

Chapter 4

Conversion through Condemnation : Plays Unpleasant

"I must be cruel only to be kind." *Hamlet*

Widowers' Houses was produced in 1892. Shaw had begun the play in collaboration with William Archer seven years before its eventual completion. The understanding was that Archer was to supply him with a plot and he would write the dialogue. This unlikely collaboration — almost incredible to anyone familiar with the two men's irreconcilable temperamental difference and their conflicting notions of drama — soon ran aground. In 1891 J.T.Grein inaugurated the Independent Theatre, financed almost entirely by himself. Willing to produce plays without commercial consideration, Grein was looking for original English plays dealing with real human emotion and real human life. Shaw, who was thinking along similar lines, felt that he could fit the bill, so he fetched the incomplete play from the cold storage and hastily completed it. The result was an explosion of terrible intensity. *The Era* commented on 24 December, 1892 :

Hardly any recent play has provoked so much newspaper and

other controversy as Mr Bernard Shaw's *Widowers' Houses*. At least two of the daily papers, on the day after its production, devoted leading articles to its consideration, besides special criticism of almost unprecedented length...Then all last week a controversy on its merits and demerits raged in a morning paper; and it was held up as an example of the kind of play the Lord Chamberlain did not object to by Mrs Aveling in her lecture to the playgoers.¹

The intensity of the storm does not seem to be surprising today when one puts the play against the backdrop of the cup-and-saucer comedy that ruled the stage at that time, Shaw's departure from *Cointure Dorée*, the play by Augier on which Archer had based his plot, was nothing less than shocking. In Augier's play, Trelan seeks to marry Celeste, the daughter of Roussel. Behind Roussel's huge fortune is a questionable deal. When the idealistic Trelan learns of Roussel's ill-gotten wealth he refuses to taint himself with a dowry derived from such a source; and with Roussel declining to make amends, he gives up the idea of marrying Celeste. The sudden outbreak of war causes Roussel's ruin and sweeps away the hurdles across Trelan's path, thus enabling him to unite with Celeste in a disinterested marriage.

In Shaw's play Dr Harry Trench, travelling in a boat on the Rhine, meets Blanche Sartorius. They immediately fall in love, but Blanche's father, before giving his consent, wants to ensure

that his daughter will be welcomed by Trench's aristocratic relatives. Trench apparently gets round the difficulty by fetching from them favourable responses, but in the second act Trench discovers to his horror that Sartorius owes his wealth to slum landlordism. He unceremoniously dismisses his rent collector Lickcheese because the latter has spent a little sum on repairs of the slum tenement. Trench refuses to marry Blanche unless she agrees to forgo her dowry. So far there is a perfect correspondence between Augier's play and Shaw's. But the plot gets a sensational twist when Trench learns that his own affluence derives from the mortgage of the same slum. He soon learns to silence his conscience, sheds his moral posturing and joins Sartorius and the rejuvenated Lickcheese in a new scheme to make the most of his property.

There is a great deal of difference between the two endings and Shaw claimed that the difference lay between romanticism and realism. Amidst the din of controversy Shaw's defence of the play centred almost exclusively on the principle of realism. In the play he had shown "middle-class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on the filth"² not because he enjoyed grubbing in muck but because as a dramatist with unflinching devotion to truth he owed it to himself to recreate the real world as opposed to the ersatz that usurps reality under the arc lamps. In a letter to *The Speaker* Shaw wrote :

We want a theatre for people who have lived, thought and felt, and who have some real sense. In such a theatre the merely literary man who has read and written instead of living until he has come to feel fiction as experience and to resent experience as fiction, would be as much out of place as the ideal British public itself. Well, let him sit out his first mistaken visit quietly and not come again; for it is clear that only by holding the mirror up to literature can the dramatist please him, whereas it is by holding it up to nature that good work is produced.³

In the same letter Shaw argued that the artistic quality of a play could not be independent of its scientific quality. In the same tenor he argued that the failure of his critics to appreciate the play was due to their failure to recognise reality :

I do not hesitate to say that many of my critics have been completely beaten by the play simply because they are ignorant of society...What I mean is that they do not know life well enough to recognise it in the glare of the footlights.⁴

To what extent was Shaw's contention valid ? How much of an improvement is it on Augier's play from the standpoint of realism? Charles H. Shattuck⁵ has shown that the play published in 1893 was even more poorly constructed than the 1898 version. But even the present version is mechanically constructed and is too full of

coup-de-theatre to justify Shaw's rather tall claims for it. One of the first conditions that a life-like action must satisfy is that it must be probable. The manner in which Trench and Blanche meet on the Rhine and immediately fall in love might have been more credible if Trench had not turned out to be, on the strength of a very unlikely coincidence, the mortgagee of the slum from which Sartorius's income is derived. The consequence of the doctor's moral outrage and his subsequent discovery of the merit of self-interest are, therefore, foregone conclusions. Shaw does this to reduce the margin of individual choice. It becomes more difficult for Trench to escape the stigma of parasitism than it is for Trelan because unlike the latter, Trench is forced by the author's manipulation of the plot to choose between habitual aristocratic life and the life of the pauper. In the French play, by exercising his freedom of choice Trelan could rise above common cynicism. Undoubtedly, such an action has only limited value and cannot be a substitute for collective action. But at least the play sees man as a responsible individual whose action determines his own life as well as that of others. Of course the importance of such action can easily be overestimated as it can be used as a handy weapon by political reactionaries. But that does not demonstrate the superior realism of Shaw's play nor justify his stricture that his critics do not recognise life in the glare of the footlights, since the number of improbabilities in the two plots are almost equal.

If *Widowers' Houses* still conveys an impression of intense

realism, it is because the creaking joints of the plot are completely hidden by the confident realism of the details, and Shaw's boldness succeeds in transforming the subject of municipal debates and official bluebooks into stageable drama. This is both its strength and its weakness. If the freshness of the subject and the author's originality (compared to the prevailing theatrical fashion) is its strength, its weakness lies in its being too obviously a thesis play : for an author who set so much store by the organicness of the plot, the mechanical contraption manufactured to prove a point must be counted as a conspicuous failure. We need not hesitate in conceding that if Augier stresses one side of the truth about man's relation to society, Shaw provides the necessary correction in emphasizing the other side, namely, that individual responsibility cannot be a substitute for state intervention in the interests of the poor. The play thus becomes an argument for socialism.⁶ But what has not been noticed — and in this respect the most glaring oversight is the playwright's — is that the argument is merely the inspiration behind the play, not the play itself. When we judge the play we must go not by abstract arguments but by the behaviour of the *dramatis personae* in actual situations, which means that they cannot be treated merely as social types — nor their behaviour as mere paradigms — but also as individuals with a subjective sense of freedom. This makes a crucial difference. When Shaw assumes the audience's culpability in the maintenance of a parasitic system, he is within his rights as a social observer, but when he deals

with his characters, one finds that he does not make them mere representatives of social classes; they are finely differentiated individuals, yet in his defence of his characters he seeks to focus entirely on social determinism. First he gives Sartorius enough individuality, then in his defence he seeks to discount that aspect completely. The attention of the reader is drawn away from the Sartorius of the play to the character of the social class of which Sartorius is a member.

This tendency is abetted by certain hints of the author. To discount the individualism of the character, Shaw makes use of the sartorial metaphor. A.M.Gibbs draws our attention to the name 'Sartorius', pointing out that sartorial surfaces hide the ruthless⁷ nature of predatory capitalism. In the first act Cokane chides Trench for being seen in *négligé* : "How are they to know that you are well connected if you do not show it in your costume ?"⁸ Cokane believes that a gentleman is his tailor's creation and he is supported in this by the transformation of Lickcheese, whose new status is summed up by sealskin. Viewed in this manner Sartorius becomes a class name. Carlyle says in *Sartor Resartus* :

Happy he who can look through the clothes of a man (the woollen, the fleshly, and official Bank-paper and state-paper clothes) into the Man Himself; and discern, it may be, in this or the other Dread Potentate, a more or less incompetent Digestive-apparatus; yet also an

inscrutable venerable Mystery, in the meanest Tinker that sees with eyes.⁹

Shaw is here moving in the opposite direction. Instead of penetrating the layers of clothes to reach to the soul, Shaw seems to maintain that the soul of a man becomes the social clothes it wears. In the preface, he drives home the point by arguing that everybody in Sartorius's position would have behaved as he did.

It is important to recognise the proper status of Sartorius and his relation to the author. In this regard, apparently plausible observations miss the mark because they fail to locate the hidden nexus between the dramatist and the main character. Margery Morgan, for instance, says that "the view of society that the play unfolds is of a conspiracy between the aristocracy of 'Birth' and the self-made middle class against the poorest section of community."¹⁰

Such a view would seem to be warranted by Shaw's florid use of imagery : he is supposed to have shown middle-class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on filth.¹¹ But in another sentence — and there's the rub — he says :

Now the didactic object of my play is to bring conviction of sin — to make the Pharisee who repudiates Sartorius as either a Harpagon or a diseased dream of mine, and thanks God that such persons do not represent his class, recognise that Sartorius is his own photograph. In vain

will the virtuous critic tell me that he does not own slum property; all I want to see is the label on his matchbox or his last week's washing bill, to judge for myself whether he really ever gives a second thought to Sartorius's tenants, who make his matchboxes and wash his stockings so cheaply.¹²

Such a view excludes the conspiracy theory. The people who are indicted are not only Sartorius, Trench and Cokane, but the entire community.¹³

By giving exploitation the character of necessity, Shaw makes the exploiters victims of their circumstances rather than conspirators. The acquittal of Sartorius is important. The play is a comedy of evil in which the vulgar snob Cokane, with 'tact' as his watchword, the ne'er-do-well scoundrel Lickcheese finally making it with suave blackmail and the once-naïve Trench outgrowing his brief period of innocence forge an alliance with the clear-eyed and inexorable Sartorius. The tension of the play is created by the conflict between Trench and Sartorius and it is resolved in the appropriate manner of comedy — not in Trench's destruction but in his absorption by Sartorius's greater magnetism and firmer grasp of truth.

The Shavian ambivalence about society that we have discovered in the novels will be evident in the play once we accept that Sartorius is not merely a helpless victim, not merely a fellow sinner but also the Shavian mask, and his relation to

Trench is in some respects similar to Undershaft's relation to Cusins in *Major Barbara*. Sartorius is the precursor of Undershaft, and embodies, like him, the conflicting tendencies of Shaw's immensely complex attitude towards man and society.

In what amounts to almost a parody of the well-made sentimental play, Shaw allows Lickcheese at the beginning of the second act to become pathetic, letting the play come close to being a tear-jerker. The discharged Lickcheese, wretched, shabby and struggling to keep the wolf from the door, leaves the scene as a wreck: Sartorius is an affectionate father, but in the role of a slum landlord he is hardened and impervious to sentimental appeals. His own house is on gravel and the hygienic environment keeps the death-rate of the locality very low. In his slums, when the returns dwindle a little because of welfare costs, he condemns Lickcheese and his four children to starvation. Thus a side of Sartorius's character is revealed which Shaw, in a flurry of rationalization, does not take stock of either in the preface or in his numerous remarks on the play.

Sartorius's money is extracted at the expense of hungry children crying for milk. It is true that Sartorius alone cannot change the system, it may also be true that the total overhaul of the system is necessary, but his sacking of Lickcheese because the latter spent a little sum in mending a staircase shows that as a member of his class, Sartorius is the most hardened of exploiters. When money is involved, he does not hesitate to create avoidable misery. The pettiness of Lickcheese's "crime"—

Lickcheese is tight-fisted and spends only when spending becomes unavoidable, and never to an extent that neutralises even a week's collection — and the enormity of the punishment exposes the weakest spot of Shaw's defence of Sartorius. Shaw's absolution of Sartorius depends on the unstated syllogism that since this is a very imperfect world, abounding in gross injustice, and as humanitarian gestures cannot be the substitute for collective decisions, we have no individual — as distinct from collective — obligation to our neighbours, and can skin them with a clear conscience and put the blame on society. Lickcheese has a point when he says that Sartorius is "no better than the worst I ever had to do with."¹⁴ But the point is lost on Shaw, whose acute social conscience is accompanied by phlegmatism on the question of individual responsibility.

When Shaw says that his attacks are directed against his readers¹⁵ and not against the stage characters, he must be taken seriously because Sartorius's acquittal depends, in Shaw's scheme, on the conviction of the reader. In accordance with this scheme Shaw turns *peripeteia* or reversal — a tragic device in Greek drama — to comic end. Before the crucial twist the play is allowed to develop as a stage melodrama with a lily-hearted hero, a sharp villain and an appropriately lugubrious proletarian in Trench, Sartorius and Lickcheese respectively. Lickcheese's exposé in the second act pitches Sartorius in the nadir of public estimation. Then the plot begins to wind in the opposite direction. Sartorius's innocent comment in the first act — "we are fellow

travellers, I believe, sir"¹⁶ — becomes pungent irony as the truth begins to surface about Trench's property. The apparent villain turns out to be the only level-headed person in the play; with his clear-sightedness he takes Trench in hand and after destroying his naivety wins him over slowly but inexorably, forcing him to give up his half-hearted milking of the poor for full-blooded exploitation. When a half-indignant, half-dazed Trench asks: "Do you mean to say that I am just as bad as you?", he replies: "If, when you say you are just as bad as I am, you mean that you are just as powerless to alter the state of society, then you are unfortunately quite right."¹⁷

Shaw intends to show that the audience live, like Trench, in glass houses and have no business to throw stones at Sartorius. In fact he says something which is more depressing: as an individual one cannot come out of his glass house even if one wishes to. Sartorius closes the exit door when he says: "No, gentleman: when people are very poor you cannot help them, no matter how much you may sympathise with them."¹⁸ It is not impossible to detect a sneaking satisfaction in the remark, and one suspects that the satisfaction is not Sartorius's alone. The reader of the novels recognises echoes of Sidney Trefusis in Sartorius. When one adds to it the fact that Sartorius, in his unflinching recognition of the evil of property and his unsentimental rejection of charity becomes a potent advocate of socialism even without once mentioning the word "socialism", it at once becomes clear that Sartorius is the mask through which Shaw

reveals himself in the play.

Blanche merely echoes her father with her gut-reaction :
"Oh, I hate the poor. At least, I hate those dirty, drunken,
disreputable people who live like pigs."¹⁹ The transformation of
Sartorius from an apparent vampire to a very affectionate father
and a favourable human specimen is one of the marvels of the play.
Upto the second act, Shaw keeps his cards close to his chest
before revealing them through deft manipulation of the plot.

To expedite Sartorius's acquittal, Lickcheese's sudden
resurrection through a *coup-de-theatre* is affected. Shaw touches
the play up with farce to save the comedy from sentimentality, and
the play successfully blows away the cloud of Sartorius's
culpability. The Sartorius we are left with at the end of the play
— the Sartorius whom Shaw chooses as his alter ego — is a
helpless unit of an unjust society, a tender-hearted father who is
both father and mother to his orphaned daughter. This would have
been impossible if he had had the blood of Lickcheese's children
on his hands. Therefore the prim theatrical device of a
resurrected Lickcheese in a dazzling sealskin-coat smoothly going
through one sleek deal after another is a necessity for
Sartorius's moral rehabilitation. Shaw caps his acquittal by
providing him with the final testimony of his innocence : "...if
we made the houses any better, the rents would have to be raised
so much that the poor people would be unable to pay, and would be
thrown homeless on the streets."²⁰

We need to modify radically Margery Morgan's conclusion and

insist that the vision of the world the play unfolds is bifocal, it sees the world through the scowling eyes of a Carlylean prophet from a distance and it sees it through the eyes of Sartorius inside the play. As a result the play preaches socialism but rejects brotherhood. The relation between the two can be diverse : at the hands of Chesterton and Belloc human brotherhood was the more effective substitute for soulless statism. For most socialists, one is the foundation of the other. But Shaw, who has often bewildered his readers with simultaneously viewing things from different points of view (the most notable examples are the debate in the interlude of *Man and Superman* and the exchange between Joan and Cauchon in *Saint Joan*) declines to probe the effect of Sartorius's refusal to make himself responsible for the fate of his tenants. Both Sartorius and his creator puts the question of individual liability out of court. If Sartorius sees man only as a small part of a big social machine, discounting the relevance of the margin of individual choice in an arrangement of impersonal forces, Shaw goes the whole distance with him by not taking the question up either in the preface or in his letters and by manipulating the plot in such a way that the importance of an individual decision becomes insignificant even to the individual who would normally have been affected by such a decision in life. Lickcheese's luck is actually Shaw's blind spot.

Returning to Augier's play for comparison we see that if the Shavian mind shows a better understanding of politics, a part of the mind also remains stunted in comparison. In the *Ceinture*

Doree the author makes us believe that the love between Trelan and Celeste will inspire them to attain a strength which neither of them is capable of by himself or herself alone. That strength teaches them that instead of being the victims of simple determinism, they will master their environment. The break with Augier's play is nowhere more pronounced in *Widowers' Houses* than in the manner in which the characters look at love. In Shaw's play love is shown to be a masochistic impulse; attachment brings in its wake injury and insult. Blanche, who savages the maid deeply attached to her and nearly throttles her to death, explains her conduct with cool nonchalance: "Nobody who really cares for me gives me up because of my temper. I never show my temper to any of the servants but that girl; and she is the only one that will stay with us."²¹

This vampirish exultation over turning love into servitude, and rewarding it with wanton cruelty returns with slight changes in the last act, where Blanche's sultry but unconventional expression of love takes the form of a spider-dance. Her last long speech, apart from reminding the reader of the erotic dance of the primitive animal in heat, is a massive assault on any illusory self-respect that Trench may still possess. In a short but deadly burst of nervous revulsion, the author of *Three Plays for Puritans* reveals the picture of his hell. That he is in violent disagreement with his critics over the name of this state of mind is a different matter.

II

Shaw's next play, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, created even greater sensation than *Widowers' Houses*. For thirty-one years it remained unlicensed in England (it was licensed in 1924). In the United States, where there was no censor, the actors were arrested, to be later released on bail.

In his usual fashion Shaw derived the play from a romantic story about a prostitute and gave it a twist that completely changed and Shavianised it. In a letter, published in the *Daily Chronicle* on 30th April, 1898, he wrote :

As to "Mrs Warren's profession" it came about in this way. Miss Janet Achurch mentioned to me a novel by some French writer as having a dramatisable story in it. It being hopeless to get me to read anything, she told me the story, which was ultra-romantic. I said, "Oh, I will work out the real truth about the mother some day. In the following autumn I was the guest of a lady of a very distinguished ability — one whose knowledge of English social types is as remarkable as her command of industrial and political questions. She suggested that I should put on the stage a real modern lady of the governing class — not the sort of thing the theatrical and critical authorities imagine such a lady to be. I did so; and the result was Vivie Warren."²²

The uproar that the play created was due as much to the theme of prostitution as to Shaw's thesis that prostitution was the least immoral course to be taken under the circumstances and that the members of the audience were no better than Mrs. Warren. As Maurice Colbourne points out :

Squarely on society's—that is the audience's—back he laid the burden of blame, while the prostitute herself, unburdened, escaped free. This was more than any audience bargained for and more than enough to make England evoke her censor, and America her police, in an effort to protect the public from being unmasked before Shaw's unshaking finger as the villain of the piece.²³

The Shavian bomb explodes in the second act and its sound dies out before the play reaches the third act as the most revolutionary aspect of the play is both introduced and stamped out in a single act. Mrs Warren points out that we, who sell ourselves for other people's profits, are all prostitutes. She also teaches us that the immorality of her profession is nothing compared to the immorality of committing suicide or murder—depending on whether one is an employee or an employer—in a whitelead factory. About her virtuous half-sisters she says :

One of them worked in a whitelead factory twelve hours a day for nine shillings a week until she died of lead poisoning ... The other ... married a government labourer

... and kept his room and the three children neat and tidy on eighteen shillings a week until he took to drink.²⁴

The hollowness of the so-called virtuous life was exposed by Liz, Kitty's sister. Kitty Warren was at that time employed as a barmaid and accidentally met Liz one day across the counter. Liz told her what Kitty was doing : she was wearing herself out "for other people's profit."²⁵ Mrs Warren remarks : "The house in Brussels was...a much better place for a woman to be in than the factory where Ann Jane got poisoned. None of our girls were ever treated as I was treated in the scullery of the temperance place, or at the Waterloo bar, or at home."²⁶ To the audience not yet accustomed to the Shavian inversion this ethical reorientation must have been stunning, not least because there was too much truth in her contention for the audience's comfort.

Mrs Warren makes this truth pierce the armour of the prudes and puritans present among the audience when she says to her daughter :

What sort of mother do you take me for ? How could you keep your self-respect in such starvation and slavery ? And what's a woman worth ? What's life worth ? Without self-respect ? Why am I independent and able to give my daughter a first-rate education, when other women that had just as good opportunities are in the gutter ? Because I always knew how to respect myself and control myself. Why is Liz looked up in a cathedral town ? The same reason.

Where should we be now if we'd minded the clergyman's foolishness ? Scrubbing floors for one and six pence a day and nothing to look forward to but the workhouse infirmary. Dont you be led astray by people who dont know the world, my girl. The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station of life, let her make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she cant expect it. Ask any lady in London society that has daughters; and she'll tell you the same, except that I tell you straight and she'll tell you crooked.²⁷

The impact of this speech is as shattering on the audience as it is on Vivie. With a vice-like grip on logic the disreputable woman demonstrates that she is not the only prostitute in society. Marriage—or most marriages at any rate—is nothing if not legal prostitution, since the compulsions behind most marriages are the same as the compulsions behind Mrs Warren's choice. What the censor and the police must have found unbearable is the evident truth that Kitty Warren retains more self-respect than most "honest" workers. She is definitely more moral if living is more moral than letting oneself be murdered in the white-lead factory. As for the sanctimonious pretensions of society Mrs Warren coolly shows everybody interested in seeing that the overwhelming majority of society is constituted of Mrs Warrens. Mrs Warren's profession is our profession.

Yet the play comes apart at the seams as the tonal incompatibility between the two halves of the play destroys its unity. The following note, written by Shaw, was a part of the programme accompanying the first production of the play at the Strand Theatre : "When a woman of bold character and commercial ability applies to herself the commercial principles that are ruthlessly applied to her in the labour market, the result is Kitty Warren, whom I accordingly present to you."²⁸

Yet, *Mrs Warren's Profession* is not merely a sociological play. Kitty Warren is a woman whose individuality spreads beyond the social category of a brothel-madam in an amoral capitalist society, which is all that is strictly necessary to make *Mrs Warren's Profession* a socialist play. Yet in making her a powerful character and in arming her with drive, determination, self-respect and an unconventional humaneness — no girl in any of her brothels is treated as she was treated in the temperance place — Shaw puts himself into a dilemma. The detonative strength of his dynamite depends on his success in making Mrs Warren convincingly superior to the withered specimens of conventional piety as well as to the practitioners of 'clean' business who traditionally escape social odium. But at the same time the particular nature of *Mrs Warren's Profession*, which gives her character a certain turn, is extremely repulsive to Shaw, who shrinks from filth with treflon-like consistency.

The Shavian dilemma has not been happy for the play. The second half of the play negates its first half, and the sting of

Shaw's criticism is largely neutralised at the end when the new heroine — in the first two acts it is Kitty Warren who completely dominates the play — rejects her mother and her mother's world and Kitty Warren merely becomes a part of that world, thoroughly vicious and corrupt. After being allowed to grow as a person, she is made to fizzle out into a mere symbol. By the third act, when Crofts is rebuffed by Vivie, Mrs Warren has been equated with him by her daughter : "When I think of the society that tolerates you, and the laws that protect you ! When I think how helpless nine out of ten girls would be in the hands of you and my mother ! the unmentionable woman and her capitalist bully —"²⁹

The reader has reasons to think that this change in attitude is Vivie's as well as Shaw's. Shaw's, because nothing puts him off like sexuality, especially when it is accompanied by emotional demands. The reverse tendency of the play is thus set into motion when Shaw inflates the second act with an exaggerated sentimentality of both the mother and the daughter, for neither of whom the bloated emotionality seems quite natural. The thematic and tonal turnabout is also facilitated by shifting the focus from prostitution to the suggestion of incest. A.M. Gibbs points out that a manuscript draft of the play shows that at one time Shaw wanted to show unambiguously that Samuel Gardner, Frank's father, was also Vivie's father.³⁰ A letter that he wrote to Archer also clearly states that the play "is enveloped in a web of possibilities of incest" and he chided Archer for being repelled

by the "comparatively rose-watery part of it"³¹ :

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But the odd thing to me is that you should so dislike the Frank & Vivie courtship which does not shock me in the least and overlook the episode between Mrs Warren & Frank which is to me the most exquisitely atrocious passage of the play...Mrs Warren narrowly escaping an affair with the son of her old associate, Crofts wanting to have the daughter as her mother's successor even with the possibility of the daughter being his own, & Frank & Vivie making love to one another, is part of the situation. You really have not sounded the depths of the pitch or appreciated the blackness...³²

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the play which the audience is promised in the programme note, the play that Shaw intended to use as a weapon in his counterblast to society, the play that "unmasked [the public] as the villain of the piece",³³ is not the same play that the audience is left with at the end. Like a chameleon it changes its colour and its meaning changes so completely that somewhere along the line it becomes a different play : Mrs Warren, who began as a symbol of levelheadedness in a society more corrupt than herself, is changed into a part of the *gestalt* that evokes the audience's strongest revulsion. Shaw must have felt that the theme of incest spoilt his original purpose, for he half-heartedly seeks to withdraw it near the end when Frank tells Vivie on the strength of the Reverend

Samuel Gardner's assurance that he is not her half-brother. But by then, it is already too late.

At the base of the play's sudden change of direction lies the issue of Vivie's rejection of her mother. Kitty Warren is a category-defying earthy and robust woman whose vulgarity, shot through with the aches of a hungry heart, constantly threatens to upset the intellectual poise of her daughter. Vivie can accept her mother's profession but when Mrs Warren insists on a mother's claims on her daughter's affection, Vivie, quick to perceive the danger to her passionless world of actuarial calculations, rejects her, saying: "you are a conventional woman at heart. That is why I am bidding you goodbye now."³⁴ Kitty Warren's anguished cry — "listen to her ! listen to how she spits on her mother's grey hairs ! oh, may you live to have your own daughter tear and trample on you as you have trampled on me"³⁵ — brings disconcerting echoes of similar words from King Lear, whom she momentarily resembles when she says : "I was a good mother; and because I made my daughter a good woman she turns me out as if I was a leper."³⁶ It is here that we recognise that Vivie is not merely a prude,³⁷ she practises the extreme economy of an emotionally parsimonious woman whose chief objection to old world gallantry is that it is "a frightful waste of time."³⁸

We are thus back to the familiar world of the Shavian protagonist who protects himself or herself from an overheated emotional atmosphere by retreating behind invisible walls. The withdrawal of the incest theme ironically adds to the similarity

between Vivie and characters like Conolly, Trefusis and Charteris, for the fear of incest would make Vivie's reaction only too natural, but when there is no such excuse, her unceremonious rejection of Frank after a brief period of flirtation, along with her callous indifference to her mother proves that any demand of emotional commitment habitually puts her in a state of funk and invites an immediate backlash.

While Shaw can evoke echoes of *King Lear* in depicting the forlornness of Mrs Warren, the last two acts are basically the justification of Vivie's decision because the bold social rebel has by then become a part of the nauseating viciousness that engulfs the play. The clear-eyed dissident has been enmeshed in a web of incestuous possibilities. This is the Shavian ambivalence. This ambivalence takes the play out of Mrs Warren's hands and puts it into those of her daughter, making it end on a note of negation.

III

Charteris, the philandering hero of Shaw's third play, resembles the author more closely than any of the figures we have so far come across. For once the author has freed his imagination from the strain of creating a character in which Shaw's own self is blended with a purely fictional element or with an idealized mutant of some strain he perceives in himself. In *Widowers' Houses*

the bio-data of Sartorius, his circumstances and the incidents in his life were as different from Shaw's as chalk is from cheese — the identification was only partial, and that too only at the emotional level, and much of it was subterranean, taking place inspite of the author. Charteris, however, is more than a mask. The incidents of the play so closely resemble the actual incidents in Shaw's life, the characters are such thin disguises for actual persons, and the sexual exploits of Charteris are so unmistakably Shaw's own, that the play can be called autobiographical in the strictest sense.

The first act, in which Julia breaks in on Charteris and Grace, is taken from Shaw's own life. When Jenny Patterson, with whom Shaw had had an affair, came to know of Florence Farr Emery, the other woman in Shaw's life, she created a violent scene. On 4th December 1893, Shaw wrote in his diary :

. In the evening I went to F.E., & J.P. burst in on us very late in the evening. There was a most shocking scene; J.P. being violent and using atrocious language. At last I sent F.E. out of the room, having to restrain J.P. by force from attacking her... I made J.P. write a letter to me expressing her regret & promising not to annoy F.E. again. This was sent to F.E. to reassure her.³⁹

Shaw's mercurial shifts in position regarding *The Philanderer* could not have been due to an unwonted tentativeness about its artistic merits : having once got out a confession of

such private nature, it would have been superhuman of him not to wince occasionally at such a delicate subject being broached — though by none other than himself—in full public view. Thus one can almost visualise the disapproving shake of the head as he wrote to Ellen Terry that the play "turned out to be a combination of mechanical farce with realistic filth which quite disgusted me."⁴⁰ 'Distress' would have been an apter word than 'disgust' : The Don Juan figure of the play, a figure that would later sing a rehearsed paean to narcissism, was yet to be rigged out in a glossy suit of philosophic jargon. Therefore the picture of the hero emerging from the play is rather unflattering — a fact that could not have escaped Shaw's notice. Mrs Patrick Campbell was quick to put her finger on the sore spot rather bluntly when she said : "I find it ugly — some mischievous personal experience."⁴¹

Yet the high-minded rhetoric of the play's preface appears to have sprung from an Olympian mind that is a complete stranger to such skittishness as shown by Shaw's private remarks :

In *The Philanderer* I have shown the grotesque sexual compacts made between men and women under marriage laws which represent to some of us a political necessity (especially for other people), to some a divine ordinance, to some a romantic ideal, to some a domestic profession for women, and to some the worst of blundering abominations, an institution which society has outgrown but not modified, and which "advanced" individuals are therefore forced to

evade.⁴²

Equally self-assured was his letter to William Archer in which he claimed that though *The Philanderer* was as promising a failure as *Widowers' Houses* it was "a step nearer to something more than talk about what plays ought to be."⁴³ In another letter he called *Qit* "an extremely advanced farcical comedy."⁴⁴ He preened himself for the courage to write such a play and wrote to Richard Mansfield ; "Judging by the reception of 'Arms and the Man', I cannot doubt that if you were to play "The Philanderer", you would be lynched at the end of the first act. It exudes brimstone at every pore..."⁴⁵ He congratulated himself for writing such a "dangerous play".⁴⁶

Shaw never got over the flip-flop between such self congratulatory exuberance and undissembled disgust at having washed dirty linen, that too his own, in public. Thus he could dismiss his own boast and write to Golding Bright that *The Philanderer* dealt with the "fashionable cult of Ibsenism and New Womanism on a real basis of clandestine sensuality."⁴⁷

Shaw's uneasiness about the play proves rewarding to the probing scholar. *The Philanderer* is in a sense the prehistory of *Man and Superman*, and in this play Shaw does something he does not dare to do in the more celebrated play : he dares to show the shocking gap between people and their self-images. Whereas in *Man and Superman* Shaw accepts the self-image of Don Juan as his authentic profile, in *The Philanderer* the radical Ibsenist and

socialist can laugh at the discrepancy between Ibsenism as a cult and the real impulses of the people who use that cult merely as a screen. Charteris, for example, seasons the official view of the cult, a view that sanctions his own conduct, with a liberal dollop of irony as he points out to Julia that she has strayed from the narrow path of hallowed libertinism :

As a woman of advanced views, you were determined to be free. You regarded marriage as a degrading bargain, by which a woman sells herself to a man for the social status of a wife and the right to be supported and pensioned in old age out of his income. That is the advanced view : our view. Besides, if you had married me, I might have turned out a drunkard, a criminal, an imbecile, a horror to you, and you couldnt have released yourself...So I had to be content with a charming philanderer, which taught me a great deal and brought me some hours of exquisite happiness.⁴⁸

Many a reader of *Mrs Warren's Profession* and of *Getting Married* will be a little surprised at the farcicality of the tone, suspecting the author to suffer from *mauvaise foi*, because Charteris's tongue-in-cheek remarks are preached with high, even gloomy, seriousness in Shaw's second play as well as in the preface to *Getting Married*. Is the acolyte of the author of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* playing Judas to his master ? I do not think the question can be answered once for all. It can be argued

quite convincingly that Shaw kept the task of the publicist and that of the artist quite distinct from each other : in the preface to *Getting Married* he merely points the way to a more rational society, whereas in *The Philanderer*, he sees not from any neutral high ground, but through the eyes of actual, and by no means very extra-ordinary, men and women; and through their eyes he sees the absurdity of his — Bernard Shaw's — dream of a rational world. But on closer scrutiny this amounts to begging the question. In the first place, the rational world presented with such conviction in the preface to *Getting Married* is not a world for immortals, it is the best one can have for actual persons living in the world as we know it. Secondly, and this is more important, Shaw's deviation from Ibsen and his recourse to farce stems from a temperamental, and hence artistic, inability rather than from a greater sense of realism.

The Quintessence of Ibsenism shows even more clearly than *Getting Married* or its preface that no man was more alive than Shaw to the characteristic genius of Ibsen which had the courage to look steadfastly at our own cherished ideals and discover terrible truths therein. Shaw's themes are similar to Ibsen's — the sanctity of marriage, individual freedom and responsibility, and forms of revolt and evasion — but while the same theme compels Ibsen to probe pitilessly even if it exacts a terrible price (as in the case of Nora), and brings no message of hope (as in the case of Mrs Alving), Shaw, who is willing to go the whole distance with Ibsen at the abstract level of general criticism,

takes evasive action when it comes to realising it imaginatively in his own play. Nora and Mrs Alving are by no means very extraordinary persons, but their creator does not allow them to avoid their fate. In sharp contrast, final evasion after an initial show of courage is the characteristic Shawian reaction. To be true to one's colour under all circumstances implies a degree of commitment that makes every action final and inexorable, and it does not allow the luxury that the snail enjoys of conveniently withdrawing into its shell when the weather gets rough. Characteris, Shaw's alter-ego, seems ignominious not, as Shaw thinks, because of his philandering⁴⁹ but because he is mortally afraid to walk without his shell.

Shaw's ambivalence, his intellectual sympathy being at odds with his emotional lukewarmness, places his hero between wind and water, from which position he chooses to extricate himself through non-committal laughter. Farce becomes the natural favourite of a man who finds the burden of revolt, with its emotional complications, so heavy that he opts to stew in the juice of his own egoism instead.

The interpretation of the play as a socialist's critique of existing marriage laws accorded well with Shaw's crusading image, hence its grouping with two other socialist plays under the title, 'Plays Unpleasant'. But as his letter to Golding Bright⁵⁰ shows, Shaw himself diluted such a claim and saw it as a satire on clandestine sensuality under the garb of Ibsenism. Such puritanic backlash is not unexpected from a person of intensely antiseptic

taste, but as even a casual comparison with any of Wycherley's plays will show, sensuality, clandestine or otherwise, merely forms the background. Had we not been aware that the play had been modelled on Shaw's own sexual adventures, and had the title been changed and a couple of sentences deleted, we would have been totally unaware of the overt sexual liaison between Julia, Charteris and Grace without much loss of valuable insight. The play can be read as Shaw's comments on advanced morality or on marriage, it can also be read as a satire on philandering, but the most important aspect of the play is concerned with the exploration of human relationship. The play shows what a love story can turn out to be in Shaw's hands.

The non-committal method of Shaw induced an intelligent critic like Margery Morgan to misread the author's ambivalence and project her own humanitarian response into the play when she observed :

The true tension and conflict in the play...arise from the author's recognition that there is a negative and potentially dangerous side to the exercise of reason and its control of emotion... The love-enmity between Julia and Charteris is thus exposed as the effect of an unhappy polarisation of human nature into intellect and emotion.⁵¹

Morgan's error is caused by the false clues with which Shaw habitually misleads his critics. We have seen in the course of our analysis of the novels — and this will become even more evident

when we come to his last plays — that the method of every Shavian superman is transcendence rather than integration of emotion and intelligence.⁵² Shaw's aspirations are closer to those of the saint rather than the modern artist. Yet he is enough of a dramatist to humanise a potentially anti-humanistic aspiration by undermining his own vision with irony. In this particular case his ambivalence is, as we have seen, partly due to some unpleasant personal associations, and partly due to the recognition of his own inability to integrate intellect and emotion : the reluctant compassion for Julia is akin to that of the priest leading the sacrificial goat to the altar. It is just a twinge of remorse for unavoidable suffering, the justice of which is not questioned.

At the centre of the play a man of ideas confronts a woman of feeling. Charteris, who feels at home when he plays with ideas ranging from Ibsenism to philandering, is ill at ease in the presence of Julia, who is an uncomfortable reality — a conventional woman. The insubstantiality of Charteris's world extends to his philandering, for it is a role he plays tentatively like an amateur actor having little faith in his vocation.

Predictably he suffers from a sense of guilt, as is obvious from his weary opening exchanges with Julia. He laughs at Julia's expense, but on the wrong side of his face as it becomes clear to him that he has neither Grace's dignity, nor Julia's human feelings. At this stage *The Philanderer* becomes an ambiguous comedy with two incompatible objects : the satire of Charteris-Shaw directed at himself and an intellectual

justification of Charteris's conduct. That emotionally the play is pulled in two opposite directions is also evident from Shaw's inability to make up his mind about the moral tone of the play.

The sharply unpleasant tone of *The Philanderer* is less due to the theme of philandering than to the ill-usage of Julia at the hands of Charteris. The matrix of farcical comedy is nearly broken when Julia discovers that behind Charteris's gay mask lies a warped mind that makes the most of its opportunity to hurt and humiliate. She says :

You made me pay dearly for every moment of happiness. You revenged yourself on me for the humiliation of being the slave of your passion for me. I was never sure of you for a moment. I trembled whenever a letter came from you, lest it should contain some stab for me. I dreaded your visits almost as much as I longed for them. I was your plaything not your companion.⁵³

We have seen that Julia's bitter complaint is not only applicable to Charteris but to most Shavian masks through which the author reveals himself. One remembers the fate of Trefusis's wife, but one also remembers the words of Alice Lockett who discovered in Shaw the same willingness to hurt. The last stinging sentence of Julia's speech is almost an exact repetition of the words of Trefusis's unfortunate wife, the woman who was killed not by the bitter cold night, but by the indifference of a callous husband. The quintessential Shavian hero may have a consort, he is

forbidden to have a companion. The excuses proffered by the heroes differ from case to case, but whatever the pretext — frank charlatantry or the service of the Life Force — a woman is seldom more than a plaything to Conolly or Trefusis, to Charteris or Juan.

Shaw makes a parade of Charteris's power over Julia with almost sickening thoroughness. In confusion and pain, Julia lets out a piercing cry : "Oh, Leonard dont be cruel. I'm too miserable to argue — to think. I only know I love you."⁵⁴

For his sake she sacrifices a woman's pride : "I know I have been wicked, odious, bad :I say nothing in defence of myself... I was distracted by the thought of losing you. I can't face life without you, Leonard."⁵⁵ But the snail living in his hard shell is a singularly insular creature. Though Charteris can get hold of a ready excuse for his callousness to Julia's suffering — she behaves like a spoilt child and talks like a sentimental novel⁵⁶ — it is only remotely connected with Julia's exasperating habits. Grace Tranfield, who furnishes him with none of these excuses, is treated with better manners, but not with much genuine difference. As Sylvia, Julia's sister, observes, "I dont think you care a bit more for one woman than for another."⁵⁷

Oddly enough, this underdeveloped sensibility forms the basis of the supermanlike swank of Shaw's hero. To Grace, a model of self-control, yet full of love for him, Charteris boasts:"My happiness depends on nobody but myself, I can do without you."⁵⁸ Yet he will not give up his inauthentic existence, his habit of

treating his own life as a vaudeville and his women as playthings. To such a player it means very little if his words ring utterly false, since the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity has been completely erased by his constant itch for histrionics. Thus he can say to Grace, with a vulgar cacchination she does not hear : "you have my heart in your hands. Break it. Throw my happiness out of the window."⁵⁹

The subject of Shaw's almost endless number of jokes, the physician, is obligingly present in the form of Dr Paramore. Yet that doughty votary of mind-boggling stupidity, choking with disappointment at the loss of science on hearing that Paramore's disease was a false discovery, is only slightly more ridiculous than the clever hero : one claims for medical science total independence of human welfare, the other, in his eagerness to remain an advanced individual, gladly renounces his humanity. They make a neat twosome. As Julia says about Charteris: "There is not in his whole nature one unselfish spot."⁶⁰ But Charteris does not depend on Julia to pronounce his bankruptcy, he does it out of his own mouth when he confesses that he was driven to propose to Grace only to escape from Julia. At the end Julia knows something Charteris does not know—that he is "a miserable little plaster saint."⁶¹

Shaw's studio contains many clay models of the finished colossal figure of the superman, and Charteris, though finally abandoned, or rather supplanted, is one of the early models. Though this thing is added and that subtracted, the final version

of the superman differs only in external details. Inside his bones, deep in his marrow—the region that is not touched by intellectual debate—he is the same material as Charteris. The genesis of Don Juan must be traced to in characters like Charteris in order to discover their fundamental similarity which overrides the difference. In this sense *The Philanderer* in the prehistory of *Man and Superman*, and even *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Since this similarity is not apparent to Shaw he lets the reader see the entrails of Charteris. In *Man and Superman* he takes much greater care to cover his base, to conceal the fact that his colossal figure, Don Juan, too, is a plaster saint.

Chapter 4 : Notes and References

1. Quoted in *Shaw : an Autobiography, 1856-1898*, pp. 268-269.
2. CP I, p. 33.
3. Letter to *The Speaker*, 31 December, 1892, quoted in *Shaw : an Autobiography, 1856-1898*, p. 275.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.
5. Charles H. Shattuck, "Bernard Shaw's Bad Quarto", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*⁵⁴ (1955) : 651-63.
6. In the Preface Shaw says that the play is "deliberately intended to induce people to vote in the Progressive side at the next Country Council election in London." CP I, p. 46.
7. A.M. Gibbs, *The Art and Mind of Shaw*, p. 44.
8. CP I, p. 4.
9. *The Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle*, vol. I, p. 65. My attention has been drawn by Gibbs's book to the connection between Shaw's protagonist and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. However it seems to me that Gibbs overlooks the fact that Shaw is reversing the Carlylean position in equating a man's soul with his clothes, i.e. his social position.
10. Margery Morgan, *The Shavian Playground*, p. 27.
11. CP I, p. 33.
12. *Shaw : an Autobiography, 1856-1898*, p. 27.
13. In the preface Shaw makes his intentions clear : "I must, however, warn my readers that my attacks are directed against themselves, not against my stage figures." CP I, p. 34.

14. CP I, p. 80.
15. Ibid., p. 34.
16. Ibid., p. 51.
17. Ibid., p. 94.
18. Ibid., p. 93.
19. Ibid., p. 110.
20. Ibid., p. 110.
21. Ibid., p. 98.
22. *Collected Letters*, vol. I, pp. 403-404.
23. Maurice Colbourne, *The Real Bernard Shaw*, p. 125.
24. CP I, pp. 310-11.
25. Ibid., p. 312.
26. Ibid., p. 312.
27. Ibid., pp. 314-15.
28. Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *Theatrical companion to Shaw*, p. 32.
29. CP I, p. 332.
30. A.M. Gibbs, *The Art and mind of Shaw*, p. 52.
31. *Collected Letters*, vol. II, p. 277. c
32. Ibid.
33. Colbourne, op. cit., p. 125.
34. CP I, p. 355.
35. Ibid., p. 354-55.
36. Ibid., p. 355.
37. Maurice Valency remarks that Vivie's objection to her mother's profession is not so much a socialist's objection to profiteering

as a puritan's revulsion against sexuality. Maurice Valency, *The Cart and the Trumpet* pp. 97-98. There is little doubt that inspite of what they claim Vivie and her creator are revolted by sex but I think Valency misses the point that what Vivie finds even more revolting than sex is her mother's expectation that she reciprocate her feelings towards her.

38. CP I, p. 277.

39. Editorial note, *Collected Letters*, vol. I, p. 296.

40. *Collected Letters*, vol. I, p. 644.

41. *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell : Their Correspondence*, p. 86.

42. CP I, p. 33.

43. *Collected Letters*, vol. I, p. 395.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 458.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 486.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 632.

48. CP I, p. 147.

49. *Collected Letters*, vol. I, p. 486.

50. *Op. cit.*

51. Margery Morgan, *The Shawian Playground*, pp. 32-34.

52. The subject is discussed in detail in the last chapter of this study.

53. CP I, p. 148.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Ibid., p. 153.
57. Ibid., p. 180.
58. Ibid., p. 185.
59. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
60. Ibid., p. 211.
61. Ibid., p. 220.