren's Profession* (banned by the censor since 1898)
- 1928** Published *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*
- 1929** *The Apple Cart*, produced at the first Malvern Festival, organized by Barry Jackson's Birmingham Repertory Theatre with Shaw as its figurehead
- 1931** Visited Moscow, and met Stanislavski, Gorki and Stalin
- 1932** *Too True to be Good* produced at Malvern. Published fable of *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* following a visit to South Africa
- 1933** Travelled to India, Hong Kong, China, Japan and the USA
- 1936** Celebrated 80th birthday. Gave up driving
- 1938** Awarded Oscar for the best screenplay for Gabriel Pascal's film of *Pygmalion*. *Geneva* (featuring caricatures of Hitler and Mussolini called before the International Court of Justice at the Hague) transferred from Malvern to Saville Theatre, and then to St James's Theatre
- 1939** Ceremonially presented with the deeds of a site (in South Kensington) for the National Theatre of Great Britain
- 1943** Death of Charlotte Shaw
- 1944** Published *Everybody's Political What's What?*, an instant best-seller
- 1946** On his 90th birthday, honoured with the freedom of both Dublin and the borough of St Pancras
- 1950** Died on 2 November

PRINCIPAL WORKS OF BERNARD SHAW*

PLAYS

- Widowers' Houses* (1893)
Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant (1898) (including *Mrs Warren's Profession*; *Arms and the Man*; *Candida*; *You Never Can Tell*)
Three Plays for Puritans (1901) (including *The Devil's Disciple*; *Caesar and Cleopatra*)
Man and Superman (1903)
John Bull's Other Island (1907)
Major Barbara (1907)
The Doctor's Dilemma (1911)
Getting Married (1911)
Misalliance (1914)
Androcles and the Lion (1916)
Pygmalion (1916)
Heartbreak House (1919)
Back to Methuselah (1921)
Saint Joan (1924)
The Apple Cart (1930)
Too True to be Good (1934)
On the Rocks (1934)
The Millionairess (1936)
In Good King Charles's Golden Days (1939)

NOVELS AND OTHER FICTION

- An Unsocial Socialist* (1884)
Cashel Byron's Profession (1885–6)
The Irrational Knot (1885–7)
Love among the Artists (1887–8)
Immaturity (1830)
The Black Girl in Search of God (1932)

CRITICISM

- Major Critical Essays* (1930) (including *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1891; *The Sanity of Art*, 1895 and 1908; *The Perfect Wagnerite*, 1898)
Music in London (1931; from serialization 1890–94)
Our Theatres in the Nineties (1931; from serialization 1895–98)

POLITICAL WRITINGS

- Fabian Essays in Socialism* (edited, 1893)
Common Sense about the War (1914)
The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism (1928)
Everybody's Political What's What? (1944)

*Dates are of first English-language publication.