

Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association

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George Bernard Shaw (1909): **G.K. Chesterton's Contribution to the British Drama**

Session 1.7 – “G.K. Chesterton”

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During the first decade of the twentieth century, George Bernard Shaw was a dazzlingly popular controversialist and playwright. G.K. Chesterton, Shaw's junior by nearly twenty years, was an up-and-coming belletrist whose burgeoning career promised success in many different fields, including novels, essays, and poetry. Despite the age difference, and a clash of opinion regarding almost every topic they discussed, the two writers were nonetheless intimate friends. With mutual goodwill and admiration, each beleaguered the other with ideological attacks and repartee, not only in private conversation, but frequently in the public forum to the great delight of literary society. In 1908, Shaw publicized a particular challenge with which he had pestered his young acquaintance privately for years: Shaw contended that Chesterton "should contribute something to the British drama."¹ Shaw's obvious intention was to educe a play from Chesterton's fertile imagination. Chesterton's response to this challenge in 1909, however, was an altogether different sort of contribution to British drama. Chesterton's book, *George Bernard Shaw*, is perhaps the most important and celebrated work in all Shavian scholarship.² More literary criticism than biography, the work boldly outlines the influences of Shaw's complex personality on his art and philosophy; and, despite eliciting powerful and prompt argument from Shaw himself, Chesterton's study also drew this notable acknowledgment: "The book is... the best work of literary art I have yet provoked."³

In his introduction to *George Bernard Shaw*, Chesterton wrote: "Most people say that they agree with Bernard Shaw or that they do not understand him. I am the only person who

¹ Denis J. Conlin, "Introduction," in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton XI: Plays and Chesterton on Shaw*, eds. George J. Marlin *et al.* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 19.

² See William B Furlong, *Shaw and Chesterton: The Metaphysical Jesters* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), 40. See also: Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002), 243: Chesterton's "the *best* book" Shaw has inspired.

³ Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 143.

understands him, and I do not agree with him.”⁴ That Chesterton often disagreed with Shaw was certainly no revelation. But the claim that he alone understood Shaw: this was a rather more provocative assertion. Shaw was after all an eminent celebrity whose opinions could be found in countless periodicals; several biographies of the playwright had already been published.⁵

Furthermore, Chesterton’s study of Shaw might ostensibly be judged inadequate: he is typically scant on all of the ordinary biographical data – such as dates and proper names – which a reader might expect to find in such a work.⁶ It is not even until the third chapter that Chesterton finally gets around to admitting a fact which usually comes at the beginning of a biography: after pages of prefatory material, Chesterton writes, “Now... for the first time I may be permitted to confess that Bernard Shaw was, like other men, born. He was born in Dublin on the 26th of July, 1856.”⁷

The justification for Chesterton’s remark that only he really understands Shaw can be traced to the unique methodology for Chesterton’s biographical study, according to which he used Shaw’s own work as a model. Noting a tendency in Shaw to “write a very long preface even to a very short play,”⁸ Chesterton began his book with three introductory chapters outlining the main influences upon Shaw’s literary career before ever even mentioning one of his famous writings. This method, “putting the moral in front of the fable,” was Chesterton’s way of “explaining such matters as Shaw himself might explain them.”⁹ For Chesterton, Shaw was a “man of many introductions,”¹⁰ and he felt that it would be “indefensibility foolish to attempt to

⁴ *Quoted in Furlong*, 61.

⁵ *Furlong*, 41.

⁶ *Pearce, Wisdom and Innocence*, 134.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, “George Bernard Shaw,” in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton XI: Plays and Chesterton on Shaw*, 384. *Hereafter: G.B.S.*

⁸ *G.B.S.*, 363.

⁹ *G.B.S.*, 365.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

explain a man whose whole object through life has been to explain himself.”¹¹ This is what others, failing to understand Shaw, had attempted. So Chesterton chose to approach Shaw through a Shavian perspective, treating Shaw the way that Shaw would treat a character in one of his own plays.¹²

The approach was a brilliant success. Not only did it lend a useful structure to Chesterton’s book, but it grew out of Chesterton’s uncanny insight into Shaw’s psychology, an insight which can be appreciated in light of a statement made by Shaw himself. Years after the publication of Chesterton’s seminal work, Shaw acknowledged in an interview that he had in fact lived much of his life as a self-made character: “I had to become an actor, and create for myself a fantastic personality fit and apt for dealing with men, and adaptable to the various parts I had to play as an author, journalist, politician, committee man, man of the world, and so forth.”¹³ Shaw had been all along putting on one or another Shavian *persona*. The celebrated Shavian scholar, Eric Bentley, puts this point succinctly: “In a sense what we are looking for is not biography at all. In a sense Shaw has no biography.”¹⁴ Chesterton’s unique methodology positioned him to penetrate keenly into Shaw’s various *personae* to illuminate the personality underneath.

One of Chesterton’s most remarkable observations in *George Bernard Shaw* is the identification of puritanical biases informing Shaw’s work. In the prefatory section entitled “The Puritan,” Chesterton builds the case that Shaw’s teetotalism and anti-romanticism stem from a particularly priggish form of Calvinism, a theme to which he returns frequently in his later

¹¹ *G.B.S.*, 366.

¹² See Furlong, 51-52.

¹³ Erik H. Erikson, “Biographic: G.B.S. (70) on George Bernard Shaw (20),” in *G. B. Shaw: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. J. Kaufmann (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 24.

¹⁴ Bentley, 205.

discussion of Shaw's works.¹⁵ This element in Shaw's intellectual development, rarely appreciated before Chesterton's book, became subsequently a cornerstone in Shavian scholarship; in the words of one scholar, "[Chesterton's] insight was to haunt [Shaw] down through the years."¹⁶

In this instance, too, the verity of Chesterton's observations would be corroborated many years later by Shaw himself. At age seventy, Shaw would admit that his mother's flighty lack of organization significantly facilitated the development of his fastidious and even fanatically precise personality.¹⁷ To quote Chesterton:

There is at least one outstanding fact about the man we are studying; Bernard Shaw is never frivolous.... [He] exhibits all that is purest in the Puritan; the desire to see truth face to face even if it slay us, the high impatience with irrelevant sentiment or obstructive symbol; the constant effort to keep the soul at its highest pressure and speed.¹⁸

Similarly, the prudish and cynical portrayal of inebriants stumbling through Shaw's plays were later admitted to have been crafted in response to his own father's "drink neurosis" – they were the means by which Shaw tried to cope with his difficult childhood: "It had to be either a family tragedy or a family joke."¹⁹ Perhaps the most significant insight Chesterton had *vis a vie* Shaw's "puritanical" tendencies comes from a section dedicated to Shaw's play about Caesar and Cleopatra. Chesterton describes what he calls Shaw's "primary and defiant proposition... that the elect do not earn virtue, but possess it," which he rightly identifies as a Calvinist tenet.²⁰ It is

¹⁵ *G.B.S.*, 381-382. For an example of Chesterton contextualizing this in discussion of a particular play, see his treatment of romance in *Candida* on 421-422.

¹⁶ Furlong, 45.

¹⁷ Erikson, 22.

¹⁸ *G.B.S.*, 381.

¹⁹ Erikson, 21.

²⁰ *G.B.S.*, 438.

noteworthy that Chesterton makes this distinction in the midst of a discussion of the character of Julius Caesar, who might at first glance appear just another instance of the stock character of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, a device common to many Shaw plays. Chesterton boldly repositions Shaw's entire religion and philosophy, not in the framework in which it was commonly understood, namely that of Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht* (Will to Power),²¹ but in a radically different frame: as a developed form of John Calvin's doctrine of election.²²

Another of Chesterton's revolutionary Shavian distinctions deals with the notion of paradox. While most of their contemporaries regarded paradox as an element essential to Shavian drama, Chesterton startlingly maintained that Shaw was "almost entirely without paradox."²³ In fact, Chesterton found this to be Shaw's major weakness.²⁴ In Chesterton's words:

Paradox is about the only thing in the world that [Shaw] does not understand. All his splendid vistas and startling suggestions arise from carrying some one clear principle further than it has yet been carried. His madness is all consistency, not inconsistency.²⁵

Thus, Chesterton explains, Shaw could not fully understand or appreciate so many institutions founded upon paradoxes. Specific examples given by Chesterton are romance, marriage, patriotism, and Christianity – all themes central to plays like *Major Barbara*, *Candida*, and *Man*

²¹ See for example Stuart E. Baker, *Bernard Shaw's Remarkable Religion: A Faith That Fits the Facts* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), especially 43-59. Notably, Chesterton himself had opted for this more simple approach in his earlier essay on Shaw found in *Heretics*, Christian Classic Ethereal Library: "Heretics by G.K. Chesterton," available from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/heretics.html>; Internet; accessed 01 November 2009. Hereafter *Heretics*.

²² *G.B.S.*, 437-440, especially 439: "Caesar is not saved by works, or even by faith: he is saved because he is one of the elect."

²³ *G.B.S.*, 448. See also, Furlong, 60.

²⁴ E.g., G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1959), 3-4. Hereafter *Orthodoxy*. See also *Heretics*, chapter 4.

²⁵ *G.B.S.*, 448.

and *Superman*.²⁶ Chesterton deduces that, as a result of Shaw's inability to grapple with the paradoxes underlying these basic human traditions, they are never genuinely portrayed in any of Shaw's plays. Rather, such institutions merely form the skeletons of "straw men" which Shaw invariably proceeds to subject to ironical derision.

Chesterton illustrates this point with several examples from Shaw's work. First, he cites the portrayal of religious faith in *Major Barbara*, saying: "[T]he actual expressions of religion in the play are somewhat unsatisfactory as expressions of religion – or even of reason."²⁷ For instance, Chesterton shows that Barbara's final conviction that God should be her debtor betrays a denial of her former faith or at least an imperfection in her knowledge of the God she had believed; for, "if God owes everything to her He is not God."²⁸ Chesterton also criticizes "the incredibly weak fight which [Cusins] makes... in answer to the elephantine sophistries of Undershaft."²⁹ Cusins is the character whom Shaw portrays as the exponent of traditional virtues in opposition to the diabolical dynamite tycoon, Andrew Undershaft. At one point, – during a debate which Chesterton calls "disgraceful" – Undershaft argues against the value of voting by pointing to the historical success of violent revolutions, and Shaw has Cusins feebly concede: "It is historically true. I loathe having to admit it. I repudiate your sentiments. I abhor your nature. I defy you in every possible way. Still, it is true. But it ought not to be true."³⁰ Indeed, the young

²⁶ See *G.B.S.*, 422, 450, 455-458.

²⁷ *G.B.S.*, 457.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; Cf., "The Project Gutenberg eBook of Major Barbara, by George Bernard Shaw," act III, available from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3790/3790-h/3790-h.htm>; Internet; accessed 01 November 2009. Henceforth "Major Barbara." Chesterton, infamous for misquoting, here paraphrases Barbara's speech in his own words to the same effect. Shaw's original: "When I die, let [God] be in my debt, not I in his; and let me forgive him as becomes a woman of my rank."

²⁹ *G.B.S.*, 447.

³⁰ "Major Barbara," act III.

Greek professor Cusins seems hardly a credible witness for the cause of civility and virtue when he makes this dramatic confession: “[A]ll the poet in me recoils from being a good man.”³¹

A further example of Shaw’s straw man technique is found, according to Chesterton, in the play *Man and Superman*.³² In this play, Shaw addresses the theme of marriage through the relationship between Ann Whitefield and John Tanner. “[S]till haunted with his old impotence of the unromantic writer,” Chesterton says, Shaw fails to paint a believable picture of premarital courtship.³³ Chesterton acknowledges that Ann does shine as a strong and compelling character; but alleges that Shaw must greatly attenuate Ann’s femininity in order to make her more assertive. Here again, Shaw’s trouble arises from a failure to understand paradox: he cannot contrive to paint his female protagonist in a manner both strong and ladylike. In the end, says Chesterton, readers “are convinced successfully that Anne wishes to marry Tanner, but in the very process... lose all power of conceiving why Tanner should ever consent to marry Anne.”³⁴ The character of Ann, whom one critic describes as “an incorrigible liar, an inveterate hypocrite... [but] nevertheless thoroughly charming,”³⁵ is typical of the “Woman” described by the play’s moral mouthpiece, Don Juan, in the famous scene in Hell: “Marriage is... the most licentious of human institutions.... And a woman seeking a husband is the most unscrupulous of all the beasts of prey.”³⁶ Thus, although Shaw maintains the play as an argument for the dismissal of marriage as an idea and an institution, he does not really sustain the case; for the

³¹ “Major Barbara,” 703.

³² See “The Project Gutenberg EBook of Man and Superman, by George Bernard Shaw,” available from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3328/3328-h/3328-h.htm>; Internet; accessed 01 November 2009. Henceforth “Man and Superman.”

³³ *G.B.S.*, 465.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Frank N. Magill et al., eds., “Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy,” in *Masterplots: 1,801 Plot Stories and Critical Evaluations of the World’s Finest Literature, Volume 7: Los-Myr* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, 1996), 3900.

³⁶ See “Man and Superman,” act III.

romance he portrays and the marriage he debates are not accurate representations of the real, but just two more Shavian chimeras. Hence, it is easy to see why Chesterton's accusation of Shaw constructing straw-men for his ideological pugilism was picked up by many subsequent critics, such as John Freeman, who wrote in 1916: "[Shaw] has mastered the trick of showing up one character vividly at the expense of another, but he has not mastered the trick of letting one character speak for itself and by itself...."³⁷

Chesterton's last and greatest criticism for Shaw is a condemnation of his personal espousal and the embodiment through his work of a neo-Neitzschean and neo-Darwinian philosophy called *creative evolution*.³⁸ Although the fullest expression of this concept came after Chesterton's book was written – in *Back to Methuselah* – the idea is present in seminal form throughout Shaw's earlier works.³⁹ In *Major Barbara*, for example, Andrew Undershaft is a veritable "superman" whose iron will keeps him and his legacy atop the social ladder.⁴⁰ The point of that play, as Chesterton describes it, is that "even the noblest enthusiasm of [Barbara] who becomes a Salvation Army officer fails under the brute money power of [Undershaft] who is a modern capitalist."⁴¹ Chesterton tries to argue that there is an inconsistency here; that, if Barbara's will can be so easily dominated by Undershaft's, then Shaw has failed to demonstrate the supremacy of sovereign willpower. However, as Harold Bloom points out, this is admittedly

³⁷ John Freeman, "[Excerpt from] 'George Bernard Shaw' in *The Moderns: Essays in Literary Criticism*," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Volume 3*, eds. Sharon K. Hall et al. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1900), 384. See also the discussion in Furlong, 59.

³⁸ See Furlong, 155.

³⁹ Stuart E. Baker, *Bernard Shaw's Remarkable Religion: A Faith That Fits the Facts* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 41. See also Furlong, 156.

⁴⁰ Baker, 41.

⁴¹ *G.B.S.*, 458.

a somewhat weak reading of the play, not to mention of Nietzsche.⁴² Nevertheless, Chesterton's chief argument with the philosophy of *creative evolution* and the advent of the Superman was not so much that it was inconsistent as that it was iniquitous. Chesterton, always wary of the eugenics craze sweeping his contemporaries, a concept which drew heavily upon notions like *creative evolution*, reacted vehemently against Shaw's Lamarckian social theory.⁴³ In *Heretics*, he wrote:

Mr. Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and loveable in our eyes is man... And the things that have been founded on this creature immortally remain; the things that have been founded on the fancy of the Superman have died with the civilizations which alone have given them birth.⁴⁴

Literary scholar Joseph Pearce describes the danger which Chesterton so keenly observed in Shaw's philosophy. The fancy of the Superman, Pearce writes, "blinded [Shaw] to the base and basic reality of man's weakness, and this in turn hardened his heart and hindered his ability to sympathize... with beleaguered humanity."⁴⁵ With its reference to Shaw's heart, Pearce's description reminds one of Chesterton's own famous characterization from *Orthodoxy*: "... [Shaw] has a heroically large and generous heart; but not a heart in the right place."⁴⁶ The popular quotation is perhaps the best representation of how Chesterton was able – paradoxically – to love Shaw while abhorring his philosophy.

⁴² Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views: George Bernard Shaw* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 15-16.

⁴³ See Furlong, 155. See also Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence*, 281-284.

⁴⁴ *Heretics*, 20-21.

⁴⁵ Joseph Pearce, *Literary Catholics, Literary Giants* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 233.

⁴⁶ *Orthodoxy*, 26.

Stung by Chesterton's penetrating insight into his interior motives, Shaw reacted with some fervor against *George Bernard Shaw*.⁴⁷ He even went so far as to disparage the work in his advice to subsequent biographers inquiring after sources.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Chesterton, writing two years before his own death, in an essay called "Second Thoughts on Shaw," repudiated very little if anything from his former observations about his dear friend, and certainly none of those regarding *creative evolution*. In this late essay, Chesterton was able to appraise Shaw's *magnum opus* on *creative evolution*, *Back to Methuselah*: an enormous play spanning three nights of performance time and telling a story beginning in Eden with Adam and Eve and ending with their ghosts in 31,000 A.D. Chesterton notes two great failures in the work: first, he says, Shaw "fails to explain why this unaccountably and everlastingly unfolding universe... should be supposed to be always changing for the better;" and second, "he most definitely fails to make us feel that it *is* changing for the better [emphasis added]."⁴⁹

After years of argumentation, Chesterton still could not find his way round to being convinced by Shaw, nor Shaw by Chesterton. Each, however, amidst his theory and his philosophy, had a heart – misplaced maybe, but large and caring nonetheless. And they remained great friends throughout all their lives. For his part, Chesterton objected to the ideas of *creative evolution* and the Superman, but he had his Christian beliefs, and the firm faith and hope that men could be improved and become still better men. This was the hope Chesterton held for all his fellow men, and perhaps for no one more than for George Bernard Shaw. And to that cause of helping Shaw become a better man – and better writer – Chesterton lent his very constructive criticism.

⁴⁷ Furlong, 43.

⁴⁸ Furlong, 46-47.

⁴⁹ G.K. Chesterton, "Second Thoughts on Shaw," in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton XI: Plays and Chesterton on Shaw*, 601.

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