

Chapter 6

Melodrama with a Difference : Three Plays for Puritans

"Happiness is never my aim. Like Einstein I am not happy and do not want to be happy." Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches*.

Shaw's habit of subverting popular forms of the theatre did not end with *Widowers' Houses* and *Candida*. In *Plays for Puritans* he tried his hand at Shavianising melodrama. "As a superior person" he held melodrama in high esteem and thought that the form merely needed "elaboration to become a masterpiece"¹ :

It should be a simple and sincere drama of action and feeling, kept well within the vast tract of passion and motive which is common to the philosopher and laborer, relieved by plenty of fun, and depending for variety of human character not on the high comedy idiosyncrasies which individualize people...but on broad contrasts between types of youth and age, sympathy and selfishness, the masculine and the feminine, the sublime and the ridiculous, and so on. The whole character of the piece must be allegorical, idealistic, full of generalisations and moral lessons; and it must represent conduct as producing swiftly and certainly on the individual the results which in actual

life it only produces on the race in the course of many centuries. All of which, obviously, requires for its accomplishment rather greater heads and surer hands than we commonly find in the service of the playhouse.²

The Devil's Disciple was Shaw's first attempt to make melodrama conform to his formula. It has all the broad contrasts Shaw demanded of melodrama : the ritualistically pious woman, Mrs Dudgeon, is in reality the woman without religion, whereas Dick Dudgeon, who calls himself the Devil's Disciple, is the man with the higher religion; at the moment of reckoning it is revealed that the Presbyterian minister Anthony Anderson is by natural calling a soldier and the outcast Dick has the makings in him of an ideal minister. Virtue presents itself in the garb of vice and institutional religion, represented by ossified Puritanism, is actually the holy garb worn by wretched spitefulness. Characters are broad types : the self-sacrificing, the sanctimonious, the overtly masculine, the utterly feminine.

Yet the novelty of the play lies in the subversion of the rules of melodrama. The interest of the play centres on the nature of Dick's narrowly-missed martyrdom to save the husband of Judith Anderson. Shaw leads his audience up the garden path by first preparing it for a Sidney-Carton-like exercise in self sacrifice for the sake of a woman — a *sine qua non* of romantic melodrama — and then jolts it with a rude shock when Dick avers that Judith Anderson means nothing to him :

What I did last night, I did in cold blood caring not so

much for your husband or for you as I do for myself. I had no motive and no interest: all I can tell you is that when it came to the point whether I could take my neck out of the noose and put another man's into it, I could not do it...I have been brought up standing by the law of my own nature; and I may not go against it, gallows or no gallows. I should have done the same thing for any other man in the town, or any other man's wife.³

The Shavianization of Dick is the elaboration which Adelphi melodrama needed, according to Shaw, "to become a masterpiece." Shaw knew that the genuine novelty of the melodrama lay in the unexpected twist in the tail, and by staking everything on the play's ending he implicitly claimed for the play an allegorical structure in which the overt action was less important than the significance of that action. He clearly distinguished between the body and the soul of the play and argued that the play was ambitious only in the contemporary time-frame as it embodied the advanced thought of the day: "As such, it will assuredly lose its gloss with the lapse of time, and leave the Devil's Disciple exposed as the threadbare popular melodrama it technically is."⁴ Shaw attempted to link the unrealistic "threadbare popular melodrama" to surrealism:

Why did Dick save Anderson? On the stage, it appears, people do things for reasons. Off the stage they don't...The saving of life at the risk of the saver's own is not a common thing; but modern populations are so vast

that even the most uncommon things are recorded once a week or oftener. Not one of my critics but has seen a hundred times in his paper how some policeman or a fireman or nursemaid has received a medal, or the compliments of a magistrate, or perhaps a public funeral, for risking his or her life to save another's. Has he ever seen it added that the saved was the husband of the woman the saver loved, or was the woman herself, or was even known to the saver as much as by sight ? ⁵

As a critic points out, Shaw's comparison is more ingenious than apt, for "few instances are reported of policemen or firemen who, out of a sense of duty, offer their necks to the public executioner as does Dick Dudgeon, in order to save a convicted insurgent."⁶ But though the crudeness of the genre made *The Devil's Disciple* a very unsatisfactory medium of Shaw's ideas, the author was trying to realize through Dick his idea of a truly liberated soul because what he was trying to convey, quite unsuccessfully as it turned out, was the fact that Dick Dudgeon was his version of Wagner's Siegfried. In *The Perfect Wagnerite* he Shavianised Wagner's hero sufficiently to make him conform to his idea of the superman and remarked :

The philosophically fertile element in the original project...was the conception of Siegfried himself as a type of the healthy man raised to perfect confidence in his own impulses by an intense and joyous vitality which is above fear, sickliness of conscience, malice, and the makeshifts

and moral crutches of law and order which accompany them.⁷

If one probed a little further one would discover in Siegfried — Shaw's Siegfried — the soul mate of Candida, perhaps the soul mate of Trefusis, for the Shavian distillation of Wagner's Siegfried was the perfectly self-sufficient, perfectly asocial being : "Siegfried ...is, in short, a totally unmoral person, a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakoonin, an anticipation of the 'overman' of Nietzsche."⁸ Since he has no regard for morality, convention and society and is totally self-centred, he is "dangerous and destructive to what he dislikes" and "it is fortunate that his likes and dislikes are sane and healthy."⁹

It is clear that the Siegfried whom Shaw claims to have discovered in Wagner's *Ring* is more closely related to Shaw than to Wagner, at whom Shaw railed for prescribing "a romantic nostrum for all human ills."¹⁰ It is equally clear that Dick Dudgeon, the hero of Shaw's pot-boiler, is too slight a figure, too skimpily sketched, to be able to carry the burden of the momentous thought Shaw placed on his shoulders. Shaw therefore turned to history for a more appropriate figure and found that figure in Julius Caesar.

II

Shaw's Caesar, like his Richard Dudgeon, is Shaw's Siegfried, but then Shaw's Siegfried can be traced back to his novels and ultimately to himself. Siegfried, as Shaw sees him, is

incapable of relating himself to anyone outside himself, he lives in his soul and his soul is a huge island. Sidney Trefusis, too, knew no love, and he thought he knew no hatred. Propelled by his self-sufficiency and a code of conduct according to which nothing bound him to the outside world, he took turns at wishing man's destruction and being his saviour. The overman — Conolly, Trefusis, Richard, Caesar, Siegfried — is qualitatively different from man. He is a freak. The virtue of the overman is as freakish as the vice of Camus's Caligula. Both are free, both are unrelated to others and separated from the world by a moral vacuum.

Caesar resembles Dick Dudgeon as closely in the nature of his virtue as in the manner of disguising the virtue. Among Shaw's many slanted self-portraits, Caesar is the one that approaches the ideal most closely. The idealised Caesar being non-human at the core, Shaw took care to mask the inner strangeness with amusing touches of common humanity. Writing in *The Play Pictorial* he commented :

Our conception of heroism has changed of late years...It is no use now going on with heroes who are no longer really heroic with us. Besides, we want credible heroes. The old demand for the incredible, the impossible, the superhuman, which was supplied by bombast, inflation, and the piling of crimes on catastrophes and factitious raptures on artificial agonies, has fallen off; and the demand now is for heroes in whom we can recognise our own humanity, and who, instead of walking, talking, eating, drinking, making

love and fighting single combats in a momentous ecstasy of continuous heroism are heroic in the true human fashion : that is, touching the summits only at rare moments, and finding the proper level of all occasions, condescending with humour and good sense to the prosaic ones as well as rising to the noble ones, instead of ridiculously persisting in rising to them all on the principle that a hero must always soar, in season and out of season.¹¹

Shaw claimed to have created in Caesar a hero "in whom we can recognise our own humanity." Accordingly, Caesar says almost mournfully that he is easily deceived by women, that women's eyes dazzle him. He smarts when Cleopatra addresses him as "old gentleman." Thus Shaw's Caesar wears an oak wreath to conceal his baldness, and shows a foppish sensitivity to any mention of his age. According to Shaw these are sufficient to humanise him, but these constitute no more than Caesar's human mask.

The appropriate analogy of a character that shows such an immense gap between a frivolous exterior and a god-like core takes us away from Western literature to the *Mahabharata* and the Hindu Puranas, in which Krishna steals butter-milk as a child and philanders heartily as a young man. Even as Arjuna's charioteer he seems merely human most of the time, but when it comes to the crunch he shows his dazzling luminousness, and reveals to Arjuna his divinity. By "condescending with humour and good sense" to the prosaic occasion Krishna makes himself bearable to the other personages of the epic. It is his method of preventing the epic

from degenerating into a divine soliloquy.

In Shaw's play even Cleopatra, not the brightest of persons, recognises that Caesar is essentially a god when she remarks to Pothinus: "Can one love a god?"¹² Shaw himself understood the difficulty of creating drama out of the encounter of a god with mere mortals when he wrote to William Archer that "there is no drama in it because Caesar was so completely superior to his adversaries that there was virtually no *conflict*, only a few adventures, chiefly the hairbreadth escape when he jumped into the harbour."¹³ Shaw himself stressed the psychological inertness of Caesar when he differentiated between virtue and goodness, granting Caesar the former, but not the latter :

...in order to produce an impression of complete disinterestedness and magnanimity, he has only to act with entire selfishness; and that is perhaps the only sense in which a man can be said to be naturally great. Having virtue, he has no need of goodness.¹⁴

In other words Caesar is another Siegfried, a reincarnation of Dick Dudgeon, who tells Judith Anderson: "What I did last night, I did in cold blood, caring not half so much for your husband or for you as I do for myself."¹⁵

It is surprising that Shaw makes his Siegfried anticipate Christ : When Cleopatra tries to justify the murder of Pothinus, Caesar says : "If one man in all the world can be found, now or forever, to know that you did wrong, that man will have either to conquer the world as I have, or be crucified by it."¹⁶

Yet the implicit comparison is not very apt, for no two men could be more different. Clemency, particularly when it is a policy that holds the enemy "baffled at the gates all these months"¹⁷ is not the same thing as pity, nor are kind words to Cleopatra or Rufio the same as love. Christ died for others and the Caesar of the play is willing to risk his life for Cleopatra or anyone else but his action is not similar to that of Christ but to that of Dick, who was prepared to die for Judith Anderson though he did not care for her. Shaw's hero is capable of remarkable virtue but that virtue is totally unconnected to goodness. Christ's virtue was goodness on a divine scale.

Shaw's Caesar is truer to himself when he reminds Cleopatra : "My poor child : your life matters little here to anyone but yourself."¹⁸ Towards the end a wiser Cleopatra has learnt her lesson :

Love me ! Pothinus : Caesar loves no one. Who are those we love ? Only those we do not hate ; all people are strangers and enemies to us except those we love. But it is not so with Caesar. He has no hatred in him : he makes friends with everyone as he does with dogs and children. ¹⁹

To Shaw's superman everyone stands on the same footing as a stranger or a dog : he is equally friendly towards them in his impersonal way. Cleopatra despairingly calls him a god, and Caesar himself tells the sphinx in the prologue to the play that he is more like it than any living person : "part brute, part woman, and part god — nothing of man in me at all."²⁰ But if Shaw's Caesar is

a god he is neither like the Christian God nor like any of the pagan gods, he is something like the Brahman of the Vedanta — immutable and impersonal.

Comparison with the historical Caesar will show the difference between him and Shaw's hero. Instead of being a stranger to the race of men as the Caesar of the play claims to be in the prologue, the Caesar of history possessed the characteristics of the human race rather abundantly. Shaw's Caesar has virtue, therefore he is beyond good and evil, history's Caesar was not a stranger to either good or evil. Shaw believes that Caesar was driven to conquests not by his lust for fame but by the exploratory instinct, but Plutarch tells us that Caesar burst into tears of envy when he compared his career with that of Alexander.²¹ The Caesar that emerges from Suetonius's chronicle is the Caesar who attacked the Senate House, killed Senators, usurped political power, and in order to be the chief Pontiff resorted to flagrant bribery. We also learn from Suetonius of Caesar's paranoia : not only did he have his statue sculpted but also had it installed in a temple. And a new college of Lupercals was built to celebrate his divinity. Caesar was a notorious lecher, every woman's husband and every man's wife. Yet the same Caesar was capable of great clemency and tolerance.²²

The Caesar of history had conflicting passions of such great intensity that the poet who seeks to recreate him must be able to sympathise with every aspect of human life, he must be in love with life as it is lived in its various ramifications and must be able to plumb every depth and scale every height. Such a

Caesar was beyond the range of Shaw, who needed for his hero someone who was a stranger to the human race. Consequently he had to invent a Caesar, create one who would conform to his self image. His Caesar had to be a god who had merely pitched his tent on the earth that we know. The actual Caesar was bound with numerous men and women by bonds of passion, bonds of love and hatred, jealousy and craving. The Shavian Caesar is an inert benefactor of mankind.

III

Shaw's next play, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, is another melodrama, and another Siegfried play. In a number of ways, it is the continuation of *Candida*, *The Devil's Disciple* and *Caesar and Cleopatra*.

Like *The Devil's Disciple*, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* is unashamed melodrama. In the notes that Shaw published along with the play he claimed that the locale was suggested by Cunningham Graham's Moghreb-al-Acksa. The play, which is subtitled 'An Adventure,' looks like being custom-made for the Aelephi. In our times it would be a godsend for a Hollywood scriptwriter. Besides the exotic setting, it has flashy Arabs, a Shaikh buying for blood and Black Paquito, the glamorous brigand. The action gallops from crisis to crisis, constantly accompanied by suspense, abduction, melodramatic encounters, the smell of gunpowder and the threat of impending death. Anyone interested in tracing the ancestry of the play must search for precedents not in high-brow theatre but in popular entertainments like *Freedom* by Rowe and

Harris.²³ As a critic remarks :

The co-incidences necessary to enable the characters to assemble in one place at one time, the recognitions and reversals which advance, complicate and resolve the intrigue are all frankly theatrical. Despite some pleasant realistic touches, the minor characters — among them Drinkwater, Marzo, and the Reverend Mr Rankin — are all stock types.²⁴

Yet as one approaches the play at a level deeper than that of the props and the overt action, one finds weaved into it those tensions that Shaw could never resolve conclusively. At the level where Shaw is more than the stage carpenter's mascot his play is deeply Shavian insofar as it examines the same subject that he has dealt with in his novels and earlier plays.

The subject of *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, like the subject of most of his plays, is the conflict between freedom and commitment. In the novels and in his earlier plays the self-absorption of Shaw's heroes and heroines draw them so completely away from society that there are hardly any points of contact left between the protagonist's inner world and the outside world. *The Devil's Disciple* and *Caesar and Cleopatra* differ from *An Unsocial Socialist* and *The Philanderer* since Dick and Caesar are able to come to a better adjustment with society in spite of remaining fundamentally as insular as Trefusis and Charteris. Shaw's Siegfried is as independent of society as Trefusis but accidentally his impulses are such that they help instead of

hinder social cohesion.

After reading the play *Ellen Terry*, for whom Shaw had written the part of Lady Cicely, grasped the fact that the heroine is completely self-centred and her interaction with society is merely accidental and expressed her dissatisfaction with the play. Shaw replied :

Listen to me, woman with no religion. Send...for two books of travel in Africa : One Miss Kingsley's ...and the other H.M.Stanley's. Compare the brave woman, with her commonsense and goodwill, with the wild-beast man, with his elephant rifle, and his atmosphere of dread and murder, breaking his way by mad selfish assassination out of the difficulties created by his own cowardice. Think of all that has been rising up under your eyes in Europe for years past, Bismarck worship, Stanley worship, Dr Jim worship, and now at last Kitchener worship with dead enemies dug up and mutilated. Think also on the law — the gallows, penal servitude, hysterical clamouring for the lash, mere cowardice masquerading as "resolute government," "law and order" and the like. Well, how have you felt about these things ? Have you had any real belief in the heroism of the filibuster ? Have you had any sympathy with the punishments of the judge ?...I...thought the distinction of *Ellen Terry* was that she had this heart wisdom, and managed her own little world as Tolstoy would have our Chamberlains & Balfours & German Emperors & Kitcheners & Lord Chief

Justices and other slaves of false ideas & imaginary fears manage Europe. I accordingly give you a play in which you stand where Imperialism is most believed to be necessary, on the border line where the European meets the fanatical African...I try to shew you fearing nobody and managing them all as Daniel managed the lions, not by cunning — above all, not by even a momentary appeal to Cleopatra's stand-by, their passion, but by simple moral superiority.²⁵

Shaw's letter would make it appear that *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* is a radical critique of the civilization of domination. A world governed as Tolstoy would have it governed, by goodwill rather than the gun, by Lady Cicely's heart wisdom rather than the "wild-beast man with his elephant rifle," would need not only a different kind of ruler from Bismarck or Kitchener but also from Candida or Caesar. The higher selfishness of a Siegfried may superficially resemble the wisdom of the heart but is very different from it. The common point that Caesar and Dick Dudgeon make is that virtue is something very different from goodness. In *The Perfect Wagnerite* Shaw warns us that Siegfried can be very destructive regarding the things he does not like, in *Candida* we realize how destructive Shaw's female Siegfried, his Virgin Mother, can be towards men who are emotionally dependent on her. Candida is not averse to Cleopatra's stand-by — we need only to recall Mrs Webb's description of her as a prostitute — her methods are different from Bismarck's and Kitchener's only in being less overt. In her little world she uses violence and

domination just as Bismarck used them in his big world; only, as is appropriate to her scale of operation, her violence is psychological and her domination subtle.

Yet Shaw's letter to Ellen Terry is more than smooth sales talk, because until we come to the very end of the play, we find Lady Cicely refreshingly humane, her courage appears to be the courage of a woman rather than the virtue of a superwoman, a virtue as much genetically determined as a knee-jerk reflex. She succeeds in showing, in a way neither Candida nor Dick Dudgeon could, that the tribal's sword is superseded not by the empire's gun but by the needle that stitches the torn coat-sleeves of an avowed enemy.

It is difficult not to feel that Ellen Terry, the model for Lady Cicely, captivated the author sufficiently to hold her own against Shaw's settled idea of the superior being. Had the bloodless piety of the Virgin Mother gained unquestionable victory in Shaw's mind, there would have been no need to resuscitate her after finishing *Candida*, because no one needs to exorcise a ghost unless there is a ghostly danger to ward off. As a result there is an incongruity in the way the play ends. The natural vitalism of Ellen Terry, whose fearlessness, if one goes by the evidence of the many men in her life, certainly extended to the fearlessness of love, was conspicuously built into the character of Lady Cicely. And yet that woman is sought to be disowned at the end by the legerdemain of Shaw's intellect. The fact that in seeking to create the Virgin Mother in *Candida* he merely succeeded in creating another *la belle dame sans merci* explains why Shaw had to write another play about the Virgin Mother, and yet his own

uneasiness and nervousness on the subject show why *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* had to end the way it did.

Perhaps there is nothing in the whole range of Shaw's plays that articulates his dilemma so sharply as *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. Near the very end the play is engulfed in a Strindbergian shadow as Brassbound and Cicely engage in a brief, silent but deadly battle for survival. And that is Shaw's dilemma. He can see that the aggressiveness of the wild beast man and his mode of domination can be defeated only by the wisdom of the heart and yet he believes that when the heart's wisdom becomes love it reintroduces the consequences of the rule of the elephant gun at a different level.

Before he met Lady Cicely Brassbound was not unhappy because then he was steering a course. The minute she destroys his delusions about the supposedly wicked uncle and the wronged mother he loses his bearings. Brassbound tears his mother's portrait, and discards the memory of a face made repulsive with drink and despair : "Now everything is gone. You have taken the old meaning out of my life; but you have put no new meaning into it."²⁶ He thinks of marriage with Cicely as an escape from this void. By surrendering his independence, he consigns himself to a life of submission. Marriage is for him a frank acceptance of the loss of self-esteem : "I want a commander, Dont undervalue me : I am a good man when I have a good leader."²⁷ Thus to Brassbound love is the consequence of the disintegration of the self and its consummation in marriage is a ritualised act of the surrender of freedom. It is the final act of the defeated man. Thus the

encounter between Captain Brassbound and Lady Cicely ironically ends in the duplication of the relationship that Lady Cicely's methods seek to destroy. The difference between her method and the methods employed by the empire is the difference between psychological domination and physical domination, a difference far less substantial than the difference between a Bismarck and a Tolstoy.

Lady Cicely refuses to marry Brassbound not because she feels that he is mistaken in interpreting love as abject surrender but because she shares his attitude. Shelley's Witch of Atlas refused to fall in love with men because she could not bear their death. Shaw's Witch of Atlas does not fall in love because she knows that when one is in love one cannot dominate and rule, and when she has to choose between love and power she unhesitatingly chooses the latter : "I have never been in love with any real person; and I never shall. How could I manage people if I had that mad little bit of self left in me ? That's my secret."²⁸

It is the secret of Siegfried. This secret may have robbed the play of its natural conclusion by artificially imposing Shaw's intellectual aspiration on a character that seemed to grow naturally like a flower, but by doing so it ensured that she was at one with Candida, Dick Dudgeon and Caesar. And insofar as it is Shaw's secret as well as Lady Cicely's, it proves to be an invaluable guide to the understanding of Shaw's most famous comedy — *Man and Superman*.

Chapter 6 : Notes and References

1. *Our Theatre in the Nineties* vol. I, p. 93.
2. Ibid.
3. CP II, p. 113.
4. Ibid., p. 32.
5. Ibid., pp. 35-36.
6. Maurice Valency, *The Cart and the Trumpet : the Plays of George Bernard Shaw*, p. 159.
7. *Major Critical Essays*, p. 213.
8. Ibid., p. 200.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 218.
11. *The Play Pictorial*, vol. X, No. 62, reprinted in CP II, p. 307.
12. CP II, p. 257.
13. *Collected Letters*, vol. II, p. 94.
14. CP II, p. 303.
15. Ibid., p 113. In Shaw's philosophical anarchism Maurice Valency discovers his faith in the natural goodness of man. Valency, pp. 160-63. Surely it is a mistake to orient Shaw to a philosophy which sees man's natural goodness impeded by social structures. The stress in Shaw — as is obvious if one grasps the fact that the author of *An Unsocial Socialist* is also the man who wrote *The Devil's Disciple* — is not on man's goodness but the superman's self-sufficiency and unsocial nature. It is here that Dick Dudgeon is different from Anouilh's *Antigone* — the stress is

more on isolation than on virtue. Every saint has known the dual nature of sainthood : to love and to act disinterestedly, to be tied and to be free. What is likely to be overlooked when the plays are judged without reference to their ancestry and evolution is that the autarchy of the superman, his self-sufficiency and the non-recognition of the outside world as a determinant of human action are certainly as important in Shaw's works as the exploration of virtue.

16. CP II, p. 277.

17. Ibid., p. 278.

18. Ibid., p. 247.

19. Ibid., p. 257.

20. Ibid., p. 182.

21. Plutarch's *Lives*, translated by John and William Langhorne, p. 235.

22. These facts are mentioned in Gaius Suetonius Tranquiallus, *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Robert Graves.

23. See Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre*, p. 209.

24. Maurice Valency, op. cit. p. 188.

25. *Collected Letters*, vol. II, pp. 98-99.

26. Ibid., p. 282.

27. CP II., p. 415.

28. Ibid., p. 416.