Shaw: A Critical View

Elsie B. Adams

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 30, Number 1, 1987, pp. 95-97 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/374752/summary
strongly recommended. It also, incidentally, serves to allay the nagging doubt, expressed earlier in this review, whether anything new can come out of Forster criticism at this time of day.

Norman Page
University of Nottingham

SHAW: A CRITICAL VIEW


Nicholas Grene’s *Bernard Shaw: A Critical View* is billed as "an unpolemic, unapologetic critical study" of Shaw exploring the question of why Shaw often seems unsatisfying, "even at his best." In examining Shaw’s definition of dramatic reality, his tragic vision, and his successes (Grene likes *Pygmalion* best, with *John Bull’s Other Island* a close second), Grene assesses Shaw’s strengths and weaknesses, with an emphasis on the latter. Though there is much praise of Shaw in the book, we are finally left with a portrait of Shaw as an artist who is too complacent, too stagey and theatrical, lacking subtlety and complexity and presenting an equivocal view of reality. Finally, his very articulateness is offered as a source of "our recurring sense of shallowness in Shaw."

The analysis begins by placing Shaw in a line of Irish "creative double-thinkers"—Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde. Grene argues in a chapter on the influence of Wilde and Ibsen that these playwrights left Shaw with two incongruous images: the clown, and the preacher. Grene believes that Shaw’s attempt to combine the comic and the real led to a distorted vision and to an ambiguous attitude toward drama that is reflected in the plays. Grene seems to feel that comedy and truth are incompatible. For this reason, though he admits that the work is cohesive and cogent, he finds *Man and Superman* "curiously without resonance and without depth."

Another failure in Shaw, according to Grene, is his preoccupation with things "pleasant." Shaw is reluctant "to look into the more sinister quality of human beings," refusing to explore the tragic possibilities between Vivie and Mrs. Warren and unwilling to give Andrew Undershaft any really diabolic characteristics. Shaw softens the "hard truths" that emerge in his plays (for example, in *Major Barbara*). He almost destroys the trial scene in *Saint Joan* by his "irresistible urge to turn his characters into smart-alecs." In stage technique, Shaw relies on stage effects rather than on the "truly dramatic." Grene attacks the histrionic characters and "big theatrical scenes" in *The Devil’s Disciple* and the ham language and theatricality of *Caesar and Cleopatra.*
What Grene seems to forget is that Shaw is, after all, writing comedy (or, in the case of The Devil's Disciple, melodrama) for the stage. That he should be temperamentally inclined to the "pleasant" (rather than to the tragic) side of existence and that he should employ theatrical effects, theatrical conventions, and even stage language on occasion should come as no surprise. Furthermore, the comic tradition before Shaw—from Aristophanes to Jonson to Molière—allows for the expression of reality through comedy. (Shaw was not the first "clown" who was in dead earnest about exposing the foibles of an absurd and corrupt society.) The result need not be, as Grene suggests, "the special distorted vision of the comic fighting the claim to absolute or realistic truth." The result may be—as I believe it was with Shaw—a clear vision which expresses in comedy a distorted, ambiguous reality and, at times, a higher reality toward which one might strive (as in Man and Superman and Back to Methuselah).

The major problem with Grene's argument in the book is that it begs the question. He sets out to explain why Shaw seems "less than fully satisfying, even at his best" and concludes with a reference to "our recurring sense of shallowness in Shaw." Some readers and viewers of Shaw (and I am one of them) find him in his best works—such as those analyzed by Grene—neither "less than fully satisfying" nor shallow.

Nevertheless, there is much of interest in Bernard Shaw: A Critical View. The explications of specific Shaw plays are thorough and thought-provoking. Grene is refreshingly forthright in his opinions. He makes good use of the holograph manuscripts of selected plays recently published by Garland under the general editorship of Dan H. Laurence. He devotes a chapter to John Bull's Other Island, which he calls "the most underrated and neglected of Shaw's major plays," and another chapter to Pygmalion, the only play that receives Grene's wholehearted approval. Grene insists that Shaw found in Pygmalion a perfect blending of social criticism, full comic personalities, and "a dazzling perfection of form and execution."

In his last chapter, "Language and Reality," Grene suggests that Shaw's genius with words worked against him: for Shaw, "fluid, fluent, dexterous, eloquent speech" was primary, and language was "a precision instrument" used to cut to the truth of things. Grene says that this impulse—to make himself and his characters intelligible—accounts for the effect of shallowness in Shaw. Surely this analysis must reflect a personal stylistic preference in Grene. (He refers to Shaw's "unfashionably unironical use of rhetoric" and his "lack of silence.") It is true that Shaw is a brilliant rhetorician, that his characters talk, talk, talk (into eternity, suggests the Don Juan in Hell interlude), that Shaw wanted above all to be intelligible, and that he used language to try to achieve this goal. But to conclude that the identification of truth "with the clear, the demystified, the intelligible" signifies shallowness is to succumb too much to the contemporary reverence for inarticulate, inchoate experience and for the "literature of silence."
We should note that Shaw himself was aware of the potential failure of language to effect a change in society or in humankind. He parodies his own loquaciousness in the speech of the Reverend Morell (with his "gift of the gab") and in the "Universal laughter" at Jack Tanner's talk as the curtain falls on Man and Superman. He concludes Too True to be Good—a play that Grene does not consider—with Aubrey, the preacher without a creed, speaking compulsively in the midst of an "inpenetrable fog." Aubrey preaches not because he has a message but because he must: "I am ignorant: I have lost my nerve and am intimidated: all I know is that I must find the way of life, for myself and all of us, or we shall surely perish. And meanwhile my gift has possession of me: I must preach and preach and preach no matter how late the hour and how short the day, no matter whether I have nothing to say—." Shaw's final stage direction explains to the reader that "The author, though himself a professional talk maker, does not believe that the world can be saved by talk alone." In the final analysis, however, Shaw opted for eloquence over ambiguity and for speech over silence. Those of us who are admirers of Shaw are grateful that he did.

Elsie B. Adams
San Diego State University

TEMPERAMENT OF THE EDWARDIANS


Despite the thorough examination of primary and secondary materials that Jonathan Rose did before writing The Edwardian Temperament, his book comes across less a systematic study than a series of impressionistic essays dealing with aspects of Edwardian history and culture. To give him credit, Rose recognizes the difficulty of the task he set himself. In the introduction to the book, he admits the imprecision of the very term "Edwardian" and acknowledges that there is little agreement among authorities in different disciplines about the existence, let alone the duration, of that particular period in English history. He also notes the amorphousness of "temperament" and admits that another researcher might have chosen other traits to write about. In light of these acknowledged limitations on his work, it is especially unfortunate that Rose did not give The Edwardian Temperament a sharper rhetorical edge and provide the material in his book with the cohesion to be derived from a good, strong thesis.

Part of the difficulty arises from Rose's decision to write a book drawing from sources in so many fields. He makes connections among the areas of psychic research, political science, literature, psychology, and art as these developed between 1895 and 1919. Of necessity, Rose sacrifices depth to breadth, and in the process he fails to demonstrate the permanent value of work done by figures